

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 7 Pure & Undefined Religion Part 2 James 1:22-27
Date: September 21, 2014

I. Doers

James 1:22-24

Coming on the heels of verse 21 – *“Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with the meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”*, James tells us how to make that implanted word effective in our lives. The implanted word in the first century was received orally (with the exception of the OT – usually in the Septuagint) until the epistles and gospels of the NT were written and began to be copied and circulated from church to church. James uses the word “hearers” in v. 22 because that was what was typical, but here, in what was almost certainly the first NT epistle written, the recipients are getting the word in written form. So, not only does “hearing” mean “with your ears”, but now “as you read it” and “hear it” in your mind.

Kevin DeYoung counsels us:

“All religion rests on authority. In fact, every academic discipline and every sphere of human inquiry rests on authority. Whether we realize it or not, we all give someone or something the last word – our parents, our culture, our community, our feelings, the government, peer-reviewed journals, opinion polls, impressions, or a holy book. We all have something or someone that we turn to as the final arbiter of truth claims. For Christians, this authority is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Of course, we can misunderstand, and misapply the word of God. But when interpreted correctly – paying attention to the original context, considering the literary genre, thinking through authorial intent – the Bible is never wrong in what it affirms and must never be marginalized as anything less than the last word on everything it teaches.”ⁱ

James’s basic point is this: hearing the word is merely step one [cf. Romans 10:13-17] in the process of receiving the implanted word. It is what you do next that that matters as far as the disposition of your soul is concerned. The advice here is really in the form of a command – “But be doers of the word.” This is such basic advice that we tend to ignore it with, “I know that!”, but then, if that’s so, why is Christianity in the western civilized world so anemic and relatively fruitless? If everyone who claimed to be a Christian in North America were really a Christian, there is no way the USA and Canada would ever be in the moral cesspools we have gotten to, and the private lives of “Christians” would not look so much like the world.

We profess to love Christ, but by our actions, we make that statement a farce and seem to change the meaning of the word “love”. Notice some of these verses addressed to believers – JN 14:23,24; 15:10-11; I JN 5:2-4; 3:24. We are so much into ‘grace’ and our freedom as believers that we’ve lost sight of what holiness, obedience, kindness, love for others and real worship are all about. Even at this early stage of Christianity, James has identified what is, in 2014, a common problem in the church. People are deceived into thinking that merely being in church to hear God’s word is what will

save them – a form of works or merit religion. We can feel justified and better than our neighbours; after all, what are they doing on Sunday mornings?

According to Brian Vickers,

“The greatest practical danger facing us does not come from without but from within. The matter is not whether we simply know the right things – anyone can read and amass knowledge – but whether our practises, attitudes, desires, and ambitions reflect what we know to be true. Our actions can belie our statements.”ⁱⁱ

What exactly though, does it mean to be a ‘doer of the word’? Isn’t it all done in Christ? What’s left for us to do? Here’s what James Doriani says about this;

“Doers of the word are active. We may translate James 1:22, “Become a doer”, for James expects his people to turn their professions of faith into action. Theology must lead to practice; faith must lead to deeds (2:24). Those who are wise must show it by their lives (3:13). Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and does not do it, sins (4:17).”ⁱⁱⁱ

James illustrates this for us in vv. 23-24, but why illustrate this with a mirror? There are at least 2 good reasons: First – Scripture is like a mirror to our souls. With a physical mirror, we look into it to gauge our appearance and to then take some action in order to improve it (eg. Our Sunday clothes – do the colours match? Is my hair messy? Is my shirt wrinkled?). Reading or hearing the Bible taught should have that effect on us. As we encounter passages or verses that touch us, careful introspection should cause us to make adjustments to our spiritual condition, maybe even forcing us to realise that we have no spiritual condition! Note: II Cor. 13:5; I JN 1:4-6, 10-11; 3:1-3; 5:13.

