

When Your Religion Is Worthless – James 1:26-27

James 1:26-27 (read it)

If anyone thinks he is religious – that he is a true worshipper of God

And does not bridle his tongue – he doesn't control his mouth; he speaks too much and too soon; and talks about frivolous or sinful things

But deceives his heart – convinces himself that he's just fine when he's really not That he's good when he's really bad

This person's religion is worthless – his beliefs and practice, no matter how pious, are worthless; His religion has no real value before God

Religion – the practice of closely held beliefs and values; outward expressions of worship
That is pure and undefiled before God, the Father – that is pleasing and acceptable to the one who loves us

Is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction – to get involved in the lives of the least of these

The lives of those who do not have the means or the ability to live life well, due to physical restrictions, spiritual bondage, or mental illness

And to keep oneself unstained from the world – to refrain from indulging in the sinful ways of those who live according to the flesh

- It's about religion; When it comes to religion, we are one messed up people these days
So many people believe so many different things
Some base their religion on the Bible, which is awesome; Or parts of it, which is not
Some on the traditions/fears of man
Some on their own experience, or the imagination of others – Islam, Mormonism
Some on a mixture of all these influences

While these two verses are not intended to tell us all that a Christ-centered, biblically based religion looks like . . .

They are intended to tell us when our religion is worthless

That's the issue this morning – how to know when your religion is worthless

How to know when my closely held beliefs and values, are useless before God

James says you can start with your mouth – do you hear the drumbeat?

It's not the first time he's addressed it, and it won't be the last

My religion is worthless when . . .

I don't control my tongue

Indicator #1 of a worthless religion

26 – *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue . . . this person's religion is worthless*

Remember here – James is speaking to believers; those who base their beliefs on Bible

He's like, listen – you can believe whatever you want

You can cross all the right theological "t's", and correctly dot all your biblical "I's"

You can say all the prayers you want; Study the Scriptures daily; Know them inside/out

But if you don't control your tongue, it's all for naught – it's worthless

If you're tongue slips more than your feet – your religion is worthless

If lying, swearing, gossip, innuendo, slander are your norm – your religion is worthless

If you're tongue is sharper than your scissors – your religion is worthless

Speaking of which, John Wesley tells the story of a woman in one church, he knew had a very sharp tongue – out of control

One Sunday, wearing a new tie; Could tell she had a problem with it

Sure enough, after the service she came up to him and said, "Mr Wesley, I don't like your tie. It's too long, and it bothers me."

So he asked the ladies standing nearby if they had a pair scissors

One of them did gave them to Wesley, at which point he handed them to the sharp-tongued woman and said, "If my tie bothers you, go ahead and cut it off." (she did)

As when she handed the scissors back to him, he said, "Now will you do me the favor of opening your mouth . . .

Because just as my tie bothered you and you cut it off, your tongue bothers me and I'd like to do the same."

If you don't control your tongue, your religion is worthless

- I'm not talking about, nor do I believe James is talking about – the occasional slip-up
The times when you say something you shouldn't have, or in a way that's inappropriate
Times when you know it, you admit it, you apologize, and move on

No, by virtue of the fact that James links an unbridled tongue with a self-deceived heart . . .

Tells us he's talking about someone for whom "slip-ups" are the norm

Someone for whom the norm is speaking out of turn, saying the wrong things, saying them too much – and feeling little or no remorse for having done so

Someone who has rationalized their out of control mouth, concluding it's just fine, and thinks nothing of it anymore

If that's you – your testimony is shot, your witness is blown, your religion is worthless

My religion is worthless when . . .

I think I'm good but know I'm not

This is the phrase *deceives his heart* in v26 (read it)

This is the person who thinks something or does something so often, that they begin to think it's okay – even though they know deep down it's not

Like the couple who's sleeping together before marriage, despite the fact that the Bible clearly says it's wrong (1 Thess 4:3-8)

And then they rationalize it by thinking it can't be all bad if it feels so good

Their religion is worthless because they're deceiving their heart

They think they're good when they know they're not

And the subtle sins are just as damaging – whether you're secretly fudging on your taxes
Or failing to truly follow someone who is in authority over you – thinking you know better than they do anyway

Whatever the case, if you've convinced yourself that you're just fine, when deep down you know you're not – your religion is worthless

If you've convinced yourself that you're right b/4 God when you're wrong b/4 man – your religion is worthless

If you think your heart is clean when your mind is dirty – your religion is worthless

Because though your secret sin may not show outwardly, it affects every area of your life

It's a spiritual battle that crosses physical boundaries, no matter how compartmentalized you try to keep it

- Nor does the pious observance of religious duties help the matter
You can take communion, go to church, get baptized, mumble your mantras, and know all the theology you want
But if you deceive your heart with ongoing sin – your religion is worthless

It's about your heart, and God knows it inside and out
He knows if you're deceiving yourself; He knows if you're rationalizing your sin
He knows if depending on performance of religious duties to ensure a clean conscience
He knows if you're trying to work your way into his good graces by merely "keeping the rules" . . .
Instead of loving him, and making him the constant companion of your thoughts
If that's you, the only person you're deceiving is yourself – because God knows

My religion is worthless when I think I'm good but know I'm not

My religion is worthless when . . .

