

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, NY
Pastor Tom Mortenson
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TRUE RELIGION IS.....

James 1:26-27

PRAYER: Father, we thank you and praise you for your grace, we thank you and praise you once again for the gift that you've given to us: your church. We thank you for this local expression of the body of Christ, for the freedom that we have to be able to come here and offer this worship to you, worship in song, worship in prayer, worship in spoken word, and now worship as we open up your Word. Father, grant us the presence and the power of your Holy Spirit as we do that, so that we may look into your Word and make it a permanent part of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Our text this morning concludes Chapter 1 of the book of James. Verses 26 and 27: *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.*

James is concluding this chapter by referring to a theme that he speaks of at length in Chapter 3. It is a theme of major importance to James and concludes his discussion about our spiritual senses, which include spiritual hearing, spiritual speaking, and spiritual sight – which is really what we've been discussing this past month. But what he's speaking about now is the tongue.

Last week, I pointed out the importance of understanding where James is coming from when he speaks about hearing, speaking, seeing, and doing for the believer. James is addressing, in each of these commands, an ability to hear, see, and respond that only exists in the heart of a believer. See, there's a great deal of confusion that surrounds the book of James that is actually unnecessary if you understand him as addressing himself to believers. Remember how James opens his letter in James 1:1-3? *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*

James is addressing Jewish Christians who have been scattered due to the persecution. And he says, right at the beginning, "Count it all joy, my brothers," because he's addressing fellow believers in Christ. Now, if you understand that right from the beginning, then a lot of James' commands with regard to living the Christian life will make sense. If, however, you mistakenly think he's addressing a general population of believers and non-believers, then you can wrongfully conclude that he sometimes puts the cart ahead of the horse, especially when it comes to the

relationship of works and faith. It is James who made this famous statement in James 2:26: *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

James speaks of faith in action. He describes faith in terms of "doing." Again, James 2:17 says: *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*

Now, because of his emphasis on "doing," people have misconstrued the doing of the works of faith to be the same as faith itself. Others have elevated the works themselves as the most important component of faith. I remember a concrete example of this. A few years back, we were approached by an organization called... I think it was "Faith in Action" or "Faith at Work." And this was an organization that was determined to put feet under the desire to put action to one's faith. So they said they would act as a liaison between the churches and various aspects of the community. They said that if we joined this organization, it would put us in touch with people who needed to be taken places, people who needed meals, that sort of thing, and it sounded good at first. But as I was speaking with the woman who ran the program, she made it very clear that Faith in Action was only interested in the "action" part. That is, one of the rules of the organization was that you could not share with the people that you were helping what it was your faith was grounded on. From their standpoint, they didn't want Jewish folks telling people about Judaism, or Muslim folks telling people about Islam, or Christians talking about Christianity. They simply wanted each faith group to put their faith in action by doing faith-based things. To them, the deeds themselves were all that mattered. So instead of promoting faith without works, they were promoting works without faith. And so we declined to join.

You see, it's very easy to get out of balance when examining a relationship between faith and works. There are whole denominations that have misunderstood this relationship, to the extent that one could view their relationship with Christ simply as a "to do list." If you check off enough of the right religious activities, then you can think of yourself as standing in a right relationship with God. This is nothing new; this is exactly what devolved out of the law of the Pharisees. A constant temptation for every believer is to imagine himself capable of pleasing God through what he does. And no one's capable of that. Since God is transcendentally flawless, somebody who thinks they can do that would have to do that flawlessly, and not just some of the time but all of the time. Galatians 3:10 says: *For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them."*

So why does it seem that James seems to focus so much on works? Again, we've seen verse 25 to 27, which says: *But the one who looks into the perfect of law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*

There's no question that James is focused on the doer who acts. You could say, "Isn't he giving undue attention to works instead of faith?" Consider our text this morning: *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.

Isn't this "works first"? I mean, I could imagine someone seeing this and saying, "Okay, here's my works-based checklist from James. Here are the three things I need to do to keep my religion from becoming worthless. Number one, I have to keep my mouth shut, I have to keep my tongue "bridled"; number two, I have to visit orphans; and number three, I have to care for widows. Isn't that how I get right with God according to James?" Well, you know that can't possibly be James' solution for worthwhile religion, and there are reasons why.

First and foremost, if you look at the text, there are no boundaries that James gives us. There's no telling, by what James says here, **how** bridled I must keep my tongue. There are monks who keep vows of silence for their entire life. Is that how much you need to do? Or half of that? Or maybe a quarter of that? How much must I bridle my tongue? How many orphans must I visit to meet the minimum requirements? Is it two, or four, or ten? How many widows must I care for, and what level of care am I responsible for? Can't you see the impossibility of coming at this from the standpoint of works as a justification for my righteousness before God?

