

**James**  
**Look in the Mirror! (Part 4)**  
**James 1:19-27**  
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*Tom Pennington, Pastor*  
*Countryside Bible Church*

Well it's our joy, to return this morning to the first chapter of the letter of James to the twelve tribes scattered abroad because of the persecution in Jerusalem. These were the people who had belonged to his church there in Jerusalem, to the great church that was really the foundation of the church, and now they're scattered. And he writes this letter to them, and it's filled with such rich and profound insight, and we find ourselves in the middle of a paragraph the last part of chapter 1 that compels us to examine our response to the Word of God. This is a Bible church. We love the Word of God. We love to hear it taught. We love to read it. We have an insatiable curiosity about all of the things that are recorded in it. We want to learn. We want to accumulate knowledge. We enjoy that process. And yet James reminds us here in this paragraph that that's not ultimately a true Christian biblical response to the Word of God and that in fact our response to the Scripture is a key indicator of our true spiritual condition.

Let me remind you of the words that he writes so you can put the flow of his thought into context. Verse 19 of chapter 1,

*This* you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But the one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled

religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Through these words James wants us to learn one great spiritual reality. You and I can accurately determine both the legitimacy of our faith, the genuineness of our faith and the maturity of our faith based on how we respond to the Word of God. James, as we've seen, as we sweep through this passage identifies for us three qualities that should characterize every believer's relationship to the Word.

In verse's 19 to 21 we learned that we must have a teachable heart, a teachable heart. And last time in verses 22 to 25 we concluded by discovering that we need to have a consistent obedience; not only a teachable heart but a consistent pattern of obedience in our lives. In verse 22 he issues a command, he says, "be known as a doer." In fact, if you only listen to the Word of God but aren't actively involved into putting into practice in your own life, James says you are deceiving yourself about your true spiritual condition, about the reality of your faith. And he illustrates his point in verses 23 and 24. He says if you're only a hearer, it's like a guy who looks in a mirror. You get a good look at yourself. You look at the changes you need to make, but then you go away and immediately forget about those changes until the next time you look in the mirror.

You see in 22 to 25, James describes for us two kinds of people. There are those people who listen intently to the Word of God and do nothing with it. And then there are those people who listen intently and put into practice what they've learned; they become doers. Now notice what James identifies as the difference between the two people; between the hearer only and the one who does. In verse 24 he says the mere hearer quickly goes away and forgets.

In verse 25 he says the doer abides and is therefore not forgetful. You'll notice in verse 25 the little words "by it" are not in the original text. It literally just says the one who looks intently and abides. You see the key to doing the Word of God is locked up in the Greek word "abides". You want to be a doer, then you need to abide in the Word. It literally means "to remain with or beside, to continue near". As I told you last time, I believe this is a reference to the biblical skill of meditation. You see in verse 25, the one who looks intently into the perfect law of liberty is the one who reads, who hears, who takes in the Word of God.

But the one who remains, abides or continues in it, that's the person the man or the woman who meditates on it and thinks about it and seeks to apply it. They do something with it. James says

the end of verse 25, that person is not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of work literally. He puts into practice what Scripture demands and James says that man will be blessed in what he does, blessed both now in his doing and in eternity when Christ returns.

But James doesn't stop there. James tells us that there is yet one more response that should characterize every believer's relationship to the word of God. If you're a believer, not only should you respond to Scripture with a teachable heart, not only should you respond with a consistent obedience, but you must also respond with a genuine heart change, a genuine heart change. Look at verses 26 and 27,

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Now in verses 19 to 21, James says "stop talking". Stop spouting your opinions and listen to the word of God. In verses 22 to 25 James says stop merely listening and do, obey, act on what you've heard. And now in verses 26 to 27 James says stop merely doing and become what the Word teaches.

He begins by addressing, in verse 26, the danger of external conformity. There's a real danger with merely obeying the Scripture externally. This is a rebuke of a kind of outward obedience that leaves the inner life unchanged. Notice he says, "if anyone". What we're about to read here has universal application. And the Greek text implies that there are actually people like this in the church. This is a reality. There are people who are characterized by verse 26. "If anyone thinks himself" literally if anyone comes to the subjective opinion about himself that he or she is religious.