Secondly – the physical mirror exposes drastic problems too – teenagers may notice a new bout of acne and older adults may see an unexplained bruise or a lump that was not there yesterday that we should have looked at. Likewise, Scripture as a mirror “exposes our sin, our need for repentance and the promise of grace.”^{iv} We must stay with the text long enough to be able to recall this and take appropriate action. Are we being unloving with someone, or are our actions in social settings causing people to question our Christianity, or is our secret life exhibiting sin tendencies we mask in public? Seeing this is only step one – now we have to act or our observance of Scripture is wasted. See II Pet. 1:3-11; Eph. 4:17-24; Rom. 12:9-21.

James points out in these 2 verses that it does no good to look in either a physical or the spiritual mirror of God’s word, then neglect to adjust what we’ve seen that needs adjusting. Flaws we observe can be corrected once identified in either case, but to see it and ignore it is to be a fool who is not taking advantage of the information just gathered and then simply continuing to act as if no such information has been seen. That is a very dangerous spiritual position to take.

[Discussion Question: What are some reasons that people aren’t doers of the word?]

II. The Blessing of Looking Into God's Law & Acting - James 1:25

While the person in vv. 23-24 is found to be wanting – deceived actually – the one who acts based on God's word is blessed – cf. Psalm 1:1-3. Scripture deserves and requires our attention and should not just be casually read. James uses “law” and “word” in a similar way throughout this epistle, referring (by chronological necessity) to the OT. He calls it “the perfect law”, “the law of liberty” here; later, in 2:8, he'll call it “the royal law” – but as we see the epistle unfold, it becomes clear that he means to apply the OT through Jesus' eyes, via the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus clarification therein of what the law was really all about in relation to salvation and the living out of salvation. We do see the appeal to the veracity and importance of the OT in almost every other epistle in the NT – for example, Paul in Romans 7:22 and Peter in II Peter 2:21. In the OT, David in Psalm 119, and so on. Paul's great mirror-like value he places on the law of God is especially evident in Romans 7:4-7, and the OT is highly relevant in both Hebrews and Revelation.

God's law is perfect and royal because it shows us God's character and thus reflects and reveals our own character by contrast. It does not just show us how to live, but explains why we should live that way. Of course, NT believers are always bombarded with the idea that we are “no longer under law, but are under grace”, and too many take refuge Romans 6:14 to justify their antinomianism. Rather than spend a lot of time here discussing the debate that rages over “Lordship Salvation” versus “Free Grace” positions, let me point out that this verse just cited, does not equate to “let go and let God” or an OK to live lawlessly, but instead, as Thomas Schreiner comments;

“In Romans 6:14, Paul connects liberation from sin with liberation from the Mosaic era because these were inseparable in his theology. The Mosaic era was the age in which sin dominated. Now this does not mean there was no grace in the Mosaic era, nor does it imply that all Israelites lived under the power of sin. Paul was well aware of the OT remnant that included prophets and godly people such as Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David and Daniel. What we have here is a generalization. Paul describes what was generally the case in the OT economy, not what was invariably the case. What struck him was how signally Israel failed, not the small numbers who kept the law. The promises to the nation as a whole were unfulfilled because Israel did not keep the law. Moreover, because Paul is speaking in a redemptive-historical fashion, it would be an error to conclude that believers need not obey any commands since they are under grace. Paul's point is that Israel did not keep the law as long as they were under the law (ie. The Mosaic Covenant). Now that believers are under the power of grace they are enabled to keep the moral norms of the law by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4). This is precisely what both Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-34) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-27) foresaw occurring when the New Covenant became a reality.”

Salvation does not release us from the spirit of the law so much as from the letter of the law. In our Christian walk, as we mature, we begin to recognise how deep our sin really was before we were saved, and even as we are saved, the indwelling Spirit compels us to discern the depth of our sinful motives, and reveals how we occasionally deceive ourselves. Avenues for sin we never dreamed were in us before salvation or even early into our sanctification process can now be seen, but now we have a way to defeat sin! – cf. Rom. 6:5-14 & James 4:7-10. John Piper gives us an eye opening list of

things that we only recognise as sin once we have matured significantly. Notice his points here:

“When he [Paul] describes the sins of his own people in Romans 2:24, the climax of the indictment is this: “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” What makes sin sin is not first that it hurts people, but that it blasphemes God. This is the ultimate evil and the ultimate outrage in the universe.