You see, in order to understand just what it is that James is getting at, we have to understand what works are, from God's perspective. So let's start at the beginning.

We start with the gospel: that God himself left heaven itself, that he entered earth itself in the form of a human being, lived out a perfect life, and then offered that life up as a sacrifice for us, and so all who by faith place their trust in him get his goodness in return for our sin. Something else takes place when God offers us the gospel and we accept it. When you come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, God begins to take up residence within your spirit. That's an incredibly important thing to understand. Listen to what 1 Corinthians 3:16 says about that: *Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

Why does God do that? Because his intention is to raise up – from every tribe, tongue, and nation – a people whose transformed lives bring honor and glory to his Son. Again, 1 Corinthians 6:19 says: *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price. So glorify God in your body.* And Revelation 4:11 says: *Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.*

We have been placed on this earth to glorify our creator. That's why we exist. That's why we're here. Okay. So how do we do that? Well, we do that by virtue of the works, which flow out of our transformed lives. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:14: *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand,*

and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Jesus is making the assumption that good works will always flow out of a redeemed life, but they are not the source of that redeemed life. They are proof that there is life there in the first place. You know, breathing is not the source of life itself, but it is pretty good proof that you're alive. And breathing is to life what good works is to faith. If there are no good works, there's no evidence that the patient's faith is alive. James refers to three of those good works in our text this morning. Let me read it again. He says:

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.

You see, there are three different good works here. One work is negative; two are positive. So let's take the negative one first. *If anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*

There are two different ways to understand what James is getting at here: there is an outside-in approach, and there's an inside-out approach. God's approach is **always** inside-out. And the world's approach is always the opposite: it's always outside-in. At worst we've seen this illustrated by the Pharisees, who were the absolute experts at outside-in. Jesus called them out as whitewashed tombs. This is what he said in Matthew 23:27:

"Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

You see, the outside-in approach says this about James: if you want religion to be worthwhile, you'd better learn how to bridle your tongue. And to a certain limited extent, you can do that. Just how limited that is is illustrated by this article that occurred in the Boston Globe just last week. This is out of Middleborough, Massachusetts. Let me just read it to you:

On the first morning that swearing in public became a civil offense in Middleborough, Corey Mills said he heard more swears than he's ever heard in his life. He was answering the telephone at the police station, where he is a sergeant. This is a small town, but the calls were coming from far and wide, for the previous night at its annual town meeting, the residents had overwhelmingly voted to give police the opportunity to hand out \$20 tickets for using profanity in public. One angry veteran came into the station to argue that he had fought to defend his right to swear; he had to be shown the door.

On the recommendation of the police chief, who was looking for a set of tools to cope with crowds of unruly teenagers who gathered downtown at night, the citizens of Middleborough voted 183 to 50 to decriminalize a bylaw against profanity in public. The law had been on the books since 1968 but not used in years because it wasn't considered worth prosecuting. Decriminalizing effectively revived the law, giving police the power to hand out \$20 tickets without worrying about bringing a criminal case to court. On the downtown drag of Centre Street the following afternoon, some of the youths who hang there, and who are a target of the ordinance punctuated their feelings with vehement oaths. One youth thought it was [expletive]. Another thought was [expletive, expletive]. A car drove by and a young woman yelled out the window, "Is it illegal to say [expletive]?"

It was a fair question, and one whose answer, according to the freedom of speech specialists, is probably no.

David Hudson, a scholar at the First Amendment Center, said he expects the constitutionality of the ordinance will be challenged, and that the law will be invalidated.

This new law in Middleborough is a classic example of an outside-in approach. You place a reward or a sanction on some type of objectionable behavior in the hope that it will change. And perhaps it will change a little on the outside, but that's not at all the type of change that James is speaking of here. You see, the outside-in approach identifies the tongue as the problem and it seeks to find ways to address curbing the tongue from the outside. A local government may impose fines – a local church may attempt to impose some kind of social stigma on that kind of behavior – and in the end, you may get your desired results if all you desire is a lessening of the amount of coarse language. But, as I said, that is not what James is after. James is speaking to brothers in Christ, brothers who have already received Christ as Lord and Savior. God's Holy Spirit has already indwelt him or her, and he is in the process of sanctifying him or her from the inside-out.

James knows that the problem with the tongue can never be really addressed on the outside because it is in essence an internal problem. Jesus made that quite clear in Matthew 5:10-20:

And he called the people to him and said, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up."

Just take that last thought and kind of tuck it away. That kind of comes out of nowhere. He says:

"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up; let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us." And he said, "Are you also still without understanding?" Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness,

slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

Jesus says the heart of man is filled with evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander. Now, the outside-in approach says "find a reward or sanction that will somehow curb the output, not of the heart, but of the expression of the heart" – which is the tongue. That's like trying to fix a toothache by putting an aspirin on your tooth. The only way you're ever going to fix the toothache is to fix the internal source of the toothache, and that's the decay and the rot that's inside the tooth.

