Rightly Practicing the Word

James 1:26-27

November 5, 2023

Well, so we're gonna be in James chapter 1, the last two verses, verses 26 through 27, continuing in our study through the book of James. Today we come to the end of chapter 1. We're in that final, the final section that I kinda laid out, the final, the kinda concluding section of verses 19 through 27. It's a section which kinda works together as, as an appropriate, uh, conclusion to the introduction of the book in chapter 1. So the introduction of the book is all of chapter 1; this is an appropriate conclusion to it. But it also does this while beginning to touch on, and introduce, the subjects which are going to take up the rest of the book, that's gonna broadly be expanded on.

Essentially, the rest of the book of James is, is a, is a test in, really, what does it look like to be a doer of the

Word? What does being a doer of the Word look like? And, more specifically, James wants to kill every concept of false faith that we might have. He wants to keep us from being the unstable, double-minded, deceived person that he has been warning us about. James has just introduced the concept of being a deceived person in the last section that we looked at: One who maybe believes themself to be a Christian, one who claims to be following Christ, but their actions and their attitudes expose something different. It's the idea that there are those who claim to be Christians but whose hearts and actions show them to be otherwise.

It's a truth that has always been a significant issue within the New Testament Church and throughout Christian history. And it will continue to be until Christ returns. And in fact, it's such an important issue, and something that is supposed to be so important to us, that every New Testament book addresses this issue of discerning between true and false faith in some way or another. And it even seems to be the main theme of at least two of them, James and, and 1 John. So this truth, that this is a big issue, it should remind us not only that this will always be a concern, but also that this is pretty

significant. The fact that this is in the Bible all the time means that it needs to be a significant concern for the church.

And, it's a significant issue for them, but probably even more so for us. Because the, the fact that this was an issue in a time where there was, there was literally no cultural capital for claiming to be a Christian, means that it's probably a much bigger deal right now. Remember what we talked about when discussing the context of this book, that the recipients of this letter are going through an incredibly significant trial right now, and much of it is directly due to the fact that they have come to understand Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

All the internal evidence in this book points to this being a congregation of Jewish Christians. James, who is the leader of the, the church in Jerusalem, addresses this letter to the twelve tribes of the dispersion, or the diaspora. We talked about the fact that, how that's the common designation given to the scattered Jewish people, based on the Old Testament understanding. They have the common Old Testament understanding that God had scattered his people among the nations for the time

being, and would one day bring them back together. He's one day going to bring them back together into the land under the reign of the Messiah.

Now, that time is still future as James is writing this, and it's still future for us, as Travis mentioned a couple of weeks ago in his communion message. This is still what we, what we see among the Jewish people today. These people that James is writing to, though, are among the minority of Jewish people who recognize that the Messiah has come. He, he has come, but he's yet to establish his Kingdom on earth. He's yet to rule on the throne of David. Remember we talked about how James is most likely the earliest book written in the New Testament. It is, it happened before, it, it's, it's coming before, really, Gentiles have, have really entered the picture as part of the church.

And at the time that James is writing his letter, Christianity is really kinda seen more by most people as just a, a heretical form of Judaism. The rest of the Jewish community does not believe that the Messiah has come. As the religious leaders and many among the Jews, through the coming of Christ,

have now been exposed as those who only really actually love the form of religion that they had, and not the God who that religion was supposed to be pointing to. When the long-awaited Messiah came, the majority of the Jews decided that they wanted His place as Lord more than they actually wanted him. They saw the clear passages of a Messiah coming and reigning in power, and they couldn't comprehend the concept of a Messiah who had to die for his people first, and cleanse them from the power and penalty of sin, before reigning on David's throne; that he had to make purified citizens for the Kingdom before the Kingdom would come in power.

So these early Jewish Christians have come to know and follow Christ, and have therefore been rejected not only by the Pagan Roman culture around them, but also by, by long-time family and friends who, who now see them as, as nothing more than defecting heretics. And many of their trials, their most significant trials are directly related to the fact that they now understand Jesus to be Lord, and have committed themselves to following him. That's why it's a little surprising that, even though this is the case, that it would be physically easier for them to just decide not to follow Christ, one of the main issues

James deals with in this letter is the issue of false faith. Those who are not what they say they are, or uh, or more specifically, those who believe that they're something that they actually aren't.

We see this problem throughout the New Testament, from the earliest written letters (like James) to the, to the latest written letters. Even though there are various types of persecution throughout this entire time, and it would be much easier to not be a Christian than to be a Christian, we see even here the issue of false converts. In fact, the, the two books that I just mentioned, James and 1 John, are, are almost chronological bookends to the New Testament; James writing in the late 40s AD, mid-to-late 40s AD, and John's writings (1-3 John, his Gospel and Revelation) all being written in the mid-to-late 90s AD. And the problem persists throughout this entire time, this problem of false faith.

