

James 1:26-27: Some Marks of True Religion

OUTLINE

The tongue
The needy
The world

INTRODUCTION

Today we have the wonderful opportunity of presenting a mission work for us as a church to get involved in. Through Christian Compassion Ministries we have a long awaited answer to prayer where we can get involved in a significant gospel work that ticks some other important boxes as well. Today I would like to preach to us from James 1:26-27 and put some of our thinking on the table as to how and why we are getting involved with such a work. The book of James holds first place for probably being the first book of the NT to be written, only 10-15 years after the resurrection of Jesus. This early date can be seen in the fact that James is addressing an almost exclusive Jewish audience, 1:1, 'to the twelve tribes of the dispersion.' Another clue is that James seems to be dealing with very similar problems that Jesus dealt with in the gospels, not problems related to idolatry, immorality and philosophy like we see in Corinth but the sins of religious people. 1:2-21 deals with religious people responding to trials. 1:22-2:26 deal with having an active faith. Our verses are right in the middle of a discussion about being doers and not hearers of the word only, and a faith that is vindicated by its fruit. One of the key problems that Jesus addresses in the gospels is external, loveless and hypocritical religion. The Jews were the most orthodox people on the planet, but they had turned the truth into a superficial group of superior people who prided themselves in keeping men's rules all the while neglecting God's true commandments. Jesus called them to obey God's commands not man-made rules; to practice true religion from the heart not only externally; to receive a righteousness from God by faith and not manufacture one of their own devising; and to have a faith that evidenced itself in love. It has been pointed out that James and Paul are dealing with two different types of problems. Where Paul is dealing with people who believe that they can save themselves by works and not by faith alone; James is dealing with an opposite problem of people who have an orthodox confession but no evidence of saving faith. Paul was dealing with the problem of legalistic reliance upon the law salvation and had to push back with an emphasis on justification by faith alone. James on the other hand is dealing with the problem of those who say they are believers, but whose lives are filled with bad fruit and no good fruit and he has to emphasize that saving faith does not stand alone but is accompanied by works.

Our portion concerns itself with James making some pithy remarks about the signs/marks of true religion that the people he is talking about need to hear. If we were to give a full list of things that make us for true religion we would probably have a long list that would include necessary beliefs about God, the trinity, the way of salvation as well as the things James mentions. James is trying to make a point and he foregrounds the moral problems which reveal that some of these people might be hypocrites and not true Christians, that they are only Christians in name but not in truth. He talks about how true religion will always make itself felt in three key areas, 1:26-27, 'If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's 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.’ We will look then at how true religion shows itself in the areas of the tongue, the needy, and our relation to the world.

The tongue

V26, ‘If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.’ Our verse begins with the idea that someone might think he is religious but in truth is not. In the Greek the word for thinks is actually ‘seems’, ‘if anyone seems to be religious.’ Right off the bat we have the traditional problem of inward versus outward religion, of white washed tombs; of cleaning the outside but not the inside of the cup. It is easy to look religious without being religious. It is easy to be Christian in name; to go to church; to participate in the external acts associate with Christianity and not be a real Christian. You can get baptized, partake of the Lord’s Supper, even be able to give all the right answers to the catechism questions and not be born again. James is dealing with a bunch of Jewish converts to Christianity who have brought the problem of nominalism with them into the church. They are pursuing Christianity in the same old way they practiced Judaism. But a true barometer of where your heart is, is the tongue. The mouth speaks of the abundance of the heart. A Christian is not something that you do from the outside but from the inside. You cannot become a Christian by going to all the right places, and hanging with all the right people, and using all the right phrases. A Christian is someone who is born again not merely born to Christian parents. You have to come to a recognition that you are lost, that you cannot save yourself, and see in Christ God’s only provision to make a way for your sins to be paid for and forgiven. And then not by being good, but by coming to God in humility and asking for the free gift of forgiveness you become a child of God. That is what is going on outwardly, inwardly the Holy Spirit is drawing you to Christ, uniting you to Christ, giving you a new heart and causing you to experience an inner renewal that the bible describe in metaphorical terms as replacing a heart of stone with a heart of flesh. You now have a new set of desires, priorities, and a new ability to obey God and put away sin. This change makes itself known in all sorts of ways. You want to pray, be with God’s people, put away old addictions, be holy, forgive old grudges, reconcile with enemies, etc. James zeroes in on a change that will be evident to all, the way you speak.

