

10. Called to the True Religion

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

(James 1:26-27)

Are We Religious?

James exhorts us not just to be hearers of the Word, but also doers of the Word. This has become a well-known admonition: “Are you a hearer and a doer?” It is the kind of loaded question that can make us feel guilty. We may not even be sure how to respond properly. We do not want to sound smug, nor do we want to appear weak, and so the safest answer is probably, “Well, I am *trying* to be a hearer and a doer. I am doing my best.”

In 1:26, James writes about being religious. If asked whether we were religious people, what would we answer? We would probably say that, while there is always room for improvement, we do consider ourselves religious. We might even be somewhat affronted by the question. “Why do you ask? Do you have reason to doubt my religiosity? Am I doing something wrong? Did I say the wrong thing?”

For many people, religion is very important. We even speak of world religions. Christianity is no longer the most prominent religion. Buddhism and Islam are growing by leaps and bounds, while Christianity shrinks. We must be aware of the fact that Christians today are being persecuted more than ever before in the history of the church.

The world in which James lived was also very religious. But James is not writing about other religions; he is addressing members of the churches who consider themselves to be religious. He writes about worthless religion, meaning vain and empty religion such as that of the heathens. It has no substance, reaps no benefit, and deceives its adherents. That kind of religion, found in the world, can apparently also be found in the church of Christ. It should not be,

but it is. The Lord Jesus therefore calls us to the true religion. This religion is characterized by what we say, what we do, and who we are.

What Does “Religious” Mean?

James writes, “If anyone considers himself religious...” The original word for “consider” means that we do not just think we are religious, but in fact we are quite convinced that we are. I do not think that it means we should boast about being religious, but we can take a certain pride in being religious.

There is nothing wrong with that in itself. Perhaps the word “pride” is less fitting than the word “thankful”, but James does mean that a certain pride is present. He is talking about people who are religious in a very conscious and deliberate way.

We should be clear as to what James means here with the word “religious”. It is not the word used for being God-fearing or pious in the proper sense. It is a word used more for public worship. It denotes the outward expression of religious duty, to do what is expected in a religious sense. When someone is religious in this way, he does the outward acts which, to an extent, are normative, and he is very fastidious and prompt in these things. Being religious means that a person is concerned about the finest worship and the truest liturgy.

We can say that the Jews, for example, were very religious in this sense. They had to follow the ritual to the letter of the law. The proper clothes had to be worn, the music had to be exactly so, and the liturgy was moving and beautiful. Much attention was paid to little details, and a slight deviation from the rules was considered tantamount to heresy. Remember how there is a link in the letter of James to the “Sermon on the Mount”. The Lord Jesus spoke then about the religion of the Jews and the following items were specifically mentioned: all the commandments of the law, oaths of many kinds, alms, prayer, and fasting. The Jews maintained all of these with great diligence. They were very religious indeed.

We might even say that every religious community has its own traditions and peculiarities. These are the things that set us apart from others and give us our own identity. Those who do not stand for every aspect of this identity and who dare to question any traditions are quickly considered to not be truly religious.

What We Say

I find it remarkable that James then mentions the bridling of the tongue. We read, “If anyone considers himself to be religious, and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.” Is that the most serious sin? What about other things, like church attendance or being a member of a study society? Why and how does James first mention the tongue? He says that if we do not control our tongues, we might as well be heathen because then all our religion is worthless. It is vain, empty, and useless, terms used to describe the religion of the pagans. Whoever does not control his tongue may be religious in his own eyes, but he is like a heathen in God’s eyes.

James does not say that we must refrain from all speaking, but that true religion has everything to do with what we say. This comes first, because the mouth is the gateway to the heart. The mouth gives voice to the inner thoughts. Our heart and mind are on our lips. James is somewhat preoccupied in this letter with the sin of the tongue. This is the second time he mentions it, and the reason must be that it is such a prevalent sin in the church, among religious people. Gossip, even malicious and destructive gossip, is often found in a close-knit community like the church.

People can be very religious and always speak about how to serve the Lord. They can be very concerned about the state of the church. They have a text for every situation imaginable. They see all the errors that are creeping or rushing into the church. They warn incessantly that things are going in the wrong direction. And in the process, they do not shrink back from judging others strongly.