We often think of these people who we are warned against as those pretending to be something that they know that they are not. But the way that they are portrayed in the New Testament,

and in James in particular, we can see that's not actually the case. These are people who actually believe that they are followers of Christ when they are not. That's what being self-deceived means. It's different than being a hypocrite. So if it was such a significant issue during that time, then we should naturally expect that it is an even greater issue now.

Even though our society has been growing in the way it despises Christianity, and it is getting to the point where it probably would be easier to reject Christ altogether in order to get along more comfortably in this culture, it is still much, much, much easier to be a Christian in our time than in that time, and in, in other places in the world.

In fact, it's really no trouble at all to at least find some church, you can find some church in the country somewhere, I guarantee you, that will allow you to claim all of the benefits that you want of Christianity, while still hanging onto whatever sinful or worldly practices you don't really want to give up. You can find that church. I don't care what came into your mind as far as deviant, sinful behavior that you would want

to cling on to, but you can find a church that will allow you to do that.

That's why church discipline doesn't have near the impact now that it should. Because once someone has been confronted in their sin faithfully, through all four steps of church discipline, and the entire church pronounces a judgment on them that, "we don't see evidence of a life that matches your profession," that person can just easily go to another church down the road who's gonna take them in with no questions, never coming to us and asking why they left, just accepting whatever they said, and really only guarding against ever trying to make these people feel uncomfortable again. That's why church discipline doesn't work like it should.

That's also why we have to be so careful about baptism and church membership here in the church, because we no longer live in a time where being baptized or becoming a church member actually means that you lose anything of significance. You don't yoo, loo, lose your job, you don't lose your family. You don't lose some sort of social status. Most people in the culture

still consider what you're doing here to be kinda part of your own religious experience, your own, you're just, you know, you're doing your thing. That's fine. "I'll do my religious thing, you do yours."

Even though many of your families might disagree with what you're doing here (and I, I think it was especially the case during COVID times), they might even hate church, it's, it is still rare that you'll actually be disowned by anyone (even though I know there's a few of you in here who, who, that is kinda the case for you).

But I remember abou-about 20 years ago, I was in the Philippines, and I stayed with a man who had been a Christian for several decades. And he came out of a staunchly Roman Catholic family. And he told me about the, the, the, the day that he was baptized. His family came and watched him, and then they got up and left, and never saw him again, never talked to him again. That was his last view of his parents, walking away from him forever. From the beginning of his relationship with

Christ really meant the end of his relationship with his parents.

And ‘at’s a similar way that it was, and that, that's the way it is in a lot of countries still. And that's the way it was for these original readers of the letter of James. Beginning a relationship with Christ meant an ending of many significant relationships. Most of us aren't familiar with that type of persecution, the type of trial that is directly related to our profession of faith; that comes directly as a result of our claim to follow Christ. So we need to face the reality that if this was an issue then, it is a more significant issue now.

The idea of false, self-deceived religion, how much worse it must be in our culture. I have no doubt, zero doubt that there are people in this room right now who are in the category of deceiving themselves. And I'm certain that all of you know friends or family members who fall into the category as well. And for many of us, it is th- the study of these verses (and verses like it) that are the very means that God will use to keep us out of that category. So therefore we should all be

desperate to pay attention to what the Word says to us in these verses this morning.

So after talking about this danger in the previous passages and what it looks like in the first few verses of this last section of chapter one, as James closes this section, verses 26 and 27, we're going to see three marks of a true Christian, three marks of true religion. So we've already seen how what makes for true Christianity really boils down to the way that we receive the Word and respond to the Word. We've seen that over the, the last two sermons in James.

And today we're gonna see three specific examples of what true Christian faith will look like. These are three important points for the entirety of the book because the, these are actually three points that are broadly expanded on throughout the rest of the letter. Now these three points are not the entirety of what faithful Christianity looks like, but they are three crucial ones. And there is a sense where you could fit maybe most of what righteous living looks like under these three categories, broadly enough speaking. So our three points today

are: number one, control over our words; number two, care for the weak; number three, clean from the world. Control over our words, care for the weak, clean from the world. These are three things that every true believer in Christ should be striving for.

Those who do fall away, those who do show themselves to be self-deceived will most likely demonstrate that that is where they are heading, by the failure to be obedient in at least one of these areas. Therefore, these are characteristics that all Christians should be conforming our lives to, in order to make them descriptive of us, so that we can be confident that we do not fall into the category of the deceived, double-minded that James is warning about. So with that, let's once again, we'll read the entirety of this section, from verses 19 through 27, to remind ourselves what James has said to bring us to this point.