James has already spoken about angry speech particularly when it comes to being angry about being tested by God, 1:19. He will go on to talk about the way in which the tongue is being used against neighbor in chapter 3. James says that the sign of a new heart and a true faith is a bridled tongue. A bridle will be mentioned again in 3:2. A mouth that is openly critical, accusatory and questioning of God is not a sign of someone having saving faith. James is more likely focusing on the way we use the tongue against our neighbor. A person who is full of clamour, and shouting, and insults, and filthy jokes, is part of what James will have in mind. Or someone who is racist or proudly making others less like scum. Someone who is a liar, or a gossip, and a slanderer. As James says, you can’t be someone who praises God and then sin against someone made in His image with your mouth. If a Pharisaic practice is prevailing among these Jews of the Dispersion then the harsh, legalistic, judgmental and critical uses of the tongue would be in view as well. A totally loveless use of the tongue where you only tear down and don’t build up, speak lies and not truth is a sign that your heart has not yet been changed.

How is it that someone who is outwardly religious, and cruel with their tongue still think that they are Christians? If the nature of the way we use our tongues is to brutally judge others, to be overly harsh and self-righteous, to seemingly be for truth and religion by focusing on those matters where people fall short of manmade tradition, it is easy to think you are on the side of truth and not error. James tells us that this sort of religion is worthless. It does not profit themselves because it deceives them into thinking they are saved when they are not. It does not profit God because these hypocrites bring down the name of Christ not honoring it. And it does not profit their number because they are a burden to them and not a blessing.

The needy

V27a, 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.' We have seen a key way to test for false religion, now James speaks positively showing us how to test for true religion. He talks first about religion that is pure and undefiled. These are words that have connotations of ritual purity meaning, without mixture or blemish. Pure religion is not mixed with manmade rules and traditions, like rules about handwashing. Pure religion is not hypocritical or twofaced, one thing in public and another thing in private. Pure religion is done before God, for the audience of one, it is not a show to be done on the street corner. Pure religion is done before our Father in heaven who can only become our Father in heaven through faith in Christ. And pure religion is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.

Now it is obvious that these are not the only needy that James is concerned with. In the OT whenever widows and orphans are mentioned, there would regularly be a mention of foreigners as well. This is not an affirmative action list where the older white male poor are left till last. This is a token list putting the most common needs forward. Widows and orphans were the most commonly needy in a context where women and children were often dependent upon men for their livelihood. James is not saying that Christianity operates according to a critical principle or a liberation theological principle of a preferential treatment of the poor. No it operates on the principle of love and compassion, it is moved by those who are in need, the poor are often the most needy.

This brings us to a burning issue and a most important question. Who has the duty of care for the poor? Who should be looking after the poor? Is it the country's responsibility to take care of its own citizens? Should countries be responsible for the poor of other countries who can't provide for their own poor? Is it the responsibility of smaller communities to look after its own poor? Is it the job of the church to look after the poor? Is it the job of the family to look after its poor? There is probably a qualified yes to all of those questions. Here a few biblical ideas to steer us. In the context of dealing with the problem of how to provide for the poor widows Paul instructs timothy to look after those who are truly widows, in other words those with no family to help them. Otherwise it is first and foremost the responsibility of the family to look after its own poor, 1 Tim. 5:8, 'But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.' Technically speaking your poor parents are your problem first not the churches or the governments. What is the church's duty towards the poor? The office of deacon is an argument that God intends for each local church to attend to its own needy. The diaconal ministry of the church is given to serve those in the family of faith supplementing and helping the family, or being a

spiritual family in the case of what Paul calls 'true widows.' We have seen as we have looked at Paul's gathering relief for the saints that suffered from famine in Judea that there was a recognition of the broader body of Christ. An argument can be made for Christians to help those of the family of faith in other places not only their own local churches. What you won't find but sadly is becoming a trend where the church is basically just becoming a charity, a non-profit that is focused on meeting the needs of the needy indiscriminately. Where some in the name of the great commission are confusing meeting social needs with the church's responsibility to preach the gospel. There is a real mission drift as people confuse social justice or social needs with our duty to preach the gospel. Many have tried to make an argument for a socially oriented gospel leaning heavily on the prophets of the OT. the trouble with that is that the prophets were what we call covenant prosecutors, calling the people of Israel, to be just and generous to the poor of Israel, and not every nation in the world. You cannot use the OT prophet to try and build a theology of universal obligation to the poor.