The glory of God is not honored.

The holiness of God is not revered.

The greatness of God is not admired.

The power of God is not praised.

The truth of God is not sought.

The wisdom of God is not esteemed.

The beauty of God is not treasured.

The goodness of God is not savored.

The faithfulness of God is not trusted.

The promises of God are not relied upon.

The commandments of God are not obeyed.

The justice of God is not respected.

The wrath of God is not feared.

The grace of God is not cherished.

The presence of God is not prized.

The person of God is not loved.

The infinite, all-glorious Creator of the universe, by whom and for whom all things exist (Romans 11:36) – who holds every person’s life in being at every moment (Acts 17:25) – is disregarded, disbelieved, disobeyed, and dishonored by everybody in the world. That is the ultimate outrage of the universe.”^{vi}

Notice how James 1:25b stresses this – “...and perseveres...”. The Bible knows nothing of a believer who enters heaven without perseverance (a possible exception is the thief on the cross)^{vii}. Look closely for an example at the exhortation of Hebrews 12:14 – “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Strive for holiness. Do we really comprehend this truth or are we hung up on the modern North American version of salvation which tells us we are “once saved, always saved, no matter how we live our life”? If that is true salvation, then what on earth do we do with warnings in passages like; Hebrews 3, 6, 10 and so many others? And what about the warnings of Jesus Himself?^{viii} Verse 25 ends with James’s promise of blessings for those who are doers of the word.

“Faithfulness is the proof of faith. Our pattern of behaviour and the words we speak uncover what we truly believe. What we say, what we desire, what we do – all reveal what is in our hearts. God formed us so that there is an unbreakable and tight connection between faith and action, between creed and word, between belief and desire...All behaviour is conceived in the womb of our beliefs. Therefore, all our desires, all our words and all our deeds make known what we truly believe and what we really value in our hearts.”^{ix}

III. Worthless Religion

James 1:26

Jesus, in Matthew 7:21-23, preaches the most horrifying words a person could ever hear, and at the worst possible time in their existence – when it's way too late! Hearing those words now is good. Hearing them at the Great White Throne is very bad. In fact, it is desolation and the bleakest possible forecast for one's eternal future. James, here in v. 26, offers us a warning that one way to identify a religion that will not save us is how we use our tongue and how it can deceive our heart.

Religious talk is cheap. How many “faithful” Christians have we seen fall into gross sin and apostasy over the years, and not just the famous ones like Jim Bakker, or Jimmy Swaggert or Ted Haggard, but also people close to us, that may have sat next to us in the pews for years Sunday after Sunday? So many have left the church never to return. How many sit there today, and will be gone in 5 years or so (or less)?

James starts off with, “If anyone thinks he is religious...”, and most people in church and many even outside of the church think they are religious, because rather than compare their religious ‘devotion’ to the pure standard of God's word, they compare it to atheists, neighbours, TV evangelists and faith healers (whom they would consider charlatans), co-workers, and the like. James's wide target for this statement is the church at large because he wants the members of the church to consider this very carefully. If we join together the points James is making in vv. 26-27, there are 3 tests of true religion mentioned: First – control of the tongue; second – looking after widows and orphans in need; and third – remaining unpolluted by the world.

“To this day, religious people may profess orthodox doctrines and faithfully attend their churches. But the proof of their religion lies in behavior, James says. He unfolds the meaning of these marks of true religion - controlling the tongue, caring for the needy, and shunning the world's pollution – throughout chapters 2-4.”^x

Control of the Tongue

The negative aspect of one's life that identifies him/ her as having worthless religion is that, this person does not bridle his / her tongue. James spends a lot of time talking about the effects of the tongue: 1:3-4 [self-justifying]; 2:3-4 [flattery & humiliation]; 2:16 [careless well-wishing without action]; 2:18 [proclaiming faith without deeds / hypocrisy]; 3:9 [praise God, then curse people]; 3:10 [blessings and cursings]; 4:11 [speak evil of another person] & 4:13 [boasting of one's plans without taking God's will into the plan].