Now the word "religious" is a rare New Testament word. The adjective occurs only here in the New Testament. The noun form occurs at the end of verse 26 and at the beginning of verse 27 and then only in Acts 26 where Paul refers to his ceremonial religion as a Pharisee, and in Colossians 2:18 where it talks about the works of angels. It's a very interesting word, this word religious or religion. Josephus the Jewish historian used it of, used it often of public and ceremonial worship in the temple. Paul used it as I said already of ceremonial worship as a Pharisee. The term describes the "diligent and careful performance of outward ceremony, the ceremonial aspects of worship or the external acts of obedience that characterize a religion".

Now these could be done from a sincere heart, it could religion and be done sincerely or it could be done hypocritically. But it's describing primarily those outward and external acts that accompany a faith a religion.

So, James is talking to everyone who has concluded that his diligent external obedience, that his religious activity is acceptable to God. Perhaps as we went through the passage that talks about being doers, you felt pretty good about yourself. You said to yourself you know, I think I do a decent job in the obedience category. I mean I regularly attend church, I read my Bible, and I don't just read, sometimes I even really diligently study as a fairly serious student. I set aside time daily to pray. I give to the Lord's work. I serve in a ministry of the church. Everyone respects me; I seem like a decent Christian. So, I think I am a doer. If that's your perception of yourself then you need to read on. Verse 26, "If anyone thinks himself" [Has come to the conclusion that he is by virtue of his external acts, okay, religious] "and yet does not bridle his tongue...."

Here's a caveat; if he has come to this conclusion about himself, and yet he doesn't take this action, and in a minute we'll see the conclusion. But let's take a look at this sort of caveat. He doesn't bridle his tongue. You see how we use our tongue is very important to James, he's going to come back to this theme in a big way when we get to chapter 3. But here in this verse all he says is that we should put a bridle on our tongues. He uses the same Greek word used for a horse's bridle. It's quite a powerful image. He pictures the tongue in your mouth and in mine as a wild horse that needs to be tamed that needs to be brought into line that needs to have the reins held tightly. And the implication is that a true heart response to the Word of God will bridle your tongue. If you truly responded improperly to the Word of God, that in and of itself will act as a bridle on your tongue. To put James' words in a vernacular, he's talking about keeping a tight rein on your tongue.

So now look at verse 26 again. He's saying if you think you're a doer, if you think your external obedience is pretty good, but you don't bridle your tongue, you don't use self control over your mouth, you don't keep a tight rein on what you say, you are deceiving your own heart. James Hiebert says the picture here is not that of a conscious hypocrite. In other words, we're not talking about a person who's a hypocrite and knows it. He says we're talking about a self-deceived religionist. This person's deceived themselves. His failure, that is to control his tongue, is an index of his inner condition. The gospel has not brought a transformation of his inner life.

Now, how is it that what we say, that the tongue can be such a clear indicator of what's going on in the heart. Well remember, James leans heavily on the teachings of Jesus. So, what did Jesus teach about the tongue? Turn back with me to Matthew 12. The words of Christ in Matthew 12 will really give insight to James 1. Matthew 12:33, Jesus says, "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." Now what's He talking about here, He's saying you know if you have a good tree it's going to bear good fruit, if you have a bad tree it's going to bear bad fruit.

What's His point? Well read on, verse 34, "You brood of vipers," [Here's a reference obviously to the religious leaders of Israel.] "how can you, being evil, speak what is good?" The implication here is it's impossible. If you're evil you can't speak what is good. Now He doesn't mean you can never say anything good. He means that if you look at the sweep of what comes out of your mouth over a period of time, certainly over your lifetime, then you can't bring good speech out of an evil heart. On the other hand, evil speech doesn't flow out of a good heart.

Look at the next verse, verse 35. "The good man brings out of" [in his speech] "out of ... [the] good treasure of his heart what is good; and the evil man brings out of *his* [mouth the out of the] evil treasure ... [of that's in his heart." The evil that's there.] This is just the way it works. Evil heart gives forth to evil speech. Good heart gives forth good speech.] Verse 36, "I tell you that every careless or useless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Jesus says even at the judgment your words, what you have spoken, what you have said will be used as an indication of the legitimacy of your faith. I'm not talking about when you're talking to me as a pastor. I'm not talking about when you're talking to some other Christian you're trying to impress. I'm talking about the normal flow that comes out of your mouth, day in and day out, what your family hears, people that know you best hear. That's an expression of your heart. And it either justifies you in the sense that it shows you are in fact the genuine article or it condemns you in showing that you are not.

