

Are You Really Religious?

James 1:26-27

February 3, 2013

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^B Ephesians 2:10

^C Hebrews 10:23-25

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^E Deuteronomy 10:18, Psalms 68:5, Acts 6:1, Luke 14:12-14

^F John 15:15-19, Romans 12:2

A. Introduction

1. Text: ²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ 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 NIV)
2. The Bishop and the Barber ^{–(2)} – The story is told of the evangelical Bishop Taylor Smith having his hair cut and trying to talk to the barber about more important matters, but the barber was very talkative and the bishop couldn't get a word in edgeways. Finally the bishop said to him, "Do you consider yourself religious?" "Yes, I do," said the barber, "I always try to do my best in life." When the barber had finished cutting his hair the bishop paid him, adding, "You yourself could do with a haircut." "Yes I could," said the barber, "but I am so busy I haven't had time." "Sit down," Bishop Taylor Smith said, "I'll cut your hair for you." "You couldn't cut my hair," said the barber. "Yes, I could," replied the bishop, "I'll do my best." "Thank you, but your best isn't good enough for me," said the man. "Yes, you're right," agreed Taylor Smith, "and your best isn't good enough for God."
3. How to Go to Heaven
 - a. now I told that story in order to get one thing clear about this passage right from the start
 - (A) to correct a commonly made mistake
 - (B) it is a mistake that people often make from taking a verse or two of Scripture out of its context and disjoining it from the teaching of the word of God as a whole
 - b. they make the same mistake with these words of Jesus Christ taken from Matthew 25:31-40 – ³¹ "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. 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. 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; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ³⁸ 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ³⁹ When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' ⁴⁰ 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.'"
 - c. now, that last verse is often quoted to justify this mistake
 - d. what is that mistake that needs correction?
 - e. that mistake is thinking that by doing good works we shall be allowed to escape judgement, and to enter the Kingdom of God and at last to go to heaven – that idea is totally mistaken; it puts ...

4. The Cart Ahead of the Horse

- a. to say that someone is saved by their good works is getting everything totally backwards: Ephesians 2:10, 'For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.'
- b. Jesus, as is clear from the surrounding chapters in Matthew, is not speaking of how these 'sheep' became His blessed ones, but rather as to how they were identified: by deeds which were done towards Him
- c. clearly, James is writing to believers for he uses the term 'brethren', even 'beloved brethren', applied in the NT only to real Christians
- d. yet God's children – those who have been saved by grace through faith – often fail to live and to act as they ought; in short, they sin
- e. James is writing a book on practical Christianity – on what it means to be a practising Christian; of practising this 'religion'
- f. their faith must go beyond their head, into their hearts and from there out into their feet, hands and mouths.

B. In Real Religion, Talk Matters!..... 1:26

1. 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.

2. Seeming to Be – to Himself

- a. the person of whom James is speaking is a Christian; a believer
- b. he appears – and the Greek implies that this is principally to himself – to be fully participating in Christian worship in a satisfactory way
- c. he may be quite sincere in his self-appraisal; there is no indication here that he is acting in a deliberate, hypocritical fashion
- d. yet, as we can see, he is deluded in his thinking; he has not properly examined himself, and thus – he deceives his own heart
- e. but not others, for those inside and outside of the church can see this
- f. quite rightfully they can, therefore, question his ...

3. Religion and Being Religious

- a. the words that James uses are not in themselves either good or bad
- b. they describe the external, observable part faith as seen in the rites and forms of worship
- c. for the OT church, they would describe the the tabernacle or temple worship, the presentation of sacrifices and the observances of the law
- d. for the Christian church it would refer to the various activities that comprise a service in a given assembly of believers: the singing of hymns, the greetings and shaking of hands, the prayers, the readings of Scripture, the breaking of bread, the sermon – that is 'religion'
- e. all of these things are well and good
- f. in fact, they are a necessary part of a healthy, spiritual life
- g. Hebrews 10:23-25 warns: Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.'

- h. did you notice how often it is the tongue that is busy with religion? ... singing, greeting, praying, confessing, stimulating, encouraging?
- i. but all of those fine religious acts can be destroyed by ...

4. An Inconsistent Tongue

- a. one can debate as to which is the most powerful muscle in the body
 - (A) a runner, cyclist or speed skater might claim it is the great thigh muscle, able to carry the human body at great speed and distance
 - (B) weight lifters might point to their biceps, triceps and abdominals
 - (C) but the Bible indicates that it is the strongest muscle is the one that controls the mouth and tongue
 - (D) listen to what Proverbs 11:11 says it is capable of doing
 - (E) 'By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, But by the mouth of the wicked it is torn down.' – the tongue can tear down a city!
- b. a child is remarkably transparent – what it thinks, it blurts out – and that is expected and we accept it in a child
 - (A) so, also, young Christian – a babe in Christ – may not yet have learned to put his or her tongue under the bridle of the Holy Spirit
 - (B) but this should not be a lasting situation
 - (C) as Pastor Don Horban at Cedarview has said, 'If your religion doesn't make you Christ-like in speech, it has absolutely no worth in the eyes of Father God.'⁽³⁾.
- c. James doesn't give details here what exactly it is that the tongue is saying – he will have more to say on that subject later in the book
- d. but simply that this mighty muscle – like the mighty body of a horse – needs to be subjected to a bridle and bit, lest it run wildly amok and do much harm, and indeed, make ...