"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the

implanted Word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the Word, and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away, and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer her, who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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."

So we can see, we can see that James has just talked about the importance of being a doer of the Word, one who acts, and not a hearer only. These last two verses are, are really a, a, again, a broad example of what it means to be a doer who acts, because in it we see these points of what one looks like who reads the Word with a desire to do what it says. None of these responses to the Word of God that we see in these verses are

odd. The, these, these are commandments that you can find anywhere. There're many places in the Bible.

It'd be extremely easy for me to make any of these points today from multiple places in the Bible. In fact, it is very, very hard; there's so many faithful sermons you could preach out of this text. I, I, there could be so much good and true stuff said from these verses. These are principles that are all over the Bible. So it makes sense that one who is reading the Bible will see them in many places. And if he is one who desires to be a doer of the Word, then these things will of course be important to him because they're all over Scripture. So these responses, then, flow naturally out of that last passage, because the one who has a changed heart that is receptive to the Word of God; the one who stares deeply into the law of liberty will see these things, and will then act on them and put them into practice.

So first point, control over our words. Control over our words. We see that right in the entirety of verse 26. "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but

deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." Right off the bat, we are struck with what appears to be some odd terminology, with James using both the adjective and noun forms of the word for "religion" or "religious."

We don't actually see this word very often in the New Testament, surprisingly. It's only in two other places do we see the noun form. And this is actually the only place in the New Testament where we see the adjective form of "religious." And many of us, we often have this immediate kinda negative reaction to the term "religious" or "religion." And we hear people say something along the lines of "I don't, you know, I don't like religion, I love Jesus." Or, or, "I'm into relationship, not religion." And we know what they mean by that. And you, when you draw that out, it ma, it makes sense.

It probably isn't the best thing for us to say, because based on the broad understanding of what religion is, the relationship that you have with God is a religious relationship. This is a, this is a religious service of worship. It might be far more than religion, but it, but it's not less than that.

Religion, in its broadest understanding, has to do with worship or, or service to a divine higher power, through the means of certain fundamental practices. So this definitely describes a good portion of what we do, does it not, even, even though it could never be described as "merely" or "only" religious. The word that James uses here literally means, "One who is given to religious observations."

There's a sense in which we are given to those very same things, and it's not necessarily a negative thing. The person in this verse is not being chided for being given to religious observances or services. Rather, he is being rebuked for his commitment to religious services while at the same time not being careful with how he speaks. That's what the actual rebuke is here: not being religious, but being one who claims religion while not being able to bridle his tongue. It's not that his religiosity is the problem, it's that his speech demonstrates that his religion isn't sincere.

Rightly-used religious practices, like singing songs, preaching, communion, baptism, prayer, these are actually the

means that we use to grow in our relationship with God, to become more and more committed to him. They help us to grow in our love for him and conformity to his will through our obedience. Those can be broadly defined, those things that we use can be broadly defined as "religious practices." That's the purpose of them. They're the means to further our relationship with God. That is the end, the end for which we practice them.

So what James is pointing out here is the danger in being the type of person who is committed to the religious observances, and only the religious observances. It's committed to those and not the God who they are meant to point to. And that really is helpful for us because that describes probably the vast majority of people who claim to be Christians in the U.S. We are a people that is more than happy to do some religious practices so that we seem spiritual. We can check the spiritual box off, so that we can feel like we're doing what Christians ought to do. We can point to religious services.

There's a number of things that we can do. We can go to services, we can serve in different places in the church, all

that type of stuff. And a lot of those things are good and right. The question is, are you doing them out of joyful ob, obedience to the Lord, or are you doing them in place of joyful obedience to the Lord? Are you committed to religion or to God? So James is pointing out the reality that there are those who think that they are religious, but that their inability to bridle their tongue demonstrates that the religion that they believe to possess is worthless. It's a mirage. James says this person is deceiving himself.

Here James is once again using, using the linking words that he often uses to bring his thoughts together. So as we look back in verse 22, that's where we see that word, "deceiving." This is exactly what those who are only "hearers of the Word, and not doers" are doing. They're deceiving themselves. So here we see that this person demonstrates that he is in the category of "hearer only," because even though he can point to all of these religious practices in his life, he is disobedient to God's command that God's people are be, are to be those whose words are a blessing to others and bring him glory. This is a pretty powerful rebuke. It's actually a very strong statement about those who claim to be devoted to Christ but don't control

their tongue, but don't control the words that they say, that speak carelessly.