It's been estimated that the average person uses about 18,000 words a day. Now some of you do better than average. But 18,000 words a day are enough to fill a 54-page book. You write a 54-page book every day. In a year's time, you and I, if we're average, speak enough to compile 66 volumes every one of them 800 pages. You can believe that there's enough in the record of what comes out of your tongue to reveal what's in your heart. Ultimately, your words will reveal the real person you are. James is saying that if you think you are religious, if you think you're a doer

of the Word, if you generally practice a kind of external obedience and the people around you think, oh that guy's a good Christian, that gal's a good Christian, but you don't control your mouth, you don't evidence an inner change by what you say. The only possibility is that you are deceiving yourself. Your heart remains unchanged, and the evil heart is merely pouring out the evil that's in it and it comes out of your mouth. In fact, look at the end of verse 26 of James 1. "This man's religion is worthless." God says, it's worthless. The word worthless simply means vain, empty, useless. In fact, in Scripture this word is often used to describe pagan idolatry. You know what God is saying here? If you are outwardly obeying, if you are merely externally conforming to God's Word, but your heart hasn't really changed, then as far as God is concerned you might as well be a blubbering pagan bringing food or offering in front of a piece of rock. That's how God sees it.

James Hiebert writes in his commentary, "a professed Christianity that centers on the external features of faith: attendance at worship, prayers, church membership, participation in the ordinances, etc., but is devoid of the regenerating power of the Gospel is as futile and unprofitable as idol worship." You might as well be worshiping an idol, as far as it will get you with God. If your obedience is an external obedience that hasn't touched your heart (and the way you know that is by what pours out of your mouth), God says your mere external conformity is absolutely worthless in His sight. There's a real danger here of thinking you're a doer, of externally doing certain things and yet not being the real genuine article.

But that immediately raises a question in me as I'm sure it does in you. How can I know if my obedience is acceptable to God or if I'm deceiving myself? If it's mere doing that God hates? How can I know the difference? This is after all self-deception. Well, James anticipates that question, and he gives us an answer in the next verse, verse 27. He gives us a way to see if our obedience is the kind that honors God or if it's just no better than idolatry. In verse 27 James provides us with the description of true religion. "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Here James tells us how we can recognize the difference between mere external religious exercises and a changed heart. He's already given us one test and that is: what comes out of our mouths. Now he's going to tell us that this changed heart that is a heart where the Word of God has done its work, a heart that truly loves God and others, a heart that obeys because of that love for God and love for others. Here's what it looks like: James calls the outward expression of such a heart "pure and undefiled religion".

“Pure” simply the word for “clean”. It’s often used of clean dishes in the Greek text. It’s talking about religion that is clean “without impurities without moral defilement”. And undefiled, this is a synonym of the word “pure”. It simply means “without contamination”. James says here’s a religion that’s without impurities, it’s without contamination in the sight of our God and Father. Here’s what God’s perspective is about the genuine article. God examines and accepts obedience that passes these tests and if it doesn’t pass these tests, then its mere external conformity; external compliance, and it’s just like idolatry in God’s sight.

Notice that what John James gives us here is not a comprehensive definition of true religion. It’s not exhaustive. For example, there’s no mention in verse 27 of loving God which is essential to true religion. Instead, these two points are representative. They are two aspects of true and undefiled or of pure and undefiled religion. John Calvin in his commentary writes this, “James does not define generally what religion is, but reminds us that religion without these things is nothing.” So, what are these tests to see if our obedience is merely external conformity or if it really flows from a changed heart?

First test: do we have genuine love for those in need? Do we have genuine love for those in need? “To visit orphans and widows in their distress.” Now when you read the word “visit” you think of sort of an English American version, this doesn’t describe stopping by for a perfunctory visit and sipping a cup of coffee. It means (literally the Greek word means) “to visit someone for the purpose of caring for and meeting their needs”. The expression implies more than just sending money. It implies personal contact and genuine concern. By the way that’s why I’m so glad that we’ve been able to make contact with a couple of churches as well as with the folks that were here last week, so we can personally involve ourselves in people’s lives as opposed to just sort of sending money. We are to personally to reach out to the needy. Now don’t misunderstand James. Here’s where a lot of people misunderstand the direction he’s going. James is not merely talking about acts of charity.

Right now, in our world because of hurricane Katrina, there are millions of people extending acts of charity to relieve the suffering of the people in southern Louisiana who have wicked evil hearts; who don’t have pure and undefiled religion before God. You can do an act of charity for all the wrong reasons. In fact, turn back to 1 Corinthians 13. First Corinthians, of course the famous love chapter, but notice what Paul says in verse 3, he says, “if I give all my possessions to feed the poor....” This isn’t an overstatement, Paul says if I sell everything I have except the clothes on my back, and I feed the poor and watch the end of the verse, “but do not have love, it profits me nothing.”