5. Such Religion to Be Worthless

- a. oh! it may be all well and good on a Sunday morning from 11 to 12
- b. but come the rest of the week, what the tongue has done spoils its whole effect; the praise it has uttered is undone by what follows
- c. to be really religious, to worship and spirit and in truth, means our realising that ...

C. Real Religion Isn't Just Talk! 1:27

- 1. 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.
- 2. Real Religion Is Good
 - a. two words are used to describe good religion
 - (A) the first is 'pure' – the Greek word is that from which we get our English word catharsis – it is clean; it is cleansed; it has been really scrubbed clean of of that is dirty and soiled – purged of everything that would spoil it or make it worthless and useless
 - (B) the second is 'undefiled' – that it be untainted and unpolluted

- (1) in the butcher shops of my childhood, the floor used to be covered with sawdust – this was so that as the plasma or oil from the meat fell to the floor, it could be swept up at the end of the day and it wouldn't soak in to defile or taint the floor
- (2) God's word is that sawdust that should keep anything false seeping in and tainting our religion and worship
- b. but how are these things to be accomplished so that our religion is indeed pure and undefiled?
 - (A) as a first step, it is evident that it agree with God's commands
 - (B) but it is also evident that for our religion be pure and undefiled that we who practise it should likewise be pure and undefiled – we shall come to that in a moment, but first there is ...

3. The Important Question

- a. is not how we regard our own religious service – we have seen that we can easily be deluded
- b. nor, in fact is it what our fellow Christians may think – we can so delude ourselves, that we delude them as well
- c. but it is, what does God think of our religion? ... have we spoiled
 - (A) our singing of a hymn
 - (B) our giving of a word of testimony
 - (C) our eloquent, even heartfelt, expression of prayer
 - (D) by the way our same tongue employed in all these things
 - (E) then behaved itself the next day? ... the next hour? ... the next instant?
- d. so we are given some further tests that we can use to see if our life is consistent with our worship; that we have a consistent tongue
- e. the first is, that we exercise ...

4. Real Charity

- a. in the Bible, particularly the OT, you find that the underprivileged of society – the poor, the foreigners, the orphans, the widows – are considered to be under the special protection of God
 - (A) 'He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.' (Deuteronomy 10:18)
 - (B) 'A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, Is God in His holy habitation.' (Psalms 68:5)
 - (C) and very early in the history of the Christian church as we read in Acts 6:1, this became a concern of believers
- b. it is a real charity, as Jesus pointed out in Luke 14:12b-14, ... 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'
- c. it is real because it is giving with no thought of return in this life
- d. yet even this can be performed under wrong motivation, so James takes us to the heart of the matter; for religion to be real ...

5. Be Unmarked by the World

- a. the term, 'the world' has been defined as being 'the total system of evil pervading every sphere of human existence, in opposition to God and righteousness' ^{-(4)}}.
- b. and by Bishop Alford: 'The whole earthly creation, separated from God and lying in the sin, which, whether considered as consisting in the men who serve it, or the enticements which it holds out to evil lust is to Christians a source of continual defilement.' ^{-(5)}}.
- c. so then, though Christians are left in the world, to be their salt and light, yet they are not of the world (John 15:15-19)
- d. so, do not let its false ideas, its polluted thinking, be allowed to enter you hearts and minds, but rather, '... do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.' (Romans 12:2)

D. Conclusion

1. A young minister visited a coal mine. At the entrance of one of the dim passageways, he spied a beautiful white flower growing out of the black earth. "How can it blossom in such purity and radiance in this dirty mine?" the preacher asked. "Throw some coal dust on it and see for yourself," his guide replied. When he did, he was surprised that the fine, sooty particles slid right off the snowy petals, leaving the plant just as lovely and unstained as before. Its surface was so smooth that the grit and grime could not adhere to it. ^{-(6)}}.
2. Let your religion be pure and undefiled in the sight of God – seek the continual cleansing available in Christ so that the filth and muck of this world does not stick to your life.

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Explanatory additions to the Bible text are shown in *(braces)*. Version identifiers are:

ASV	American Standard Version of 1901
AV	Authorized (King James) Version of 1769
NAS	New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition)
NIV	New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NKJV	New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers
WEY	The New Testament in Modern Speech © 1902, 1912 R. F. Weymouth

Some of my commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

- BM – Biblical Museum, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870
- EBC – The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, Michigan – Volume 12, James, by Donald W. Burdick, Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary, ISBN 0-310-36540-6
- EGT – The Expositor’s Greek Testament, *James*, by W. E. Oesterley, Hodder & Stoughton, 1910 (Liberal, but generally helpful on Greek idiom.)
- Lange – Commentary on the Holy Scriptures by John Peter Lange, translated by Philip Schaff, Volume 9 of the New Testament; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915 (His interpretations sometimes take strange twists.)
- NICNT – The New International Commentary on the New Testament, *Commentary on the Epistles of James and John* by Alexander Ross, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954 – ISBN 0-8028-2192-8
- TYN – Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, *The General Epistle of James*, by Professor R. V. G. Tasker, The Tyndale Press, 1956
- Kerux – The sermon & illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick at the web-site, www.holwick.com.

2. From '*What Is Real Religion?*', by Rev. Geoff Thomas, Alfred Place Baptist Church, Aberystwyth, Wales – Kerux sermon #2377.
3. '*The Only Question That Matters,*' by Pastor Don Horban – Kerux sermon #25459
4. EBC, *in loc*.
5. Lange, *in loc*.
6. '*Clean in a Dirty Place,*' Fredericksburg Bible Illustrator – Kerux illustrations #13697