Bridling the Tongue

The Jews did this to the Lord Jesus. “He is leading Israel astray,” they said. “He must be sacrificed for the good of the people. It is better that one man dies than that the whole nation perishes,” said the chairman, and they all nodded solemnly. And they started whispering, talking, and finally openly condemning him, getting all the people to shout in an insane chorus, “Crucify him, crucify him!”

The Jews were very religious. They would not eat with unwashed hands or endorse healing an invalid on the Sabbath, but they could not keep a tight rein on their tongues. James uses the word “bridling”, which means pulling the bit in a horse’s mouth. The horse is poised, an explosive bundle of energy. It wants

to run, and its rider can hardly hold it under control. Suddenly control is lost and the mount rushes off. It is impossible to hold the horse back once it has started its wild gallop.

The tongue is much like this. Once we start talking, we cannot stop. What kind of talk is James referring to? He means pious talk, for these are religious people, but also the talk that results from poor listening, jumping to conclusions, and speaking rashly in anger (1:10). It is a matter of always knowing better than others, and being personalistic in the process. This includes judging and condemning others in the name of religion, which is a grave sin.

The sad thing is that such people do not see it. James writes that they deceive themselves. They may even think they are doing God a favor. It does not dawn on them that they could be opposing God. They would be indignant if we ascribed wrong motives or methods to them. Yet their religion is worthless. All their activity and clamoring mean nothing. God will say, "Go away from me, I never knew you."

True religion is characterized by what we say. If we have nothing good to say about God's children, if we cannot encourage each other with humble love or listen to each other eagerly and respond carefully, and if we cannot edify with our words, we must not eat and drink judgment upon ourselves. Would we dare take bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, signs and seals of the Lord's body and blood, with the same mouth that so easily and rashly condemns our brothers and sisters? We must not come to the table of the Lord with false religion that looks good from the outside but is hollow to the core, because it does not share love but feeds on hate.

What We Do

There is false religion, and it can be found in the true church. Remember that when we examine ourselves in the faith. True religion shows in what we do. Those who talk a lot about others never really get around to helping them. Or, to put it more generally, those who do nothing but criticize the church hardly ever become involved in building the church. We cannot build what we despise. It is true in all areas of life, but especially in the church: we cannot build up what we deeply despise.

In 1:27, James moves from what *people* consider true religion to what *God* considers true religion. He writes, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this..." "Pure and faultless" may be a Hebrew way of speaking, that is, using two words that basically mean the same to emphasize a point. It is almost like saying, "Real true religion that God accepts is..."

“Pure and faultless” does not mean religion that is without flaw. Nothing on this earth is perfect, certainly not our religion. The Form for the Lord’s Supper speaks of this: “We do not come to this table to declare that we are perfect in ourselves. On the contrary...we do not serve God with such zeal as he requires.”

“Pure and faultless” means religion that is true and solid. It refers not to a religion with condemning words, but a religion with encouraging deeds. It speaks of a religion that has come to a certain maturity—remember the theme of James—for maturity is that we see the real needs of the church, not self-imagined ones, and then help in those needs.

Note that James describes God in this verse as “God the Father”. Why does he here specify the name “Father”? He does so because any true religion honors God first and foremost as a father to his children in Christ. God is the father of us all, and therefore we must have the same love and care for each other. The church is a family with one God and Father, and in that family all the children are alike. None of them may be neglected.

Note also the word “accepts”. We must understand that God does not accept our religion because of itself. Our religion is never accepted on its own merits. Why then does God accept it? He does so because it shows forth the religion of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is modeled after his religion, based on his Word, and nurtured by his Spirit. Our religion must be the Christian religion, that which follows Christ, otherwise it is no religion. This is the meaning of being “Reformed”: we go back to the Bible in order to follow Christ, the only Lord and Savior, and to show forth his compassion and love.

Orphans and Widows

James mentions particularly orphans and widows, those who have no father or no husband. God is their Father, as well as ours, and we must then be a brother and sister to them. Think of what we sing in Psalm 68:1 and 3 of the *Book of Praise*, a psalm often associated with the sounds of battle, the enemies vanquished, and the true church preserved. In verse 1, we sing, “God shall arise, and by his might put all his enemies to flight.” Then in verse 3, we refer to him as “[the] Father to the fatherless, defense of widows in distress... [who] grants them consolation.”

