

JAMES 1:26

RELIGION CONDEMNED

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”¹

Someone has said, “You can’t believe half of what you hear, but you can repeat it.” This points out a real problem in the church today—we have too many people with unbridled tongues. James surveyed the churches of his day and drew a similar conclusion. However, he did not merely stop at noting the existence of the problem; he exposed the still deeper problem that an unbridled tongue is a symptom of a darkened heart. In fact, James demonstrates that an unbridled tongue indicates that an individual has never been born from above and is a pretender within the Family of God.

In order to have a more thorough understanding of James’ concern, I invite you to listen to the verse before us as treated in other translations. “Anyone who sets himself up as ‘religious’ by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air” [THE MESSAGE]. “If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless” [NEW LIVING TRANSLATION]. “People who think they are religious but say things they should not say are just fooling themselves. Their ‘religion’ is worth nothing” [NEW CENTURY VERSION].

It is difficult to find an English word which precisely captures the intent of the Greek. The Greek noun *threskeía* refers properly to the external rites of religion, and thus speaks of over scrupulous devotion to external forms; it speaks of “ritualism.” It is the ceremonial service of religion. It is perhaps significant to note that in the ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION of the Bible, the word “religion” occurs only five times. Three times it is used in a negative or pejorative manner [ACTS 25:19; COLOSSIANS 2:23; JAMES 1:26]. Once it is used in a neutral fashion [ACTS 26:5]. And once, following our text, it is used in a positive manner after it is defined [JAMES 1:27].

In the text, and in the verse which follows, as well as in ACTS 26:5 where Paul presents His defence of His past worship, the term *threskeía* or a cognate speaks of external practises of worship. When Festus laid his argument before Agrippa, he used a different term that could be translated “superstition,” though it was not necessarily meant to be negative [e.g. Paul, addressing those assembled at the Areopagus, ACTS 17:22]. The passage in Colossians uses yet a different term which could be translated “will worship,” referring to a self-made religion.

Undoubtedly as result of our fallen condition, people tend to practise *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis* whenever approaching the Word of God. That is, we tend to read our experience into the text instead of permitting the Word to define our experience. We are more comfortable adding to the Word through applying a hermeneutic of our own instead of permitting the Word to hold us accountable to God. The text before us this day can easily become one into which we insert our imagination about what James is saying rather than hearing what he is saying if we are not careful. However, let’s permit the Word to speak to us today so that we will be equipped to honour God.

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MAN'S RELIGIOUS EFFORTS ARE CORRUPT — Broadly speaking, religion is either the external, observable evidence of our life in Christ, or it is an effort to make ourselves acceptable to God. Thus, religion is indispensable to the Christian Faith. However, the religion we are taught in the Word of God is, like all true aspects of our relationship to God, liable to counterfeiting. James is concerned about those who have deceived themselves. When we talk about accountability to God and accountability to one another in the church, we are really talking about the reality of our religion.

The text focuses our gaze on an individual who thinks he or she is religious. James' use of the word implies that he has in view people who are careful to fulfil their religious duties. They have the ritual down pat; they know all the right words to say. They know all the things that are required to make others think of them as mature Christians. We should determine what is involved in selling oneself as religious. As we explore this thought, keep in mind that such individuals are said to be self-deceived. James is confronting people that are comfortable with their religion, stripping away the façade that they have carefully erected in an effort to make themselves acceptable to God, or at least to divert unwelcome attention from true followers of Christ.

Have you ever had someone accuse you of being religious? This is normally stated as an accusation and often in a dismissive manner when someone is attempting to explain your actions. On several occasions, especially when I have spoken to an individual concerning their relationship to Christ, the person responded by saying, "Oh, you must be religious?" What they mean is that I must go to church and take seriously the various acts of worship that are associated with a church.

Man tends to define religion by the external practises of the Faith. The liturgies of the churches are what most people use to identify religious people. A religious individual is someone who does what is required by his or her religion. Religious people know the *vocabulary* of the church, they know all the *social conventions* that define what a Christian is, they are adept at *worship*. These three areas of life—vocabulary, social convention and worship—must be addressed if a person is to be thought "religious."

