

Sermon 9: James 1:26-27: True and False Religion

OUTLINE

False religion
True religion

INTRODUCTION

The book of James is a book that addresses the sins of religious people. 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 for 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 always 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. He has spoken about being doers of the word; well here are some practical points as James moves from the general principle of being doers of the words, to some problem areas where they need to obey. Because we can become content with external association with and observance of religion, we need to be reminded of the concrete ways we are to be serving God. 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. Their main problem is not orthodoxy but orthopraxy. He highlights three problem areas, an unrestrained tongue, a neglect of the needy, and worldliness. Each of these themes arises again in the letter. We will be looking at these areas under two headings, false religion and true religion.

False religion

V26, 'If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.' The gospels are full of Jesus picture language describing false religion, 'white washed tombs'; 'the outside of the cup is clean (the part that does not matter); but the inside of the cup is dirty'; 'drawing near with the lips, but the heart is far from God'. James in the spirit of Christ's own teaching tackles the problem of false religion. The word 'think' is the word 'dokeo' from which we get the word Docetism, which means 'seems'. In other words, appearance only and not real. Docetism is the heresy that Jesus only appeared to be human but was not really human. This is reinforced by the rare use of the word for 'religion' which has to do with the outward forms, the external practices, of religion. James is describing someone who has a façade of religion, a veneer, a white washed wall that is structurally unsound, but appears new with a fresh coat of paint. James notes three aspects of this externalism.

Firstly, the person who is only playing at religion and who does not have a heart that is born again is revealed by the fact that they do not restrain their speech. James uses the word 'bridle' here and in chapter 3:2-3 where he talks about bridling a horse. Jesus tells us that the mouth speaks of the abundance of the heart. So, if someone has been born again, and has a heart of flesh and not of stone, this will show in the fact that they will rule over the most unruly aspect of their natures, the tongue. We show ourselves in our speech; the hypocrite reveals themselves in their speech. What are the problems with speech James is addressing? We have already seen the problem of faithless accusations against God; of making excuses for sin; of angry outbursts against our neighbour. James calls the tongue 'a world of unrighteousness' the tongue has the potential for a world of sin. The WLC in question 145 hints at this when it answers the question: 'What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?' Answer: 'The sins forbidden in the Ninth Commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors, as well as our own, especially in public judicature; giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calls for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful and equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice; speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, tale bearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vainglorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; unnecessary discovering of infirmities; raising false rumours, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defense; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any, endeavouring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practicing, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering: What we can in others, such things as procure an ill name.'

The true believer is fighting this way of the old man; they believer has a bridle applied and is applying force and restraint to stop the constant pouring forth of sin. The hypocrite is unfiltered in his speech.

Secondly, James tells us that those who are hypocrites are self-deceiving, 'but deceives his heart.' We see this self-deception in the Pharisees in the gospels. They are so rigorous in keeping the laws of men; they are so disapproving of their neighbours sins; they are so self-denying in all sorts of minor matters, they cannot imagine that they are sinful and in need of salvation; they cannot imagine that they are in the wrong. Here we are warned of our infinite capacity for self-deception and the effectiveness of religion to act as a sedative upon us. We are good at seeing others sin and not our own. We overestimate our looks, our value, and our importance. A little bit of knowledge and being orthodox can still puff us up and we can mistake knowing a thing with doing a thing. A little bit of singing and praying at church can make it feel like we are doing our religious duty, but the truth is we come to church not to give our religious service to God, but to be filled by the Spirit so that we can go out into the world for another week and resist sin, and serve our neighbour and take a costly stand as we witness for Christ, freshly rejuvenated by God's ministry by His word and Spirit. We can think that going to church is the end of our service and not the beginning. Having put on a performance convincing enough that the person sitting in the pew next to us thinks we are a good Christian we rest satisfied and do no more. Having satisfied man we think we have satisfied God; having made a good showing, we can think we have made a good doing; that having a good knowledge makes us a good person. Just because you made the effort to be here, and read your bibles, and have your daily devotions, and pray, do not think that this is the end of what makes up true religion. Beware of the false contentment that comes with external observance and association.

Thirdly, James tells us that this sort of religion is vain, worthless, useless. It is worthless in every way. Firstly, it is worthless to himself because it is a religion that does not save. In fact it can be as many have experienced a hindrance to salvation. How many Jews rejected Christ because they were content with their hypocritical man made religion? They think they are serving God but all they are doing is deluding themselves and blinding themselves to their need of salvation. We are all sinners, condemned before God, there is nothing we can do to cleanse ourselves of sin, only Christ and His death upon the cross can pay for our sin debt; only by repenting and turning to Him; only by experiencing a new birth can any be truly saved. To be content with a few rituals and externals is worthless. Secondly, he is worthless to his neighbour, for he does him no good. The hypocrites religion consists in token deeds to satisfy observers and conscience but are not driven by love to see another truly benefitted. He will be worthless at work because he will only work to please man not God; he will be worthless at home not leading his family in spiritual things. Thirdly, it is worthless to God. In fact it is detrimental to God's glory. Instead of lifting up the name of God through demonstrating a changed life, instead the hypocrite brings down the name of Christ.

