

A Biblical Look at Religion

James 1: 26-27

In our text this evening James deals with the religion of men. Religion is something that most people are at least somewhat familiar with. Even those who have no affiliation with the church have opinions regarding religion, even if they are nothing more than preconceived notions.

The word “religion” is found five times in the New Testament, two of which are in our text. The word “religious” is found twice in the New Testament and one of those occurrences is here as well. So, as we think of religion or being “religious,” what immediately comes to mind? Most identify religion with a particular denomination: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc... One who is viewed as “religious” would be considered to adhere to the particular tenants of a specific denomination or church affiliation.

As we begin to consider the passage before us, I want to take a moment to consider the true depth of “religion” and what it actually means within the context of this passage. It speaks of *“the outward and external observance of our faith. It implies that there has something happened internally and is manifested externally. It speaks of the acts, deeds, and service that result from our faith. When we talk about religion we are talking about what we have on the inside reveals itself by what we do on the outside.”*ⁱ Biblical religion is revealed through a personal relationship with Christ, not adherence to the creeds or expectations of men. Many have a form of religion, but lack a relationship with Christ. True religion will be shown in service and love to Christ and others.

In our previous study, James dealt with commitment to the Lord, adherence to His Word, and submissive service unto Him. These verses actually continue that line of thought. I want to examine the [differences](#) regarding religious views as we consider: [A Biblical Look at Religion](#).

I. The Vanity of Haphazard Religion (26) – [If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.](#) James continues his straight-forward approach, revealing the vanity of such religion. We find this type of religion is:

A. Masked by Deception – [If any man among you seem to be religious...](#) On the surface this appears to refer to how one’s religious activity is perceived by others, and that is inevitable as others closely watch our lives. We know that those who claim association with Christ are watched of others and that claim reflects not only on ourselves, but the church and our Lord. However, the word [seem](#) in the text literally means *“to think or suppose; it speaks of the concept that one has of himself.”* James is actually speaking to those who think they are religious and have a fond appreciation of their own religious activity and achievement.

- We may not consider it much, but our human nature carries a certain amount of pride. Quite often we feel as if we have mastered whatever activity we regularly engage in, and can spot weaknesses in others regarding their participation in the same activity. In regard to the text, James is speaking of those who think or suppose that all is well with their relationship with Christ and religious service, but they can't see their need due to their vanity.

- We all tend to be that way to a degree, but I am sure that we have all met those who seem to fit this description well. There are those who feel as if their lives and service are perfect and yet there is much that needs improved. I don't want to be deceived in my labor for the Lord. I pray that God will reveal my needs and provide the courage and wisdom I need to address them! [Gal.6:3 – For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.](#)

B. Marked by Displeasure (26) – [If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue...](#) Now we discover an attribute that is often present in those whose religion is vain. Many suppose that all is well concerning their relationship and religious service, but they have a hard time controlling their tongue. James speaks of something that all in his day were familiar with, and most of us are as well. He uses a word picture of a horse's bridle, having a bit placed in its mouth to control and guide the animal. It means "[to control, lead, guide, or govern.](#)"

- As I considered this passage, I thought of those who speak out of both sides of their mouths. While in the company of some, they may say all the right things, offering encouragement and generosity. Then in the company of others, there is criticism and judgment. Many times these are never pleased with the work or accomplishments of others. They always seek to find fault and point it out for others to see. These never seem happy in their service to the Lord. Rather than offering praise and encouragement, their comments tend to be negative and demeaning. It is as if nothing is ever quite good enough.

- We must be cautious that we don't fall into that trap as well. I know some who never seem to have anything good to say. They can't seem to control their tongue. If you spend enough time with them, if you aren't careful, you will find yourself engaging in the same activity. It is no wonder that many in the world have no desire for the church; they have heard enough "religious" people express their displeasure about it! [Matt.12:34b – for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.](#) [Ephes.4:31 – Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:](#) [1 Pet.3:10 – For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile:](#)

C. Mistaken for Devotion – [If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart...](#) Here we see the tragedy in haphazard religion. These are no doubt

zealous in their efforts. They are consumed with religious thought and activity, seeing the failures of others, and wishing all might practice religion just as they do. Sadly many of them never realize they have missed it, and in fact have deceived themselves to believe their religion is genuine. Their hearts have been deceived, “*brought into error through vain and empty words.*” Their actions were not of the Lord, but of their own devices. These have spued their criticism and negativity until they actual begin to believe it themselves, unable to see the end result of their actions or the damage caused to the body of Christ.

- One of the greatest examples in Scripture is the Pharisees. Those to whom James is writing were very familiar with them. They possessed a zeal for religion that was mistaken for devotion to God, but it was all in vain. We are far removed from that day, but the legalists continue. The modern church is filled with those who have allowed their religious, legalistic zeal to cloud their vision. They actually believe they are doing God and the church a favor by criticizing and condemning every activity that doesn't fit their agenda. Now I am not advocating that we embrace unrighteousness, but if we can never see any good in others, then there is a serious problem. I pray the Holy Spirit will examine our hearts and motives, revealing what is actually there. May we never allow pride or arrogance stand in the way of genuine service to God.