The idea of bridling the tongue, as I'm sure you've heard before, brings to mind a picture of, of the horse, you know, having something placed around it, and in its mouth, that allows it to be under control. So, so the idea is that as believers we should be in control of our mouths, so that our mouths say only that which is pleasing to God. And rather than James picking just one aspect of speech here, he just kinda has the whole mouth in general in mind. James uses a picture that, that then would incorporate all sinful speech that the Bible is clear about. So let's just, just let me read some of the, the more famous verses on our speech.

Ephesians 4:29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." Ephesians 5:4, "Let there be no filthiness, nor foolish talk, nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be Thanksgiving." Colossians 3:8-10, "But now you must put them all

away: Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator." And Colossians 4:6, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." And I am sure that you can think of many, many more verses in the Bible, proverbs that, that tell, tell us how we ought to speak.

These are the types of passages and principles we have in mind when we're thinking about what it looks like to bridle our tongue. The picture of one who is in control of what they say, who, who makes sure that their mouth is obedient to Christ, that want to, to make their words, one who wants to make their words go down the path of Christlikeness. So this is important. It, it's not merely just being in control. It's being in control for a reason. So you bridle a horse not just to be in control of it, but there is a purpose to that control. It's to take it down the path that the horse is supposed to go. It's not enough to bridle the horse and then run it off a cliff and, in control of it,

'cause you wanted to. No, it's taking it down the path it's supposed to go.

So, so the one who is fully in control of their mouth, an, and isn't saying things without thinking, but still purposefully using coarse joking, purposely fully using vulgar language to make their points, they're, they're not being obedient to this passage just because they're, just because you're carefully choosing your sinful language. And I bring this up because thi, this is actually quite important in our context today, because there's a growing movement among many people, who claim to be Christians, who say that there is a place for the purposeful use of obscene and crass language, even among Christians, in order to make a stronger point.

Despite the clarity of passages like these ones that we read here and throughout the Scripture, they're ignored for the argument that sometimes "this is just the best way to get the point across when you're in a culture like we're in." As if an appropriate application to "letting your speech always be gracious and seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to

answer everyone" would be to use a well-chosen obscenity in a gracious manner.

When we are told to put away obscene talk, how ridiculous it is to believe that that doesn't apply if I'm purposefully using it in order to make a good point. There's actually a sense in which that is worse than the person who just accidentally lets it slip out of the mouth because it's an old sinful habit.

I watched a, a video this week of a, of a pastor trying to defend this and, and just because I was studying this, he just sounded crazy. It, it sounded insane. But the fact that these are even the types of conversations and arguments that Christians are having about the words that we use just goes, just goes to point to the greater fact that, that in its entirety, we just don't take this as seriously as the Bible instructs us to.

It, it seems like many times it is our sin with words that we typically excuse the most in ourselves. We might realize that we are gossiping in the midst of the gossip, or maybe even later

when we think about it, "Oh, that could have been gossip," but we, but we can almost just shrug it off with a, "Ah, whoops, I, I, I should probably think, think about that a little more next time." It's so easy for us to fall into slander, especially in this politically-charged culture. So easy to speak in a slanderous way towards others, to make fun of others, to put them down, and then to compare ourselves to other people who are worse at it, so we think we're fine.

For many people, given the right crowd, you can begin speaking crassly, or obscenely, or coarse joking without really even batting an eye, because you're, you're gauging the sinfulness of it on whether or not someone's being offended. It's so easy for many of us to speak a harsh word in anger during a frustrating or emotional moment with our, with our spouse or with our children. It is so easy to be undisciplined with our mouths in all of these ways, let alone being careful to, to do the positive stuff, to, to always speak graciously to others, and to let only that which comes out of our mouths be used for edification of others and for thanksgiving.

Many of us regularly, maybe even habitually, fail to bridle our tongues. And we may kind-of know that it's a problem that we should work on, but we just honestly don't really feel that guilty about it. And we definitely don't lose any sleep over it, like if we had committed one of the, you know, one of them, the really serious sins that would, that would keep us up at night, keep us repenting. Those are the ones we feel broken over. It's almost like there's this kind of collective agreement among many Christians that we are not gonna take sinful language seriously, at least not as seriously as the Bible does. Like the Bible's kinda overstepping here. Unless it crosses maybe a certain line where people are, "OK, that person's clearly offended. I, I should probably go seek their forgiveness now."

But James says that the one who does not bridle his tongue is the very person that he's talking about when he's pointing out the one who is "not a doer of the Word but a hearer only." The "hearers only" are deceiving themselves. We see that in verse 22. And the one who doesn't bridle his tongue is deceiving himself here in verse 26. They're in the same category. He, he actually goes beyond the "deceived" language and makes this even more serious by saying the religion of such a man is worthless.