It's not the act of charity. There are a lot of people committing acts of charity who don't have a genuine love underneath it for God and a love for people made in His image. They're doing it for their reputation, to make themselves feel better because of the circumstances in which they live. They get some emotional punch from it. Lots of reasons people respond with acts of charity, and I'm glad they're responding, but that's not what James is talking about. James is talking about a genuine love that flows out in acts of charity.

Specifically, back in James 1 he says, for orphans and widows; orphans, those whose fathers have either died or abandoned them, and widows. Now why does he single out these two groups? Well in the ancient world orphans and widows were unable to earn a living and they were often taken advantage of. They were frequently the neediest people you could meet in that world. And James says we should care for them in their distress. And you know it makes sense that we as believers should have this kind of heart because this is the heart our God has. This is how He responds, listen to Deuteronomy 10:18, "God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and He shows His love for the alien," [That is the immigrant, the stranger in the land,] "by giving him food and clothing."

Psalms 68:5, "He is a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows." This is the nature of God, and when we act this way we reflect the character of God. But James here isn't saying that we should only take care of widows and orphans, and then we can just ignore everybody else who's needy. This is a category. It would be a reasonable and fair paraphrase of James' words here to say it this way, pure and undefiled religion is to take care of those who are the neediest around you. This is a constant reminder of Scripture. What James is saying here, listen carefully, James is saying that those who are truly changed at the heart level, those whose obedience to the word is more than mere conformity, more than mere external obedience, they have a genuine love for the needy that moves them to try to personally relieve their distress. That's what he's saying. You want to test your heart? Do you have a genuine love for those in need that moves you to reach out to them?

Can I say that in America and in Texas we have allowed often our politics to get in the way of our Christianity, get in the way of biblical Christian faith. I've been personally rebuked this week as I've read these texts. I've made a short list of texts I want to take you to this morning to let you see how important this is to God. And it is a short list, I found myself last night crossing out one after one that I knew I wouldn't have time to get to. I just want you to get a glimpse of how important this issue is to God. Let's turn first to Exodus 22, Exodus 22:21. Part of the law of God, Moses writes, Exodus 22:21,

“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry;” [Watch this] “and My anger will be kindled and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.”

Wow. God feels pretty strongly about how we treat those who find themselves in desperate need. Turn over to Deuteronomy 14. Again, I’m just touching the high points; there are so many texts that make this point. Deuteronomy 14:28, when God was King of a nation, when He was King of Israel, there was a welfare system in Israel. Now I know you may hate to hear that, but this is the reality. You read with me, Deuteronomy 14:28, “At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall deposit *it* in your town.” Now what’s going on here? The tithe in ancient Israel was the tax, and here He’s saying every third year the tax of your produce and remember this was an agricultural society, their wealth was their produce. He says every third year I want you to take what you owe the government and I want you to give it to your town and not to the central temple.

And here’s what’s going to happen with it, verse 29, “The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you,” [The Levite was a government official in ancient Israel, involved particularly in the Levitical sacrificial system. So, it started with supporting government employees, then he says,] “and the alien,” [The stranger, the immigrant if you will or even the person who’s in your country but isn’t a part of your country.] “the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.”

Look at Deuteronomy 24, just a few pages over, verse 17,

“You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge. But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing. When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf (in the leaf,) in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree,” [That is to loosen the olives] “you shall not go over the boughs again, it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard,

you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.”

God is desperately concerned that those in need in the culture be cared for. Job 29, you know you see this in the righteousness of the righteous men of the Scripture. Listen to Job as he defends himself in Job 29. Listen to him describe his own life and as I’ve had to do this week, measure your own against these words. Job 29:12, he says,

... I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the orphan who had no helper.  
“The blessing of the one ready to perish came upon me, and I made the widows heart sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind, I was feet to the lame; I was a father to the needy, and I investigated the case which I did not know.”