James makes us uncomfortable precisely because he exposes these activities as deceptive, especially when they are carried out in the absence of a vital relationship to the Father. In fact, one can participate in all the activities of your religion, with the sole result of self-deception. Think of these three areas of religious expression.

Primary among the activities that qualify an individual as religious is the appropriation of religious terminology—religious people learn to speak religiously. During the days of the judges, a regional civil war broke out between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. Jephthah led the men of Gilead in capturing the fords of the Jordan, trapping the warriors from Ephraim and Manasseh on the wrong side of the river. The Ephraimites, of course, tried to escape by crossing over the river. However, whenever they tried to pass the men of Gilead they would be seized.

The Gileadites developed a password in order to detect Ephraimites who pretended to be Gileadites when captured. The word was *Shibboleth*, which the Ephraimites (who had trouble with the "sh" sound) could only pronounce *Sibboleth*. This worked perfectly on the unsuspecting enemy [[JUDGES 12:4–6](#)]. We Christians have our *Shibboleths*, but they are much easier to pick up. Use these passwords with the right inflection and you will be considered *Christian*.

Let's explore some common "born again lingo." Whenever a Christian says, "That blessed my heart," they mean, "I enjoyed that." Another common expression is "bless the food," which is the prayer before a meal. We don't pray, we "go to the Lord." We Christians "share," except in our experience "sharing" allows us to spread news without being gossips. An "unspoken request" allows us to ask for prayer without giving the messy details of why we are in trouble. "Fellowship" is when two or more Christians get together to talk, to have fun, or especially to eat. It is truly amazing how quickly people learn the argot of Christianity, and religious people know how to put other religious people at ease by using the proper language.

In the same way, if you show the "right" socio-religious attitudes toward alcohol and tobacco, social issues, and modesty and style, you will be thought religious or pious. The behavioural mores of evangelical Christianity sadly have been made easier by the gradual alignment of many Christians with the materialism and hedonism of the secular culture in which we are immersed. We are practically indistinguishable from the world!

I am astonished at how precisely many Christians conduct their lives outwardly, while justifying a disgusting witches brew of wickedness that is condemned by the Word of God. On one occasion, I precipitated a firestorm in a church when I rebuked the congregation for gossip and bitterness toward one another. I accomplished at least one thing. They quit castigating one another and focused their rage on me.

I pointed out that they were proud of the "purity" of their lives. I commented that they boasted, "We don't smoke; we don't chew; and we don't go with the girls that do." Pointing them to **JUDE 19**, **TITUS 2:12**, and **1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-4**, I reminded them that jealousy and strife, malice and maledictions, to say nothing of a divisive attitude were marks of worldliness. The rage of that congregation toward me was palpable.

That was many years ago, and since that time I have learned that they were probably not the exception; rather they exemplified the rule among professing Christians. We make artificial rules, and when we attain the standard we have set, we announce to all and sundry that we are pure and godly. However, it is obvious throughout Christendom that we always reserve the right to invoke an unwritten "exception rule" when our friends or family fail to meet the standard we have instituted and approved.

Earlier, I pointed out that the word "religious" as James uses it in our text denotes ***outward worship***, speaking of the external actions associated with our various liturgies. "Worship," in the estimate of a surprising number of the professed people of God, means enthusiastic singing with just the right instrumental mix; and we must leave the church feeling good about ourselves. It has been well said that it is easier to introduce heresy than it is to change the liturgy of a church. Consequently, if people do not "feel" right, they are prepared to go to war to ensure that they can feel good about their "worship." May I suggest that if the criterion for worship is how you feel afterwards, you are deceived, and it is a deception of the most egregious sort, for you are self-deceived.

Nevertheless, we ardently pursue "worship," never realising that ultimately worship is the spontaneous response of an individual who has met the Risen Son of God. "Worship" cannot be worked up, worked out or worked down, it happens when God meets with us. If we carry a Bible and are somewhat familiar with it, if we read the "right" books, if we attend church regularly, sing the hymns, apparently listen, and especially if we give generously, we can easily deceive ourselves into thinking we are properly and adequately religious. Our efforts can produce a deadly religious delusion!