The same is true when it comes to the rotten decay that is inside the human heart. Jesus tells us our hearts are filled with rot and that the solution is not a new set of rules and sanctions designed to limit the output of the heart. The solution is a new heart. And again, Ezekiel 36:26 says:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

That's the inside-out approach. The inside-out approach says if you are one of God's own, inside you, right now, is the Spirit of God. Romans 8:9 says: *You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*

You see, it is His Spirit and not your flesh who is actively about the process of bridling your tongue. And not from the outside, but from the inside. And not because you have to but because now you want to. God's Holy Spirit is actively transforming you into the image of his Son, not just in the tongue but – first and foremost – in the heart.

I had that entire process brought dramatically home to me literally within hours of the first day that I became a born-again believer in Christ. This is an old, old story, so here's an "old story alert" for Nancy there. This is a story that you may have heard many, many times, but it's worth repeating.

The day that I got saved, in May of 1973, I had been staying at a friend's house, and they had been giving me the gospel over the course of two or three days. I was there in Michigan because Janice and myself were driving cross country from Vermont to San Francisco, where I was supposed to go to graduate school. Now, the reason I was in Michigan for more than just a brief visit was because our car had broken down, and I was in the process of fixing it. Now, I was a pagan at the time, and as Janice will attest, my language was pretty bad at that time, but working under cars seems to bring out the worst of anybody; it certainly brought out the worst in me. And I distinctly remember multiple times using the name of my future Lord and Savior as a curse word. At that time I had no idea that my days as a pagan had dwindled down to one, that God was in hot pursuit of me, and I was soon to become a believer in Christ.

Well, to make a long story short, that very night I had an encounter with the living God, and I gave my life to Christ. But something happened immediately thereafter that I never even understood until some six months later when I began to understand the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We left the prayer meeting where I had gotten saved and we decided to go into town to a coffee shop to just kind of sit and debrief and talk about what had happened. And it so happened that as I was walking into the restaurant, a couple was walking out, and they were in the midst of an argument. And they were not more than a couple feet away from me when one of them – I forget who it was – turned to the other in complete frustration and said out loud, "Jesus Christ." That was the first time in my life as a brand new Christian that I had ever heard those two words spoken in vain. And I immediately felt like I had been gut punched. The exact same phrase that I had bandied about that afternoon with abandon had now hit my ears as one of the ugliest and most profoundly awful outbursts of the tongue I had ever heard. At the time, I had no idea that God's Holy Spirit had taken up residence in me that very evening. At that time, I had no idea that this was the Spirit's reaction to something so profoundly rebellious, so profoundly sinful, so profoundly ugly, that God made it one of his commandments. Exodus 10:7: *"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."*

So all of this hit me at once as I was walking into the restaurant and I heard this couple arguing, and I didn't produce those emotions at all. The Spirit of the living God now living within me heard the unbridled tongue of the couple as they were leaving and produced this spiritual gut reaction within me. Prior to that exact moment, I had never given a moment's thought to the sin of taking God's name in vain. It's been 39 years since I committed that sin, and I committed plenty of others, but I don't think I've ever committed that one since that day.

Now when James says in James 1:26: *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* Do you think he's speaking of outside-in or inside-out? Do you think he's saying "You better watch what you say, Buster, because if you don't bridle your tongue, you're going to lose your religion. It's going to become worthless." That's outside-in. It's addressing the problem not from the source, the heart, but from its expression, the tongue. Rather, he is saying that you must, as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, know that the Spirit of the living God now lives within you, transforming every part not part of you, not the least of which is your tongue. And, furthermore, an unbridled tongue is a sure sign that the problems of your heart are still present and are still being expressed by your tongue, so your religion is worthless. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 15:

"Hear and understand: It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person. But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person."

See, Jesus went on to make a very profound statement in the middle of that quote about the heart as the root of an unbridled tongue. And it is often very easy to overlook what he said because it's right in the middle of the teaching there in verse 13.

I said "tuck that thought away" when we were reading it just a couple of minutes ago. It applies perfectly to what Jesus said. In verse 13, he said: *"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up."* Jesus was clearly implying that the issue of the tongue is an inside-out issue. If the Spirit of God is inside you, your tongue will be in the process of being bridled from within. The new heart that you've received will be a source, not of defilement, but of life and light and grace and peace. And if the Spirit is not in you helping you bridle your tongue, then you still have the same heart you've always had, you are self-deceived, and you will be rooted up. Now, James says in James 1:26: *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* James is simply saying there's no evidence that the Spirit is in him helping him bridle his tongue, he's self-deceived, then his religion is worthless. They're saying the same thing. They're saying it's not outside-in, it's inside-out. We say if it walks like a duck, and it swims like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, it's a duck. And James and Jesus apply the very same logic to believers.