True religion

V27, '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.' Once again true religion does consist in true doctrine, but that is not the problem with James' hearers, not only are they unrestrained and doing damage with their mouths, they are selfishly neglecting the needy, and are worldly. James sounds just like an OT prophet as he rebukes false religion and recommends true religion. In Is. 1, the prophet is rebuking Israel for just this sort

of thing, v11, 'What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.' He then calls them to repentance in the form of good works, namely helping those who are needy and by putting away evil, v16-17, 'Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.'

James tells us three things about true religion. Firstly, there is a pure and undefiled way to serve God that pleases Him. Now we must be clear that this does not mean that our good deeds save us, no. We are not saved by good works but we are saved to them. James is assuming that God is already our Father in Christ. God can only become our Father if we believe in Christ. He is not our Father by birth, as John 1:12-13 tells us, 'But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.' There are good works that God commands, that we do in Christ, that we do in accordance with His word, that we do in dependence upon the Spirit, that are graciously received on account of Christ. When we serve God willingly, heartily, lovingly, scripturally, as believers our good deeds are not as filthy rags in His sight, they are acceptable. James here points to two key areas where we can please God, where true religion is proven by its fruit.

So, the second thing we see is that true religion considers the needy, 'to visit widows and orphans in their affliction.' Are these the only categories of needy that God cares about? No, we know that in the OT God was also concerned about the foreigner, the immigrant, that they too receive fair treatment and not be taken advantage of, Lev. 19:33-34, "'When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. ³⁴ You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.' God in the gospel promises comfort and deliverance to the captive, the blind, the lame. God has compassion on all those in need. Some have felt tempted, due to the influence of liberation theology and other ideologies to speak about God being for social justice for the oppressed. This is true, but we must be careful not to impose our modern critical theory influenced categories on the Bible. James' mention of only widows and orphans does not mean that this is an affirmative action list of priorities where men have been excluded as God sides with the oppressed against the oppressor in order to subvert patriarchy. No doubt God is against all those including men who abuse those who cannot defend themselves, but we must be careful not to make God a cheerleader for modern day intersectionality categories of oppression. Widows and orphans regularly occur together, and are the typical victims when those with money and power are sinful and selfish because they were the most vulnerable.

God expects the haves to be generous with the have nots. That statement should be without controversy. I know many would like to use such a truth to serve a larger discussion related to socialism versus capitalism, but that is to put our own political concerns before the concerns of scripture. The challenge James has for us is personal and relates to how true believers live. James is not asking about the public policy and the social welfare system you think is wisest in a fallen world. He is asking you whether you are concerned about the needy all around you and if you are a faithful steward of your surplus to meet needs.

James is not asking whether your church has a mercy ministry that you can mindlessly do an automatic transfer of your tithe to and give it no more thought. No, the challenge here is whether, we who have a new heart who have been freed from the power of sin which made us so self-centered is being communicated through our willingness to go out and help those in need. How often do you think about helping those in need? How often do you think about helping yourself? We complain and are concerned about our creature comforts; about our materialistic consumption; about our luxuries and indulgences, but not the needs of those in dire straits.

James talks about visiting them. Not throwing money at the problem but the gift of time, personal presence and proximity to get your hands dirty. James is talking about Good Samaritan style investment where you get personally involved and commit to seeing some lifted out of their need. James is not interested in those conscience soothing tokens, but getting right into that situation to give real help.

The third thing true religion does is pursue holiness, 'and to keep oneself unstained from the world.' What the Pharisees might have put first in the list, James puts last. Yes, James is concerned with holiness, it is true that God is holy and we must not be conformed to the ways of the world, but too often legalists can neglect love and too rigorously pursue an ascetic approach to things. James has a holistic view of true religion that emphasizes holiness and love. The word for 'world' here is not referring to creation, but to the fallen system of this world. James is not saying that you have to become gnostic and cut yourself off from God's good gifts like marriage, the taste of food, good art, etc. No he is concerned about the system of life that is governed by the sin that once ruled us. James is warning us off the greed that so often consumes us; the constant coveting; the sinful lusts; the revenge and anger; the unguarded thoughts and godless entertainments; the passions of the flesh in all of their manifestations. The priorities of the godless heart are not our priorities, our lives reflect that this is not our home and we cling lightly to the things of this life. The values that place the things of man above the things of God.

The true Christian stands out from the false believer. Their life changing work of salvation is evident through their changed lives. Three big areas where our new hearts should show is the way we are restrained in our speech where the unbelieving heart gives vent to godless speech; to a concern and service of the needy in the place of the self-absorption that used to control us; and a separation from this world, where it is evident that we are in it but not of it, that we engage in all of our activities as those whose home is yet to come and we are merely passing through. How are you doing in these three areas? Which is your weakest? Do you need to repent and give God dominion over every area of your life?