How many Christians insist they go to church for to “worship,” yet look for more exciting “worship” because they quickly grow bored with what they currently have? Like addicts searching for the next high, too many “worshippers” flit from church to church seeking the best “worship.” Worship, if it is truly New Testament worship, brings us face-to-face with the Living God through His Word. When we depend upon a hypnotic rhythm and repetitious cries, we are scarcely different from the prophets of Baal. Refresh your memory of that incident by turning to the account in **1 KINGS 18:26-28a**.

The prophets of Baal “prayed to Baal from morning until noon, shouting ‘Baal, answer us!’ But there was no sound, and no one answered. They danced around the altar they had built.

“At noon Elijah began to make fun of them. ‘Pray louder!’ he said. ‘If Baal really is a god, maybe he is thinking, or busy, or traveling! Maybe he is sleeping so you will have to wake him!’ The prophets prayed louder.”²

Jesus addressed modern Christians who apparently imagine that repeating endless choruses is worship. “Do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them” [**MATTHEW 6:7, 8a**]. Come to the service of worship anticipating that you will meet the Risen Saviour. Prepare your heart to meet the Lord of Glory, then come with the intention of hearing His voice through the Word that is preached and you will no doubt worship. Come seeking to be entertained or to entertain, and it is virtually certain that you will not worship. Seek Christ through His Word and He will meet you through what is written. Seek Christ through energetic singing presented in your own strength and you will never meet Him.

James says that religion that consists only of external effort is worthless. In the text before us, together with the verse that follows, James sets three standards by which we can judge our religious practises. He says that our speech, our service and our separation from the world all reveal what lies under the skin. If our religion consists only of what we do and not in who we are, James says it is worthless. What seems to be “religious,” can turn out to be anything but godly!

“Worthless” is a harsh word, but it is a necessary word in this instance. This word does not appear frequently in the New Testament, but when it does, it stings the natural man. Paul cautions proud Christians that “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile” [**1 CORINTHIANS 3:20**]. He also uses this same word in **1 CORINTHIANS 15:17** when formulating an argument about the necessity of Christ’s Resurrection. He warned Titus that “foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions and quarrels about the law” are “unprofitable and worthless” [**TITUS 3:9**]. And Peter reminds readers that we were ransomed “from the futile ways” of our forefathers by the blood of Christ [**1 PETER 1:18**].

I do not want anyone to imagine that I am denigrating the liturgy of our churches. James is not saying that all religious practises are bad. Neither is James saying that religion has no place in the life of a worshipper. Finally, James is not condemning the desire for traditions in our liturgy. However, he is clearly warning that if we fail to meet the Risen Son of God, while conducting the various religious exercises that mark our worship, we are no better than clanging cymbals. If, despite all our practised social conventions that are so comforting, our hearts are still corrupt, we have never known the Lord of Glory. If, though speaking the language of Zion, we do not know Him who gives life and liberty, we are pretenders and yet under condemnation of death.

² **The Everyday Bible: New Century Version** (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN 2005)

RELIGION THAT GOD APPROVES IS MARKED BY A CONTROLLED TONGUE — “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” Earlier in this chapter James warned his readers to guard their tongue when he wrote, “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” [JAMES 1:19]. Nor will this be the last time James will caution against sinning with the tongue. In JAMES 3:1-12 and in JAMES 4:1-12, he will become quite pointed in his instruction concerning the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue. In JAMES 5:9 and 5:12 he will warn against grumbling about fellow Christians and about giving an oath thoughtlessly. In other words, James warns that our speech betrays the vitality of our relationship to the Son of God. Sinning in the way we speak is not a minor matter.

James teaches that the tongue becomes the test case for true religion—it is the first evidence of a changed life. In our text, James is emphatic that an unbridled tongue is evidence of a deceived heart. An unrestrained tongue is a highly destructive force; and religion that accompanies an unbridled tongue is worthless. Think on this with me as we review some of the wicked attitudes demonstrated among the professed people of God. First, among the professed people of God, grumbling has become virtually a standard of identity. Should some saint not like the message, she will complain. Of course, she would never speak against the pastor; she is just expressing her opinion to those she imagines to be supportive of her disgruntlement. However, grumbling is not a minor matter before God.