Now, am I saying that if I have a slip of the tongue, I am in danger of losing my salvation? That is exactly what I am **not** saying. You see, sanctification is a progressive endeavor. Sanctification takes us from where we were, to where we are, to where God wants us to be. And for every single one of us, that journey is unique and different because we all have different starting points. There is no formula to determine how many slip-ups of the tongue constitute evidence that your heart is not right.

Here's something concrete you need to consider. When we sin with our tongues (if we are believers), we have the Holy Spirit of God within us. That Spirit is convicting us. The reason why James tells us to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry" is because we need to develop the ability to listen to the Spirit as he is convicting us. But we can't do that without the power of God's indwelling Spirit. So if we sin with our tongues, and we feel no conviction, no pang of conscience, no internal sanction that this is wrong, that this dishonors the King whom we serve, then I would say "be afraid." I would say, "be very afraid." You just might be the exact kind of person James is speaking about.

But understand this one thing: you can never lose your salvation. That is never even a remote threat, and to say so is an insult to God's power to save and to keep. Listen to what Jesus said in John 10:27. He said:

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one, no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

The threat is never, never that you could lose your salvation. The threat is that you never had it in the first place, and that you are so self-deceived that you never even realized it. That's what James is after in the first part of our text, the negative part: *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*

Now the second part is the positive part. And it follows along the exact same lines of "inside-out." He says in verse 27: *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.*

Why do you think James singles out this one aspect of pure religion, this idea of widows and orphans? And what is "pure religion" anyway? Well, we've defined it. And we've defined it as "living transformed lives," understanding that we are here to let our light so shine among men that they would see our good works and glorify God in heaven. That is, having God himself living within us, transforming our thoughts, our words, and our deeds into those that imitate the Christ whom we serve. You can't do that on your own. You and I don't have the power to sustain that kind of living. And we were never intended to live that kind of life on our own strength. Paul said this of God in 2 Corinthians 12:9: *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

So why is pure religion to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world? Well, you know that heart that God gave us, this new heart that we were given, this heart of flesh that has been implanted in us after the heart of stone has been removed, the heart that grows out of the Spirit implanted in us, the Spirit who causes you to walk in his statutes and be careful to obey his rules? That is a heart that thinks like the Father thinks; it's a heart that wants what the Father wants; it's a heart that does what the Father does, just like his Son does. And when it comes to widows and orphans, God's Word shouts.

Psalm 68:5: Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

Psalm 146:9: The LORD watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Deuteronomy 10:18: He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

Deuteronomy 14:29: And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are in your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

Does it come as any surprise that those who are genuinely saved of God would have his heart within them? And that the heart of the Father is partial to widows and orphans? See, James is saying that if you are religious, you have a new heart and a new spirit operating within you, that

the old heart was defiled; it was a source of moral pollution that couldn't help but affect the tongue. Now, a new heart and a new Spirit have been transplanted and the process of sanctification has begun. We begin to think and act and desire like our Father does. And the plight of the widow and the orphan begins to resonate as it has never resonated before, and finally we recognize the importance of being "in the world but not of it" as we seek to keep ourselves "unstained from the world." I mean, think about it. Could you imagine today... can any of us in this room imagine today... going to a strip bar or hanging out all night at a drunken house party? Or how about lying and dirty jokes and gossip and slander, all those things that accompany an unbridled tongue? I can tell you, there was a time when I would have entertained any one of those thoughts. But that was another lifetime. That was before I became a new creature in Christ. You see, back then I didn't even know that there were organizations like Voice of the Martyrs or World Vision or International Justice Mission, and I didn't know they existed, frankly, because I didn't care if they existed. I care now, not as much as I should, not as much as I'm capable of, and even that I stand convicted of. That's because I'm one of his. That's because I have a new heart and a new Spirit within me transforming me into the image of God's own Son. That's what true religion is.

James 1:26: 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.

Let's pray.

PRAYER: Father God, I do thank you for this gift that you have given to us. I thank you that we can actually have pure and true religion, not because we can create it from the outside-in, but because you have granted it to us from the inside-out. I thank you, Lord, that our true religion flows from a new heart and a new Spirit you have given us. And again, Lord, if there are those in this building who don't feel that, don't sense that, don't have any inkling that there is a new heart, a new Spirit within them that responds in the way that James is referring to, I pray that you would prick their conscience and give them the opportunity to come speak with any of us, any of the deacons, any of the elders, myself... Speak to our hearts, Lord; let us get right, right now, with what an understanding of true religion is. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.