It's, it's futile. It's in vain. No matter how much you practice your religion, no matter how good you are at it, no matter how good your church attendance is, no matter how helpful you are in the children's wing, no matter how skilled you have been as, as, as a musician here, no matter how much money or time you give, if you do not care to put effort into bridling your tongue, it's all worthless. It's empty religion.

That's hard for me even to just say. To even just saying it's, it's sound, I, I've really feel like I'm overstating this. But James's language to this primarily Jewish audience is, is reminiscent to the type of language they were used to reading in the Prophets. But these were the words the Prophets would use to describe idol worship. So just listen to just a couple from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah 2:4-5, "Hear the Word of the Lord, O House of Jacob, and all the clans of the House of Israel. Thus says the Lord, 'What wrong did your fathers find in me, that they went far from me and went after worthlessness and became worthless?'" Jeremiah 10:14-15, "Every man is stupid and without knowledge. Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false. There is no breath in them. They are

worthless, a work of delusion. At the time of their punishment, they shall perish."

James is invoking the, the same language to talk about the religion of those who claim to be fellow worshippers of Christ, but fail to bridle their tongue. He's using the same language as the prophets would use to describe those who left the worship of God for the worship of idols. It's serious. In addi, in addition to all that, this word for "worthless" that James uses here (this struck me), this is the same word that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15:17 where he says, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile [or worthless], and you are still in your sins." The same word is used by Paul to describe the value of your faith in Jesus if Christ hasn't been raised from the dead, with the value of your religion if you don't bridle your tongue.

Again, it's, it's really not my intention to exaggerate or overemphasize this issue, but I do think it's something that many of us have just neglected to t, take as seriously as the Bible has always, consistently presented it to be. The, the

frequency of the biblical commands and warnings about the importance of holy speech, found throughout all of Scripture, is actually meant to show us just how big of an issue God has always seen this; just how much it either verifies or falsifies our profession.

But it's had kinda the opposite effect on most of us in that, rather than magnifying its importance, the frequency and familiarity of the Bible's teaching on the use of our tongues seems to have had more of a callousing effect on us, so that we are very, very excited to speak out against certain sins that are mentioned less frequently. Still just as evil and sinful and Hell-worthy, but we've gotten just kinda comfortable with this one.

So, brothers and sisters, let's be diligent, making an effort to bridle our tongues, to make them conformed to, conformed to Christlikeness; to be those who are careful in our speech, who think about what we're going to say, and then think about the best way to say it. Think about the most God-glorifying way to speak. Be those who refuse to participate in

harsh and condemning speech, that we might be careful not to even blur the line when it comes to obscenity and vulgarity. We'd be that careful. We'd be known for our gracious, encouraging, and holy words. Let's seek the help of each other in doing this, and the help of the Lord as well. Let's pray as the Psalmist did in Psalm 141:3, "Set a guard, oh Lord, over my mouth, and keep watch over the door of my lips."

That brings us to point two. Point two: Care for the weak. Point two: Care for the weak. So verse 26 talks about deceitful, worthless religion as that which does not bridle its tongue. And now in verse 27 we see two examples of what true religion is, or what true religion does. Again, it's important to, to, to remember that this isn't, James isn't speaking of the totality of what all true religion boils down to, as, as some have used these verses to do. Some have used verse 27 and say, "This is the summation of everything we need to know in the New Testament."

But the, no, these are just two clear examples of what it looks like to act upon the truth that we read in the Word. So

there's a false religion that's devoted to religious observance while failing to guard its speech. But (verse 27), "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, to keep oneself unstained from the world."

So as we get into this, we're not to see, I just want to, right from the outset, we're not to see "widow and orphan" as the only two types of people that we're to have compassion on. They are representative of those who are in the most vulnerable of states. Again, James is using language, he's purposefully using language to get to the heart of this primarily Jewish audience. And this is language that would be familiar to them, as these two examples of "orphans and widows" are used frequently in the Old Testament to demonstrate to Israel God's care for the weak, that they are supposed to follow him, him in.

Exodus 22:22, "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child." Isaiah 1:16-17, "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.” And Psalm 68:5, “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.”

So the, the idea behind these passages in the Old Testament, and many more like it, was that the people were to imitate their God in this; to have the same compassion, the same concern for those in helpless situations, as God does. And actually this is the same foundation that James uses here when he begins this verse by saying, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father.” He reminds them of God's fatherness. It’s a reminder that we are to care just as God the Father cares, as a Father.

The same foundation for the obedience to this command in the Old Testament, then, according to the songs we just sang, should be even more profound for us. It should have an even stronger impact on us. We are to show love and compassion for others as we have been loved. And how have we been loved? When we were at our weakest, our most helpless, powerless to do anything about our condition before God. We are enemies of God.