I witnessed a church almost destroyed because two women did not get to sing at a Christmas Eve service. They did not want to hear the preached Word, and so these two women sulked and pouted and complained for weeks until they stirred their husbands to begin a campaign of verbal assault against the leadership of the church. Grumbling is a serious sin that God will not simply overlook [see EXODUS 16:1 ff.; NUMBERS 14:1 ff.; 16:1 ff.]. Seldom do those complaining have sufficient character to do anything about their complaint, but like a pack of curs they circle their intended prey, yapping until they bark up enough courage to dart in to nip the heels seeking to wound and injure.

If complaining about the preacher is commonly acceptable among God’s professed people, what shall we say about the near universal Christian attitude that fairly shouts at those whom God has appointed to oversight, “We hired you, and we can fire you?” I am always amazed at the supposedly mature Christians who openly praise the preacher to the heavens, until in a fit of pique *they* decide it is time for him to leave. Seldom do these self-appointed arbiters of ecclesiastical correctness consider how foolish their objections are; their complaints contend that they, and only they, have the mind of God. These arrogant and ignorant souls imagine that others have not heard clearly as they have, so they must bellyache until they convince others to see things their way. James would caution such mouthy menaces to righteousness that though they imagine they are religious, their unbridled tongue demonstrates that they have deceived their own hearts. Consequently, their religion is worthless.

There is another important concept that grows out of this cautionary statement that is issued by the brother of our Lord. Those who permit such dangerous talk to pass unchallenged share in their wickedness [cf. 2 JOHN 11]. The silence of those who hear the evil spoken and fail to hold those making such statements accountable are themselves party to the wickedness that is promoted. Thus, they share in the evil that is done.

The tongue comes out with many things, and in our day filthy language has become de rigueur. As Christians, however, we must heed the Word that commands us, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths” [EPHESIANS 4:29]. Although coarse language may be included in James’ instruction, I doubt that it is central to his concern at this point in the letter. We must also be done with lying, as the Apostle has said. “Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour” [EPHESIANS 4:25]. We are beginning to approximate James’ concern when we register this point. Gossip is also a by-product of an unregenerate tongue. It isn’t so much the things that go in one ear and out the other that hurts as it is the things that go in one ear, get all mixed up, and then slip out of the mouth.

These aforementioned sins spew from an unbridled tongue, but assuredly James’ metaphor points to the uncontrolled slanderous tongue—carping, critical, judgemental. Outwardly religious people characteristically avoid filth and lying, but fall easily into gossip and slander. A man will steer clear of adultery, of stealing, of drunkenness, in fact he will be a shining light of outward religious observance—and yet will revel in destroying the character of others under the pretext of zeal, but it is a lust for vilification. Sometimes the slander is whispered, sometimes inferred, and sometimes shouted, but in the congregation of Christ it always has a perverted religious base. It is a “religious” sin!

Those are indeed awesome words that Jesus spoke to the Pharisees? Jesus said, “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” [MATTHEW 12:33-37]. The tongue will inevitably reveal what is on the inside! When secrets of the heart are exposed, can we really continue to excuse our wickedness? If the heart is right, the tongue will reflect the goodness within.

Bear in mind that the Word teaches that each Christian is responsible to discipline his or her own body. Examine the text, and you will see that each individual is responsible to bridle his or her own tongue; it is not merely that the tongue is bridled as though the individual was the recipient of some special grace enabling him or her to restrain the tongue, but the individual who accepts the life offered in Christ does seek to bridle the tongue. James is not speaking of the occasional slip of the tongue, but he has in view the life that habitually lacks self-discipline, for a redeemed life is an obedient life. Consequently, the disobedient reveal that they never possessed the life in question or they would have proven obedient; and the disobedience in question is a failure to bridle the tongue. Their slanderous speech demonstrates that they never knew the Saviour.