Turn over to 31:16. Job again defending himself and he says let me tell you how I’ve responded. He says (in this case how I have not responded). He says,

“If I have kept the poor from *their* desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, Or if I have eaten my morsel alone and the orphan has not shared it.” Verse 19, “If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or that the needy had no covering, If his loins have not thanked me, and if he has not been warmed with the fleece of my sheep, If I have lifted up my hand against the orphan, because I saw I had support in the gate.” [In other words, nobody was there claiming that the defense of this orphan and I could have my own way and take advantage of the situation. He said if I’ve ever done any of those things,] verse 22, “Let my shoulder fall from the socket, and my arm be broken off at the elbow.” [He’s saying this never happened. This is how righteous Job lived.]

Turn over to Isaiah; the prophets are constantly making the same point in Isaiah 58:6. God says, I’m sick of your fasts. I’m sick of your religious ceremonies and your worship, your public worship. And He says let me tell you what I’m really after, Isaiah 58:6.

“Is this not the fast which I choose,” [You want to know what kind of fast I want. Here it is.] “to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free to break every yoke? Is it no to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the

naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will (speedily spring forth) spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and the LORD will answer;”

You get the impression this is pretty important to the Lord. Well the ministry of Christ was no different; turn over with me to Matthew. Matthew 25, Matthew 25:34. What you have here is we’ve now fast-forwarded to what’s called the judgment of the sheep and goats to the judgment of the nation, it’s often called. It happens at the end of the tribulation period, before the millennium is where we believe this lands. And this judgment is not a judgment of nations. That’s not the best way to think of it. It’s a judgment of individuals within nations. Notice the basis on which they’re judged, verse 34.

“Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Why? Verse 35, ‘For I was hungry, and you gave me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ Then the righteousness will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You; or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least *of them*, you did it to Me.’”

You know this is the amazing thing to me. As you and I reach out to these brothers and sisters in Christ over in Slidell and Wiggins, the victims of this hurricane, it’s as if we’re treating Christ Himself that way. He goes on, verse 41,

“Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite Me in; naked, and you didn’t clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ Then He will answer

them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

You see Jesus is saying exactly the same thing that James is saying in James 1. You want to know whether or not you're the genuine article? Do you have a true love for those who are in need? Does your heart reach out for them? Unfortunately, our response isn't always this way, as I've said often we allow our politics to get in the way of our Christian faith. An unknown author eloquently captured the way in which we fall so short of Christ's standard. He wrote,

"I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. I was in prison, and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release. I was naked, and, in your mind, you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you preached to me the spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me." [Now our faith has to take feet and hands.]

This is what John says in 1 John. Turn to 1 John 3 that familiar passage where he drives home the same point. He's already made the point in this Epistle that love, true love is an expression of genuine conversion. And he says in 1 John 3:16, "We know love by this, that Christ lay down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." But you know what? You don't have to lay down your life for someone to demonstrate true love. It can be demonstrated in a much more mundane and everyday ways. Notice the next verse, verse 17. "Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him,"

You know that's what we do, isn't it? We just get jaded, we get hard, hard-hearted, we see the needs and we assume, well they're going to take advantage of me, or we assume that they're not really what they appear to be. We just close our heart. We, in the words of the character of Dickens, "Are there no poor houses, is there no welfare?" We close our hearts. "How does the love of God abide in him? "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth."

How are you doing on this test? Do you have a genuine love in your heart for the needy around you? Do you actively take care of those who are the helpless in your world, starting with elderly aging parents, or are you too busy to even care for them the way they ought to be cared for? And then expanding to the rest of the people God providentially brings across your path. The

hurricane victims that we are reaching out to, others perhaps in your neighborhood, your extended family, widows with no family and no means of support, orphans, hurricane victims, immigrants trying to adjust to a new life, the handicapped, the homeless. Now, I have to admit to you, my own conscience has been severely rebuked as I've studied these passages this week. And you know what, all of us undoubtedly feel that way, but God help us if we sit here this morning and are mere hearers of the Word, have seen what we look like in the mirror and don't like it and leave and never change. Our family's looked into the practical ways to work this out. Our elders, I've talked with them this morning. We're going to look at the church for practical ways to reach out to others as we've been commanded here. And you and your family ought to be doing the same. First test to see if our doing of the Word is merely external conformity, worthless religion, or true heart change is this: do we genuinely love those in need, and do we set out to meet that need.