We are hopelessly bound for a Hell that we deserve, to uh, t-to receive an eternal punishment that we deserve.

God sent Christ, took our place. He took that punishment on our behalf. The Father crushed his Son. He poured out the fullness of his wrath toward our sin on him, so that now, when we turn from our sins and place our trust in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the imputed life of the perfect Son is given to us, and our sins are placed on Him. We're now true sons and daughters of God. And this is why James can say so unflinchingly, "This is what true religion looks like." 'Cause for someone to understand that this is what God has done for them in Christ, and then to go back and evaluate people, and the kind of care and concern that they're going to have for them, based on what they're going to get out of the relationship, makes no logical sense. Only a false religion could do that.

So are you really a child of God? Well then, let's see if you actually share the same heart as your Father. So he picks a common Old Testament, evan, Old Testament example so that they

will make the right connection. But again, these two classes are representative of those who are weak or in need, and therefore the most difficult to exercise care and compassion for. Buh, but it isn't like he's saying, "Care for these people, and only these people;" like you can, "As long as you're looking out for orphans and widows, you can run everyone else over in your car." Isn't like he's saying anything like that. It would, like, "It'd be OK if you treat orphans and widows well, but don't worry about other people."

James uses them because they represent those who are poor and in need. And therefore when you care for them, you know that you will receive no physical benefit. It is a totally one-sided relationship. That's the emphasis here, and that is fine for the true believer. You get nothing of any type of immediate personal gain when you take time to care for those who have nothing to return to you. If you care for those for whom you receive no benefit from, then that is a sign that you're truly caring like Christ. You're truly caring like our Father.

That is the key principle at work, because that is what the love of God, manifested in the lives of those who understand how they have been loved by God, that's what it looks like. It doesn't matter how others treat them, doesn't matter what others can give to them, what others can do for them. They're able to care for them and give of their time, their energy, their love. And they're able to serve them because, in light of how the Father has loved them, how can they not show that same love of the Father to others?

We're talking about a real hands-on kind of love and care here. Notice, notice what it says. It says to "visit orphans and widows in their affliction." So now, now, now the now the, the, the liberal politicians and denominations don't really want the verse anymore, contrary to how they use this verse to advocate for financial social justice programs, to alleviate their consciences and try to prove that they really care by throwing money at a situation. The word translated as "visit" implies much more than that.

So that word can mean to, "to look after, to care for, to concern yourself with." It's not merely giving out money; it's being with them. It's making their burden your burden; making their affliction, your affliction; their distress, your distress, regardless of anything that they could do for you.

It may imply giving some money, that's true, but not necessarily. But what it definitely does imply is taking the time to really help and care for them through and in their distress. Seeing people who can do nothing for you, can't give you anything, who don't have the ability to make things easy on you in any way (in fact, it's just the opposite. It's gonna be harder for you if you get involved); it's seeing them down in the ditch and then, not just throwing money or resources down there to them, but getting down there with them and helping them, using your strength, using your energy to get 'em out.

It's doing it even when you don't want to, even when you're not motivated anyway. It's, it's, it's doing it when you don't want to, even when you're not motivated in any way, not even by the good feeling that you might get thinking that you're doing

the right thing. It's motivated solely by a true care and compassion that comes naturally for the one who is, who knows why they are able to call God their Father now.

So this care, this visiting, this concern for others is more than just being, being friendly and kind to them when you see them, 'cause it says in, "in their affliction," or "in their distress." So, so there's an emphasis not on, not, not just on the type of people that we are to concern ourselves with, but also the situations that they're in, even, even when they're in the most difficult situation. So when you're in those situations, when you see someone who you know is going through a difficult time, or maybe, maybe the last time you talked to them, you asked how they were doing and then you ended up having to do stuff you didn't want to do. You're gonna have to get involved in a situation because you, you pressed too much and made you wish you wouldn't have.

Maybe, maybe you got involved, maybe helped out, and maybe now you feel good about that situation, but you're like, "That, that was good, now. I helped that person." And so now when you

see them, you kinda try and make sure you're a little more careful about what you ask 'em. You try and greet them kinda quickly; keep from asking too many questions because you don't actually really want to know everything you found out last time, 'cause then you'll be obligated to do something. That attitude is also a violation of this verse.

It's not just that we're concerned about the people we wouldn't normally be concerned about. We go out of our way to discover affliction and minister to it. True religion that is pure and undefiled goes back to that person, and seeks that person out, and goes right back and talks about the cause of the affliction, knowing that it might mean another afternoon not doing what I wanted to do; knowing that it might be a sacrifice like that.