Although James does not mention some other things in particular – like gossip, lying, back-biting, filthy language, dirty jokes and taking God's name in vain, the Bible clearly warns about all these things and more. Jesus, in the great watershed chapter 12 of Matthew, in Matt. 12:33-37, curses the Pharisees by telling them that their words will be the instruments used against them to ultimately condemn them to Hell. “That which is within will ultimately come forth.”^{xi}

But does this mean that occasional sins with the tongue are being condemned so strongly? No – we all sin, we all say things we wish we could take back and we all desire from time to time to hold back what we would love to say, but we realise it would only hurt rather than edify. (cf. Eph. 4:29) Kent Hughes makes a good point when he writes;

“James does not mean that those who **sometimes** fall into this sin have a worthless religion, for all are guilty at times. Rather, he is saying that if anyone’s tongue is **habitually** unbridled, though his church attendance be impeccable, his Bible knowledge envied, his prayers many, his tithes exemplary, and though he considers himself religious...he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”^{xii}

The tongue unbridled also has the ability to reveal the deceit of our own hearts. Too often, we tend to believe what we say and rather than consider the implications of poorly chosen or mis-directed words, or words with evil motives to our spiritual well-being, we say them anyway. When the bent of our words is always like this, James says our religion is worthless.

IV. Keep Yourself Unstained by the World James 1:27

Visiting Widows and Orphans

In the first century AD, apart from the blind, the lame, the deaf, the lepers and other handicapped people who were almost always destitute; this group of people were the most in danger of poverty. There were no government ‘safety nets’ available like UIC, Disability Insurance, education grants, welfare or child support programmes to ensure at least minimal provision for food and clothing. Women had virtually no social status in that culture [rare exceptions did exist, such as Lydia in Acts 16], and children, especially orphaned children had even less. They were seen as general liabilities by most people and it was usually left to the benevolence of strangers (if there was no family around or willing) to give assistance in a practical (monetary) way.

Assistance would seldom come from the Jewish leaders (cf. the story of the widow’s mite in Luke 21:1-4, which is a rebuke of the system rather than an exhortation for us to give until it hurts as it is so often exegeted – the Pharisees should have been helping her and people like her^{xiii}). Isaiah 1:11-17 speaks well for the OT’s view of this subject and the passage also parallels James’s point regarding worthless religion vs true religion.

In the NT / church age, who but Christians will go out of their way to help people like widows and orphans (who are not their own family) “in their affliction”? To visit them, and that surely means just dropping in to say “hi”, means to help them in a physical sense and perhaps also in a spiritual sense, to encourage them and to pray with them. James says such actions comprise “*religion that is pure and undefiled before God.*”

Today, how would we apply this? In today's society widows are usually covered by insurance so economically, most (not all) are in little need of monetary help but there is certainly a factor of loneliness to deal with, especially after the initial shock of a spouse's death has given way to more sombre grieving. Since couples will have established friendships with other couples, a widow may find herself left out of couples events, and inadvertently ostracized from circles of lifelong friends. If the widow has older children, brothers and sisters or even parents still alive, they would usually step in to help, but since the church is considered family too, when one of our own is hurting, we need to step up and step in with practical assistance, wherever we see that need. We must not be like those spoken about in I JN 3:16-18 , whose unwillingness to actually do something tangible makes a mockery of their profession of faith, and shows that God's love is not in them.

I Timothy 5:5, 9-17

Paul, in I Timothy 5:5,9-17, puts an interesting slant on the idea of the church and caring for widows. We do not have to develop the whole chapter here, but Paul focuses on discernment in vv. 2-9, for the church to enter the picture as benefactor if a widow is truly in distress. If the widow has a grown family, they need to step up and (v. 4) "make some return to their parents...", but if a widow is alone, (v. 2) "honor them" and v. 5 – "She who is truly a widow has set her hope on God...prayers..." for this woman the church needs to help in any way they can, as the answer to her prayers to God on behalf of God.