The second test James gives us the last part of verse 27. Do we desire and pursue personal holiness? Do we desire and pursue personal holiness? "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this; ... to keep oneself unstained by the world." To keep oneself; that implies personal responsibility. It's true, ultimately God is the one who keeps us, and I love those passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:23, and Jude 24 that make that point. But we are obligated to make every effort to keep ourselves unstained. "Unstained", this word comes from the vocabulary of sacrifice. It means "without spot", literally. It's used in 1 Peter 1:19 of Christ, where it says that "He was a Lamb without spot." We're to keep ourselves from being spotted or stained by the world around us. Now "world" here is the familiar word "cosmos". You recognize that word, it's not talking necessarily about the people, it's not telling you to withdraw from the people of the world. Paul makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 5. The world is a system of values that stand opposed to God and to His word. And you and I've rubbed shoulders with that set of values and beliefs every day, and we're not to be affected by it.

James over in 4:4, he deals with the world in another verse, he says, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

If you, if you embrace the values, the system of thinking that characterizes our world, then you're no friend of God. That's what he's saying. Says, be unspotted by all of that. Again, we're not talking about people; we're talking about the system, the values that they embrace. John describes it in 1 John 2, he says "the things that are in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life," we must work with all our might to keep

ourselves from being stained by the craving of our flesh by the craving of our eyes and by the pride about who we are and what we've accomplished. You say, well that's impossible, you're right, it's impossible. John himself says if we say we have no sin, the truth is not in us, and we've deceived ourselves. But the question is, what direction are you headed, where's your desire, what are you pursuing, do you have a compelling desire to be holy?

Charles Spurgeon that great Baptist preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century said that, "the truest test of a redeemed heart is a desire for personal holiness." Don't misunderstand him; it's not the desire to be rid of some irritating sin or sin habit. He's talking about the desire in every area of life to be like Jesus Christ. That's what James says, you know you've got the real thing if you genuinely love others and if you have both the desire and the active pursuit of personal holiness. Now don't misunderstand what James is saying here. These verses can't be misread as teaching that religion is just good works and that good works assures acceptance with God, the gospel is unnecessary. No that's not what James is doing. James is insisting that right conduct always results from a right relationship with God, if the Holy Spirit has brought true change to your heart, if you have responded in faith to the gospel, if you have embraced Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, if you have a new heart, then its going to act and live and think like this.

How's your response to the Word of God? Do you have a teachable heart? Have you stopped talking? Have you stopped telling God and others your opinions and started listening to the Scripture? Do you have a consistent pattern of obedience? Are you trying to do what you learn here and in your own study and when you encounter the Word of God? Or are you just accumulating knowledge? Are you sort of a spiritual couch potato, just absorbing? And do you have a genuine heart change? At the deepest level have you been changed so that you now exercise self control over your tongue so that what comes out of your mouth exhibits that there is something good in your heart? Have you been changed at the level that you have a genuine love for those in need that moves to meet that need on behalf of Christ and a desire, an intense desire and effort to pursue personal holiness?

If those things characterize you, if that's the direction of your life, not the perfection, but the direction of your life, then James says you belong to Christ. But if those things don't describe you, then it doesn't matter how many times you've prayed a prayer, how many times you've walked an isle, whatever nail you're hanging onto as your hope of eternal life, James says under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that you have deceived yourself. Deal in reality, this is what God says.

Let's pray together.

Father these are hard words. Not one of us here this morning can honestly say that we feel untouched, unscathed by these things. Lord, we who belong to You confess that we are often hard-hearted toward those in need. That we buy into the culture our culture, and we become closed-hearted to those who find themselves in places of need. Lord, help us as Your people to find practical ways to change, to live what we've learned this morning, individually, as families, and as a church family. Lord, help us to set a course to correct this flawed course we've been on.

And Lord, I pray for the person here this morning who, as a believer, has been tolerating some pattern of sin, Lord, help them to see that true believers have an intense desire and pursuit of personal holiness. May they confess that this morning. May they renew their commitment to follow Christ.

And Lord, I pray for the person also here this morning who, if they're honest with themselves in the quiet of their heart looking into Your presence, have to admit that their response to the Word is like none of this. The Word is to them a mere curiosity. Their obedience is merely external. There's been no heart change. Father, I pray that You would strip away everything they are clinging to. Lord, don't let them hold on to some ancient profession of faith they made, some prayer they prayed. Don't let them cling to some card they signed or some baptism that they experienced. Lord, help them to see the reality that they are self-deceived and that one day they'll stand before You and hear, "depart from Me, I never knew you, you who practice lawlessness."

Father, my prayer is that today would be the day You would strip away that façade and bring them to true repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. And Lord, when this happens, we'll be careful to give You the glory, for it's in Christ's name we pray, Amen.