James writes about orphans and widows “in their distress.” The word “distress” literally means that extreme pressure is put on them. Widows were at a terrible disadvantage in James’ time. They were exploited and had very few rights, if any. No one would speak up for a widow because she was

a liability. Remember how the Lord Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of oppressing widows: “They devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40). Orphans were no better off, often living on the streets, either alone or in gangs, hungry and despised. Most of us cannot even imagine what it is like to be so completely alone and unloved.

There were a rather large number of widows and orphans in the churches. We can understand that the Gospel was of particular comfort to such people, and is today as well, for God is still a Father to the fatherless and a defense of widows in distress. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). And they came, for he said further, “I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29).

Religion of the Open Hand

When there is a large number of people who require special help, we can become tired of giving and assisting. We can come to a point where we think, “I have done so much already. Sorry, but I have reached my limit.” This is no excuse. Remember how, in the church at Jerusalem, the Greek widows were not cared for in the same manner as the Hebrew widows. In order to provide fair care to all, the office of the deacons was instituted (Acts 6:1-4). True religion does not lie only in what we say, but also in what we do. Word and deed belong together. And we may not leave this to the special offices in the church, for Christ has given to each the required gifts to benefit the entire body.

We should never confuse faith and works, but we may never separate them either. Faith leads to works as sure as “a” leads to “z”. The true religion is always the religion of the open hand, the helping hand, and the willing hand. The Reformed churches or believers have become noted for their charity, their diaconal structure, and their zeal to build a better society for the disadvantaged. This also plays a role in mission and evangelism. Word and deed go together, and it starts on the home front, with those who have need.

We may sometimes complain about certain things that we think are wrong in the church. But do we also bear our part of the burden? What about together wholeheartedly supporting Christian schools and trying to bring the individual cost down? True religion is the religion of the open hand, not the big mouth.

Who We Are

There is one thing left to consider. True religion, to which we are called, is characterized by who we are. Indeed, who are we? What is the function of true religion in this world? What kind of people must we be for those who live around us? James writes that religion acceptable to God includes “[keeping] oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27).

James does not say that we must abstain from everything in this world. This is not a passage that functions as a proof text for abstinence and isolation. The true church has been placed right in the middle of the world, the world of man that is filled with sin, rebellion, and hate. Some think that the true church must get away from this world, but it is not so. The church must function in this world. The Lord Jesus said this in the “Sermon on the Mount”: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:13, 14).

As believers, and as religious persons, we do live in the middle of this world. We have here a task and a calling, but James warns us to see things in the proper perspective. We must keep ourselves from being polluted by the world in which we function. The expression “keep oneself from” is very strong. Literally, it means that a person shall keep *himself* unstained from (the side of) the world. “Himself”? How can we keep ourselves unstained in this world? We do not declare that we are perfect and righteous in ourselves. What we have and are, we have and are in Christ. Nevertheless, there rests upon us an obligation to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world. We must work out what God works in us. We must cooperate with Christ, come to him, and be living members of his church.

Then we can stand in this world without being polluted. I believe that this expression refers to our hearts. We learn to control our tongue. We learn to open our hands. And we learn to keep our heart pure. Our heart is for the Lord. That is true religion at its deepest and finest. Others will look and see that we do not just say we are religious and are involved in religious activities, but that we really *are* religious. They will see that while we live right beside them, we belong to a different kingdom.

Cleansed By Christ

The world is so very polluted in every way. There is the pollution of the natural realm. There is also the pollution of the spiritual realm. How can we ever escape it? Yet we can, by true religion and by true faith. We cannot have true religion and then sink away in a culture of sin. I know that nobody comes

through this life unscathed. If we do not watch and pray, we will fall into terrible sins, but we may go to the Lord Jesus Christ and be cleansed by him. In this way, we are able to stand in this world without going under in it.

James does not tell us that we will live without sin. He does tell us that sin may not and need not dominate our life. Our heart is for the Lord, and from the heart come our deeds and words. Our deeds will be cleansed and our words will be purified by the blood and Spirit of Christ. So we will become more and more mature in Christ, our Lord and Savior.

True religion. How often do we think about it? Do we examine ourselves, starting with our mouth, proceeding to our hands, and looking into our heart? We speak about the true church. This obligates us immensely. Remember that God must find true religion in the church. Otherwise he says, "Your whole religion is worthless, no matter how much time, energy, and money you have put into it. What a waste." Putting time, energy, and money into the church, into God's service, is of value only when it comes from true religion.