They go back again, and then the next week, and they continue to follow up. Those who have truly been saved will show real physical care and concern that manifests into involvement in a person's life, even when that person can offer you nothing

in return. And then, and even when ministering to that person means really investing yourself in uncomfortable ways.

That brings us to point three. Point three, final point: Clean from the world. Clean from the world. Not only does pure and undefiled religion care for the weak, but it keeps itself unstained from the world. That's what this verse says. James will go into greater detail on this throughout the book, especially in chapter 4, but for now, let's just note that there is an understanding here, in this phrase, of an attentive watchfulness over your life. An attentive, continual watchfulness over your life. You are actively keeping yourself from the influence and corruption of the world.

As Christians, we understand ourselves to be called-out ones. We are those who have been called out of this evil and sin-cursed world that is passing away. We belong to Christ, an, and as we said earlier, his righteous, spotless life has been given to us. That is our imputed righteousness. This is not something that can be stained by the world. The imputed righteous life of Christ in you cannot be stained by the world.

We will always possess Christ's perfect righteousness. That's not what James is talking about here. Here he is saying that true religion has an understanding of the danger of worldly corruption that we are surrounded by, and is always making an effort to keep from being stained or polluted by it. Always making that effort.

The Bible represents this current cursed world as one that is set up against the knowledge of God, and against His holiness. And we, of course, I mean, at, that's obvious to us, we see it for ourselves. You just go outside, you turn on the TV. Yep, that's what it is. We see morality continuing to, to degrade; continues to get worse and worse, sin becoming somehow more sinful. We're in a culture that's in the final stages of Romans 1, where we're not only in rebellion against God as Lord and Master, where we don't care to hear what he has to say; but we're also, we have spiraled even farther down to a culture that rejects God as Creator, rebelling against him in that also, rebelling against how He has created us; a world that now says it rejects God's creative distinctions between men and women; his creative distinctions between man and animal.

The world and its desires are so perverse and have so infiltrated everything around us. When you really start to dig into a command like this, you feel like God is commanding me, it's, it's almost like I'm being commanded to live in the middle of a swimming pool and stay dry. And there is a sense in which it might be good for us to think of it that way, because that adds to, like, "This is impossible," and then it causes us to go to God and pray like, "This is, this is what I see in the culture, God. Keep me dry."

But the degree to which you don't feel the weight and the difficulty behind this principle, is probably to the degree that you've already been stained and corrupted. It is a, it's a strong word used for "unstained." It's the same word that's used to refer to Christ as our "spotless" lamb. That should raise the level of our concern to be obedient to this. It should make us more diligent, if we have noticed in our lives that we have been a little slack here. And if we really took an honest look at ourselves, we would realize how idle we have become in our watchfulness.

I think that we are all kind-of naive when it comes to how much we have been influenced and calloused to the sin in this world. I think all of us are. As the world continues to slide into that sinful direction, typically what Christians have done, that, that makes us feel like we're doing a good job, is to kinda slide along with the world, but just kinda slower and further behind. That, that's typically what we do.

The Bible is, the Word of God is clear. It's unchanging. Its description of what true purity is a standard that never changes. It's, it's always true. It doesn't slip in either direction. And throughout time, and until Christ returns, the culture's going to continue moving farther and farther away from this standard. And as Christians, what we tend to do is, is follow the culture, but just from a distance.

So it gets away from the Word and we, we kinda veer out a little bit, a little bit here. But we see the culture way over here, and so we're like, "Well, I'm still fine, 'cause look how, look how messed up and evil it is, and here, and here I am." And, and that's what we're gauging faithfulness to, uh, on, is

ah, is, is our distance from how bad the culture has got, has gotten, and not the, the distance from the Bible where we have gone. That, that, that's what we do. We have to see that the Bible is our standard, and we have in fact been moving also.

We typically see ourselves as fulfilling this command if we're on the right side of whatever the current cultural war might be. So, so if we're toeing the line on speaking out against even the, the slightest form of compromise on the LGBTQ stuff, it looks like we're doing pretty good. Especially when we see other churches that aren't. But as we do this, it's so hard, as, as if, as that's our gauge, it's so hard for us to see just how far we've come in our pseudo-acceptance of so much of this world.

Compared to our current culture, it's easy to just kinda slough off compromises in immodest clothing, compromises in imply, you know, implied sexual immoral lyrics in songs, putting up with a certain level, level of, you know, comfortable immorality in our entertainment. It just doesn't seem like that big of a deal when, when the culture's advocating to mutilate

children to make them into a different gender. It's hard for us to realize how soiled we've become. Like how a shirt that was once white becomes less and less white over time, but as long as it's compared to a black shirt, it still looks white. But when you get a new white shirt, you say, "Oh, this is, this isn't as white as I thought."