D. Minimized in Delusion (26) – *If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.* James reveals that such religion is vain. It is “*devoid of force, truth, success, and result; utterly worthless.*” In essence this type of religion has not made a positive impact on anyone; it is void of truth, lacking the ability to produce a desired result. It is of no value whatsoever.

- I hate to admit it, but there is a lot of vain religion in our day. Many are like those described in this passage. They are very zealous in their efforts, many times more so than those of biblical religion, but in the end it is all in vain. It is worthless, having no positive impact on the church or the cause of Christ. Isn't that a shame? Take a moment to consider the impact these could have if their desire and motives were right. What if all that energy was devoted to serving the Lord, encouraging others, and reaching the lost? Each of us must continually examine our hearts in regard to our motives. I want to please the Lord in all I do!

I. The Vanity of Haphazard Religion (26)

II. The Victory in Humble Religion (27) – *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.* Let's take a moment to consider pure religion and its contrast to vain religion. It is:

A. Motivated by Devotion – Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction... This reveals a stark contrast to vain religion. Pure religion is motivated by devotion to others, visiting and caring for those who stand in need. It is putting the needs of others above our own. There is no hint of criticism or condemnation here, only devotion to those in need.

- It is impossible to carry out such an act of pure religion in the attitude of vain religion. The vain man would seek to point out the reason for their suffering, but the pure in heart seek to come alongside them in caring for them. To visit them has the idea of “*examining closely, to inspect, or observe.*” This speaks of a desire to help in time of need rather than condemn. Those whose hearts are right with God, revealing their relationship to Him through service, will be motivated by their devotion to others. Rom.15:1 – We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Gal.6:2 – Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

B. Marked by Compassion – Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction... Those of pure religion will be marked by compassion for others. James reveals that they would be gladly willing to visit those less fortunate in their affliction. We must bear in mind, in that day, the widowed and orphaned suffered greatly. They had little, if any means of survival. These were dependent upon the kindness of others if they were to survive. He urged the believer to be marked by their compassion for others.

- This is an attribute that ought to flow naturally from the heart of every believer. I can assure you, if our hearts in are in tune with the Lord, we will be people of compassion. You cannot look at Christ our Lord and miss His great compassion. He loved as no other. Many times we find Him moved with compassion for the needs of others. We are never more like our Savior than when we are moved in compassion to love others and help them in their times of need. Vain religion won't reveal much compassion, but pure religion will abound in compassion! Where would any of us be had Christ not had compassion for the sinful and undeserving?

C. Mastered through Submission – Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. The vain man is consumed with his thoughts and desires. His concern is not those around him, but pleasing self. Those of pure religion are aware of their need to maintain a positive witness that will glorify the Lord and reach others. James knew those who were religious, but there was no fruit in their lives. He challenged the believers to allow their religion to reveal their relationship with Christ.

- What truth we find in this verse. We all know that religion cannot save; salvation comes from a personal relationship with Christ, by faith. However, one's religious activity can serve as a

good indicator of whether there has been a genuine conversion. Many today appear to be religious. They may attend church services regularly. They may recite prayers and even put some money in the offering plate, but their lives outside of church do not reflect the Lord. I am convinced that what exists on the inside will eventually be revealed on the outside. Those who are walking with the Lord will desire to live in a way that pleases Him. Pure religion will create a desire to keep ourselves unspotted from the world. If you are living one way at church on Sunday and something totally different the rest of the week, there has likely been no change in your heart, and your religion is definitely in vain. [2 Cor.6:17-18 – Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, \[18\] And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.](#)

D. Measured by Inspiration (27) – [Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.](#) Those who are bound in vain religion many times do not even realize their pitiful condition. They may feel as if they have it all together, but they are living in deception. I rejoice that we don't have to wonder whether our lives are pleasing unto the Lord. We don't have to guess in regard to what He desires of us. We can know that we are walking with the Lord, living in submission to Him.

- If there was a moment in your life that you were saved, born again in Christ, you will know. It is impossible to experience salvation without knowing it. Having that relationship with Christ will create a desire to serve Him. Pure religion will simply be a reaction to what has taken place on the inside and will reflect the change that Christ has made in our lives. There is no need to worry about your religion. If you are a child of God, walk with the Lord, and your religion will take care of itself! [Rom.12:2 – And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.](#)

Conclusion: We have considered the two types of religion, one of which is vain and the other is pure. Religion will never produce redemption, but salvation in the Lord will create pure, biblical religion. Many practice religion today, but I fear that it is just that, a practice. I rejoice that pure religion flows from a thankful heart in Christ. Walking with Him will create an attitude of service and submission to Him. Which do you possess? Are you counting on religion to produce righteousness or has your relationship to Christ created pure religion? There is a vast difference. One is vain and the other is glorious.

ⁱ <http://www.kentrivette.com/james9.htm>