Does that mean we don't care about the poor? Not at all, we must, but what matters is the how. As a Christian you should be concerned for the needy in your church and expect part of your giving to be administered by the diaconal ministry of the church to help them in their needs. This is not a supplanting of the responsibility of the family but as a supplement to it. But what about the poor in your neighborhood? Do you have a duty towards them? My answer is yes, we all believers and unbelievers alike do. There is a duty of care that is upon us in the church by virtue of our oneness in Christ. Outside the church there is also a duty of care but it is an obligation that binds us all. All human beings are made in the image of God, we are to love all of our neighbors as we love ourselves. But we do this by keeping the great commission and the great command to love our neighbor distinct. You have two citizenships. You are part of God's kingdom expressed in the church and this kingdom comes with marching orders, you are to fulfil the spiritual mission of preaching the gospel to all nations. But you are also a kingdom of this present evil age which is fading away. This citizenship also has marching orders, it is the natural law that is written upon all of our hearts. You can sum it up in loving your neighbor. What this means is that when you give to the church you should expect the church to use that money towards those ventures that are spreading the gospel. We have a hierarchy of priorities where we prioritize the unreached, bible translation, and move down the ladder to our own local evangelistic needs. If you want to give to the poor. To benefit the poor in our church you can give to the almoner's fund, there is a box on the table in the foyer. But the needs in our own church family are minimal. If you seek to benefit the poor in Timaru, or NZ, or Palestine, don't wait for the church to start a fund, find a responsible charity to give through and give. The benefit of recognizing these two citizenships is that you can keep the mission of the church unsullied as you partner with your fellow saints to spread the word. But you can also partner with your fellow human beings outside the church to bring benefit to the needy. Technically you can ally with a muslim to help the poor because you are not doing it in the name of the church. I hope that each one of you is engaged in the community and is compassionately and generously benefitting those who have need. The beauty of our opportunity to partner with Christian Compassion Ministries is that we get a 'twofer' a two for one scenario where a confessional local church is faithfully preaching the gospel to children, while also meeting their physical needs. In our supporting of this mission we are going to be focusing as a church on supporting the houses as they are manned by members of the church who will be preaching to the kids, doing devotions with them, getting them to church, and mid-week bible studies.

We are focusing our spending on those efforts that involve gospel opportunities. However we do want to recommend the other aspects of this ministry, the drop-in ministry as well as the education program as good ways to support those in physical need. Feel free to approach Warwick individually to talk about what supporting those ventures looks like.

As citizens you can also call on your government to fulfil the obligations that giving taxes to them involves and seek for them to provide for the needy. In the church we must be careful to ensure that the government's duty does not replace our duty to our spiritual family.

Pure religion helps the needy in the church through the church and outside the church in many ways. The true believer will feel drawn to help the needy, it is the job of the elders to remind us how to keep the main thing the main thing without getting off track. Have you ever been watching a movie and just when the plot is resolving and the tension between the male and female lead in this rom-com comes to a climactic confession of their love and kiss; and then someone speaks up ruining the moment saying, 'But the woman is already married she is committing adultery.' Sometimes I feel like that guy as an elder. When it comes to helping the needy, most of us are ready with compassion with hearts stirred and ready to give. My job is to be the guy who puts things in perspective and help you see how the Bible encourages us to channel that desire.

The world

V27b, 'and to keep oneself unstained from the world.' The third item on the list is the one that the Pharisee would put first on the list while leaving the others off. The three pillars of true religion are the truth that we believe, the love we live out and the holiness we pursue. The people James is writing to are orthodox, so he focuses on the love the need to live out by how they use their tongue and help the needy. And now he also emphasizes the need to not be worldly but holy. As with the other topics this is one that James returns to in chapter 4. V4-5, 'You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us." We are to be in the world, getting alongside its needy, getting our hands dirty in the hard work of loving them; while not being of the world, keeping our hands clean of its sins. If we had to ask for a definition of the world we could use John's, 'the lust of the flesh; the lust of the eyes; and the pride of life.' We are to be unspotted/unstained, without blemish as we strive to be holy as He is holy. There is no compromise with the sin, no quarter given to sin. We must not be characterized by the sins that define those who do not believe. We have put off the old man and his ways; we have put off its activities and addictions. Love for God and man, not a love of self and pleasure is now the driving force in our lives. Paul puts it this way in Col. 3:5-9, 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.'

James presents a balanced view of true religion. Some have a religion where it is all about the emotion they feel while in a stimulating worship service singing their favourite songs; but it is not translating into loving action and a hunger for holiness. Some have heads full of orthodoxy but whose hearts are more earnest to be right than to serve their neighbor. Some have a list of rules they live by as they are morbidly introspective keeping a constant tab on the things they don't do, but all the while they are judging and running down others in their pride. Which area do you need to work on that James has challenged on this morning? Is it your tongue? Is it your compassion to the needy? Is it your holiness?

Let me end with some prayer requests. Please pray for us as elders to know how to steer the church and keep us on mission looking to the Bible to show us how. Please pray for the diaconate of the church, we have approached some men to consider being in the role, pray for them and for us as we think more deeply about the role of the deacon especially around the matter of the needy in our congregation. Pray for Christian Compassion Ministries and the partnership we are entering into with them. Pray that the money we send will translate into workers, into children hearing the gospel and being saved, into those who are vulnerable finding a safe and loving home environment.