I once heard Kevin Deyoung point out (and this stuck with me), that if you took a Christian from just a few hundred years ago, and you drop them into the average Christian home in America for a week, the most significant thing to them would probably be how horrified they are by the obscenity, vulgarity and sexual immorality that most of us have just kinda gotten used to. You know, granted, they, they would have no category for something like transgenderism, but even some of the stuff that we deem as "mostly clean," it would cause them to fall on their knees and repent. The idea of keeping ourselves unstained from the world is much more difficult than we typically take it.

And it's a similar thing: we just kinda get used to that command in the Bible 'cause it's everywhere. It causes us,

negatively, to not take it as seriously as we ought. The verb here, the verb "to keep," the verb translated as "keep," is present active tense. That means it's a daily, hourly, moment-by-moment thing. It means it's something that you are constantly doing. The idea of keeping ourselves unstained from the world is a constant thing. It's a daily battle for us. We're not doing this simply by being on the right side of whatever the newest immoral, sinful rebellion in the world might be. If we're not diligent in this, we will quickly be influenced, almost by, uh, almost without knowing it. If we're not diligent, if we're not daily thinking, "I need to keep myself unstained from the world today," if that's not the mindset we take into everything that we experience in this culture, we are in danger.

It's like trying to keep sand off you at the beach. That's, that's me at the beach, by the way. I like being at the beach. I like seeing the ocean. I hate getting sand on me, and it, not a single grain. I uh, I mean, but I could look at my kids at the beach. They're covered with it all over their bodies. It's clinging to them everywhere. And if I wanted to, I could compare myself to them and I would feel pretty clean. But I'm, I am so sensitive to it that I don't even want it coming up on my

ankles. I'm like, brushing my ankles off. My life at the beach is one of constantly brushing off my legs and, and blowing sand particles off of each page of my book that I'm reading before I turn it. That, that's what I do.

Now you don't have to be like the, the command here isn't to be like me at the beach. You can keep being gross when you go there, but this really is, that idea really is what it should look like as we live day-to-day lives, when it comes to keeping ourselves unstained by the world. That should be our mindset. Th, the, the, that kind of diligence, that kind of continual self-examination, comparing our lives constantly to the pure standard laid out in God's Word. And doing this rather than ss, the satisfaction that we give ourselves all the time of being "clean enough" in comparison to a world that is constantly moving the standard farther and farther away. We, brothers and sisters, want to be so sensitive to sin that we feel even the smallest grain of it, and we're bothered by it until we wipe it away.

And that thinking, that mindset, mindset brings us full circle, back to last time I was up here, and the last passage we looked at. Because the way that we maintain this is through careful, diligent examination of the Word of God, staring intently into it like a mirror, desperate to find any perfection, desperate to find every little thing that needs to be cleaned off and cleared away, and then being a doer who acts upon what they've just seen, what's just been revealed to them. And that's the encouragement for us today, beloved.

If, like me, when you look at this passage, you are convicted about how uncareful you are with your words on a day-to-day basis, or if you see how selfish you are in many of your relationships; but despite what you might tell yourself, there really are quite a significant amount of relationships where your investment is based, at least in some small part, on what you get out of it; if you see yourself, if you see in yourself a life that has not been as diligent as you ought to be in keeping yourself completely clean from the world and its influences, but you've not seen this as a daily responsibility, and you've been satisfied just comparing yourself to the really stained people; if any of those, or all of those are true of you, then yes, it

might be true that you are deceiving yourself; that your religion is worthless. That you believe that you're something that you're not.

You should consider that, think deeply about that, and talk to someone before you leave if that's true of you. But in the end, for all of us, it's going to be your response to this text that will demonstrate if that's true or not, right? The mirror of God's Word has been held up to your life. Now, are you going to do anything with what you've seen, or not? That's the question. Let's pray.

Father, thank you so much. Thank you so much for your Word that keeps us grounded, that keeps us going in the right direction. Lord, thank you, in your kindness you've given us a stable, printed Word that can continue to be referred to, and is unchangeable. We don't have to listen to all of the prophets of our culture, and everyone who says they have a new word or a new divine word. We have the, the, the sufficient, inerrant Word of God, and we can keep going back to it. And as many times as our stubborn hearts need to, to be told the same thing again and

again and again; I pray, Lord, that we would respond as we ought to your Word through these things we've talked about today.

God, that any, anyone in here who's deceived, that they'll stop the deception today; that you'd open their eyes to that deception, and that you would grant them faith and repentance. For those of us who, who are just seeing this again, seeing things honestly, a bunch of truths we've all been convicted about more than once in our lives, and that we would respond to your Word as we ought, and we would be doers, not hearers only. In Jesus' name, Amen.