Let me restate this truth in order to drive the point home. Genuine, saving faith will produce obedience to the Word. We are not obedient in order to be saved, but because we are saved we are obedient. If we affirm biblical authority and seek to submit our views to the Word of God, we will give special attention to our speech as we seek to purify our lives. This is not merely a polemic against cursing or bitter vituperation, but it is a statement of the importance of pure speech and awareness of the impact of what we say on others and on the cause of Christ.

An out-of-control tongue suggests bogus religious devotion, no matter how well one's devotion is carried out. A true test of a person's religion is not his or her ability to speak, as we are so apt to think, but rather a true test of religion is his or her ability to bridle the tongue. God alone is able to supply the power to harness the tongue; and only the presence of the Holy Spirit creates the transformation that makes one want to rein in the tongue.

GET A GRIP — “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.” Did you pick up on what James just wrote? He is focused on the individual who imagines that he is religious, who supposes that what he is doing pleases God. Yet, this individual whom James has in view fails to bridle his tongue. Consequently, the individual deceives his or her heart. In essence, James says, “Get a grip!” In more polished language, he says, “Review your relationship to God. Take an assessment of your life to determine the reality of Christ's transforming power displayed through your life.”

A sermon has no lasting value until the preacher makes the application. Therefore, it is now time for us to make application of what we have seen in this brief verse from the pen of the brother of our Lord. The great danger of religion is that it is inclined to supplant Christ's reign over the life of the individual. The practise of religion tends to blind the soul to God's work. We substitute what our hands have built and what our minds have conceived for the glories of Christ among us. Almost unconsciously we are soon worshipping a building, defending an affiliation though it is moving toward spiritual senescence, or tolerating error because the one teaching the error is an old friend. Another way of stating this grave danger to the soul is that the practise of religion diverts our focus from the great to the mundane. Our religion shortly creates complacency, and as our eyes grow drowsy we drift off into spiritual somnolence, confident that all is well with our efforts.

Ultimately, as religion supplants the reign of Christ the unwary are condemned. This is perhaps the gravest danger of embracing our own religion in the place of Christ among us, for such religious people give the outward appearance of being sound when in fact they have become utterly corrupt. Jesus must surely have been addressing just such people when He spoke those awful words recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell” [MATTHEW 23:13-33]?

Finally, there are two vital truths I ask each listener to ponder. The first of these truths is that *the Faith of Christ the Lord is practical*. Speech becomes the test case for true religion. What we are is exposed through our speech. God is less concerned with the religious efforts we call “worship” than He is with true worship that flows from a godly life. The Christian Faith is practical, and if it fails to transform the individuals holding to that Faith, it is of no value. If our lives are not purer, if we have no concern for the lost and for the least among us, our worship is worthless.

The second truth that we must seize focuses on the transforming power of the Gospel of Christ. *The Faith of Christ Jesus transforms the life of those who believe*. The life that remains unchanged, whatever the profession of that individual is a life that fails to reflect the power of Christ. We can conclude about such an individual that they know nothing of the presence of Christ. There are among the people of God individuals who deplore the plain speech of the Bible. They are willing to read it privately or at least read about it, because they can twist what is read to suit their own strange desires. However, they do not wish to hear those same truths declared and applied because what they hear condemns them. One such truth is given by the John, Apostle of Love.

“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” [1 JOHN 3:4-10].

How’s your religion? Is it true or worthless? The wise *hear* and *do* God’s Word.

“The boneless tongue, so small and weak,
Can crush and kill,” declares the Greek.
“The tongue destroys a greater horde,”
The Turk asserts, “than does the sword.”
The Persian proverb wisely saith,
“A lengthy tongue—an early death!”
Or sometimes takes this form instead,
“Don’t let your tongue cut off your head.”
“The tongue can speak a word whose speed,”
Say the Chinese, “outstrips the steed.”
The Arab sages said in part,
“The tongue’s great storehouse is the heart.”
From Hebrew was the maxim sprung.
“Thy feet should slip, but ne’er the tongue.”
The sacred writer crowns the whole,
“Who keeps the tongue doth keep his soul.”³

³ James S. Hewett, ed., **Illustrations Unlimited** (Tyndale House, Wheaton, IL 1988) 475