



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

The Book of James, Slow to Speak

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Greg Beaupied / cell: (919) 710-9147 / Greg.Beaupied@capitolcom.org / 206 New Bern Place, Raleigh, NC 27601

James 1:26-27

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.

Introduction

This study will complete the three topics introduced in verse 19, namely, quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. In verses 26-27 James will tell us true religion is more than lip service—it is expressing your love for God by doing positive ministry to those in need, and staying clear of the sinful tendencies found in the world around us.

Our Study

If anyone...

No favorites are mentioned and no one is exempted from listening and heeding the admonitions of Scripture.

Considers himself religious...

Religious is a word used to describe the external religious rituals of the Temple. It is used in contrast to a different term found in the NT that conveys ideas such as godliness and holiness. James is insinuating that an outward appearance of religiosity is not a valuable religious observance if there is no inward reality that accompanies a rote liturgy.

Here is a place to think about your religion. James does not speak of our standing in the church, our religious education, or the careful observance of church life. These are legitimate but he asks us first to think about our speech.

... and yet

This small phrase (only implied in the Greek original) separates the presumption of a right religion from the wrong practice of a worthless religion.

We can think highly of ourselves and be wrong in our self-estimation. The contrast between practicing a right religion speaking with a loose tongue should give us pause, and lead us to look intently into the mirror of God's Law (verses 23-25).

... does not keep a tight rein on his tongue

Now James gets to the main focus of this paragraph—how we use our tongue. He knows the tongue is more than an organ of taste and touch. The tongue is a tool of speech, and speech is a reflection of the inner life. To say it in a positive way, the truly religious person is someone who moderates his speech.

James talks about keeping a tight rein. This brings to mind a horse which needs to be kept under control because it has a natural inclination to be wild and untamed. The animal can be made to do the rider's bidding but constant and necessary restraint must be used to keep the horse obedient. And so it is with the tongue, it needs to be bridled. James has already given us the principle—slow to speak (verse 19).

The tongue is one indicator of the inclination of the heart. If the tongue is not controlled by God then the same is likely for the heart (cf. Ephesians 5:19).

... he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Here we find the idea of self-deception again. We were told in verse 22 one who merely listens to the word without doing what it says deceives himself. Here, the uncontrolled tongue is more proof of self-deception. The deception is to believe an uncontrolled tongue is expressing godly religion.

Having a worthless religion is truly a horrible condition—it is literally a life and death issue. It is a particular kind of fool who thinks he knows how to please God but demonstrates with an unbridled tongue that his heart is far away from godliness. When we think of a person who makes a great show of his speech, there is a reasonable assumption about who sits upon the throne of the heart.

Matthew 12:37 *For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*

BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: MONDAYS, 5:00 PM, ROOM 1425

STAFF: MONDAYS, 12:00 NOON, CHAPEL

North Carolina

James

Religion that God our Father accepts ...

Religion is worthless if it is not accepted by God. The most sincere but wrong presumption finds no favor with God. The Lord tells us in His Word what true religion is (cf. Hosea 6:6).

Jesus, Himself gives us a fearful pronouncement, “*Then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!*” (Matthew 7:23).

James is not warning the pagan world about unacceptable religion; he is warning the church. There are Christians who wander in and out of true worship depending on where their heart is at the time. A true Christian practices false religion when the heart is cold and not filled with love toward God. A heart not filled with love for God is filled with something else. Jesus would not approve the church of Laodicea because of a lukewarm affection (Revelation 3:16).

... as pure and faultless is this:

It seems we should pause for a drum roll and strain our attention to the answer James is about to deliver. If we had not read ahead, it would be interesting to note how this statement could be completed. Think of the possibilities! James will give us two examples from separate categories of conduct that exemplify true religion. Of course, his explanation is not an exhaustive description of good religious practice but his ideas go to the core of the matter and reflect the messages of the Old Testament prophets.

... to look after orphans and widows in their distress

The meaning of *to look after* is related to the biblical word often translated as bishop or overseer. To look after is not a casual drop-in visit, but it means to minister to someone by meeting the legitimate needs they have. Literally, it means to oversee their affairs.

The admonition is applicable to anyone in distress, but in the early church widows and orphans were the primary examples of people in need. They would often be completely destitute without the means of earning income or obtaining the basic necessities. We see many examples of caring for the widows and orphans in the Bible.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 *At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year's produce and store it in your towns, so that the...the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied*

Jeremiah 7:6 *...do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow.*

Acts 6:1 *In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.*

Jesus give us the broader principle, *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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me* (Matthew 25:35-36).

and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James has described, in the positive sense, the practice of right religion. Now, he turns to a warning—keep yourself from the world's pollution. John writes a concise commentary on the teaching of James.

1 John 2:15-16 *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.*

The warning of James is a message to all believers in Jesus. We will get stained as we walk through the world. He stresses the continuous action of washing away the grime of life as it splashes against our souls.

Questions to ponder...

1. What might motivate an overactive tongue?
2. How does the practice of true religion relate to Paul's message, *offer y our bodies as living sacrifices?* (Romans 12:1)
3. What do you think James means by the phrase *pure and faultless* when he is referring to religion? Is he talking about salvation?