It's all about me

27 – *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*

Religion that is worthwhile, is all about others; Religion that's not, is all about me
The one is worthless, the other is priceless

Again, James is not intending to summarize all that true religion is
Simply telling us that religion *w/out* these things is no religion at all
Nor is he railing against church per se

He's just saying that if our acts of worship go no further than these walls, then our religion is worthless
If we fill every seat in this place, but lack a care/concern for the needy, we're *empty*

- But does this mean that *all* of our compassion and effort needs to be centered exclusively on orphans and widows? Not at all
James would have been well familiar with the *least of these* mentioned by Jesus in Mt 25 – referring to the sick, imprisoned, homeless, hungry, poor

Most likely he cites *orphans and widows* as representative of *all* who need help
All who are exposed and under-privileged

Which is one of the reasons we're focusing on CO's this month – insert for that purpose
Because getting involved in CO is one way to ensure that your religion is not all about u

When it comes to orphan care, we want to make that an emphasis here at Harvest
Already, many families have adopted children or care for foster kids fr time to time
In addition to that, we have an incredible opp to show the love of Christ to kids of all ages through the Safe Families program of Lydia Home
I would encourage you to stop by the table in the lobby and check it out

Long-term – we're working to establish an orphan care ministry where hopefully we can forge relationships with Foster-care/Adoption agencies . . .
And develop a process to educate you and help you to get involved quicker and easier, should God move you that way

Compassion is not an option

Frankly, as a church or as individuals, we can do no other
Anything else is a worthless religion that's all about me

Notice the word *visit* – it doesn't say send a check, though that's necessary
Nor does it say pray – though that too is vital
Rather, the thrust is to get involved in their lives

• **Get involved**

Get involved with your time, effort, energy, life
We're doing everything we can to expose you to solid CO's, and make it as turn-key as possible for you to get involved
But you're still going to have to make the effort

For those of you who are already involved – reproduce yourself
Stop getting mad that more people aren't doing what you're doing, and start inviting others to join you
Stop being a lone-ranger, and start being a reproducer – anything else is all about you

• **Be prepared to sacrifice**

Getting involved in the lives of the least of these is . . .
Messy, Inconvenient, Frustrating, Difficult, and Costly
Do it anyway – for the glory of God and the joy of others
You'll find that despite the sacrifices, few things are more rewarding

• **Keep your expectations low**

Be willing to do *anything*
Clean toilets; wash windows; stock shelves; serve soup, sort clothes, clean buildings, drive buses, play sports, hang out, whatever
Form the menial to the mundane – if it needs to be done, be willing to do it; anything

Expect nothing in return
They will not see you as their savior, as much as you think you are
In many cases they will not appreciate your time – so don't expect it

• **Stick with it**

Do you realize how many gung-ho volunteers compassion org's have seen?
Only to see them fade into the sunset after a few weeks or months
Make a year long commitment or whatever they ask for, and stick with it
It's one of the best ways to show you truly care
And they don't care what you know until they know that you care

I'm standing before you today because 11 ½ years ago I got involved in a CO – and God used it to change my life
Religion is worthless when it's all about you
But it's priceless when it's all about others

My religion is worthless when . . .

I live like the world

Read v27 – *to keep oneself unstained from the world*

Nobody comes to Christ *intending* to live like the world

Intending to bring shame to the one who saved them

Intending to render their religion worthless

It's far more subtle than that

Living like the world starts with . . .

- *Friendship* with the world

An innocent intrigue; A simple wondering of what it would be like to do what they do

It's not as though you shouldn't be friends with those in the world, assuming you're mature enough to handle it

The line is crossed when you get interested in their ways

When you kind of want to do what they do

Nobody *intends* to live like the world – it starts with friendship/intrigue

- Which leads to *love* for the world

And the apostle John says, “don't do it!”

1 Jn 2:15-16 – *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world.*

Living like the world starts with friendship – an innocent intrigue and participation

Which leads to love – an overwhelming attraction for the world

- If you're not careful, *conformity* to the world

Which the apostle Paul also says, “don't do” in Rom 12

Don't *be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind*

Instead of becoming like the world – influenced from the outside in

Be like Christ – transformed from the inside out

It starts with friendship, leads to love, then conformity, and results in condemnation

- The result of living like the world is being *condemned* with the world (1 Cor 11:32)

Like Lot, in Gen 13-19, who first pitched his tent toward Sodom – he moved close by

“The land is fertile and the proximity good for business – what's to hurt?”

Before long, his proximity led to *friendship* w/ the world

Pretty soon he moved into Sodom – which led to a *love* for the world

Then Sodom moved into him – and he became *conformed* to the world

Then Sodom was destroyed – and he was *condemned* with the world . . .

Losing his wife, his possessions, and his purity with his daughters

Living like the world is a subtle, slippery slope

When you do, your religion is worthless

Which is why James says – keep yourself unstained

We are to be in the world, which means getting our *hands dirty* . . .

But not of the world, and getting our *hearts stained*

You don't have to compromise the integrity of your soul in order to reach others for Christ

You don't have to pollute your conscience in order to have a great ministry

Abraham, in Lot's day, was the one who had the greater ministry, even though he was a friend of *God*, and was set apart from the ways of the world

- Is your life any different than your neighbor's?

If not, your religion is worthless

Do you rationalize marginal activities to be like your clients/co-workers?

If so, your religion is worthless

Do you compromise your convictions to live like your friends?

If so, your religion is worthless

27 – *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*