Paul also notes that the age of the widow needs to be a factor considered, as younger widows (v. 14-15) should be encouraged to remarry and have children; but note his overall point in v. 16 – blood relatives should care for their own families so that "*the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows.*"

Perhaps this is not as big a problem in today's church where people tend to live longer, but in the early church, it was a big deal. In Acts 6:1-6, widows who felt they were being left out of the physical blessings of the church created the need for the leaders to appoint deacons who would deal with their physical needs, so that the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and preaching.

So far, we have looked exclusively at widows, but James also mentions orphans, those who have lost one or both parents. Note Deut. 10:17-19, and see the emphasis on God's care for such people as these. This is perhaps why James mentions the Father in v. 27, because He cares, so we should too, as ambassadors for Him here on earth.

According to Daniel Doriani;

"Care for orphans and widows is essential to true religion for several reasons. Above all, kindness to them is pure kindness. It is mercy for the sake of mercy, because those who help widows and orphans cannot expect to receive anything tangible in return. Widows and orphans are likely to be poor for a long time."

He adds,

“God does not love the poor more because of their poverty, nor does He love the poor more than the rich. But the rich have the resources to take care of most physical needs. The godly cry to God, for they have no other hope, and He hears them.”^{xiv}

Keeping Oneself Unstained by the World James 1:27b

This is James’s third point in identifying pure and undefiled religion and it’s a personal challenge to us all. This point alone could result in a book to flesh it out fully, but I am attempting to be brief and to the point. Al Mohler, in one of his “Briefings” on the radio, on April 15, 2014, said as the summary of his point that, “Nominal faith is not faith.” Professions of faith are cheap and worthless. Dr. Mohler’s point was to challenge a poll report that claimed the divorce rate is higher among those who claim faith than the secular world. But he argues that those who attend church a couple of times a month cannot really be called Christians in the true Biblical sense, yet that is who this unfiltered poll indicated were real Christians and people of faith!

James will hit this point in detail and with illustrations throughout the rest of this epistle, showing the reader how to remain unstained by the world. John MacArthur’s sermon entitled, “Sanctification and Sin”^{xv}, makes a brilliant yet simple point that I had never considered the way he expresses it, and I believe it applies here, because he is really referring to sanctification in exhortation form;

“Sanctification is a work done in your **thought** life.” Further into the sermon, he quotes John Owen; “Sin is not subdued; when it is repressed; when it is treated with indifference; when it is exchanged for what is conceived to be a lesser sin. It is only subdued when the conscience is silent and stops accusing.”

Notice James’s strong words in [4:4](#); and also take note of Eph. 2:2; Col. 2:8; Titus 2:12; II Pet. 1:4 & I JN 2:14-15.

“Physically, we dwell in the world, but morally, we keep our distance. We test all things and hold fast to what is good (I Thess. 5:21). Thus, true religion remains undefiled.”^{xvi}

ⁱ Kevin DeYoung, Taking God At His Word, Crossway Books, 2014, p. 78

ⁱⁱ Brian Vickers, Justification by Grace Through Faith, P & R, 2013, p. 164

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel M. Doriani, James, Reformed Expository Commentary, P & R, 2007, pg. 51

^{iv} IBID, p. 52

^v Thomas R. Schreiner, Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary NT, Baker Books, 1998 / reprint 2003; pp. 326-327

^{vi} John Piper, from his sermon on Romans 2:22-24; The Greatest Thing in the World, 1/9/01

^{vii} Phil. 2:12; 4:1; Matt. 24:13; JN 8:31; Acts 11:23; 14:22; I Cor. 15:2,58; Gal. 6:9; Eph. 6:18; I Thess. 3:8; II Tim. 2:12; Heb. 2:1; 6:11-12; 12:13-14; II Pet. 1:10; 3:17-18; Rev. 2:7,10,17,25; 3:5,11,21; 14:12; 21:7; 22:11.

^{viii} See such verses as MT 10:37-39; 12:30; 7:21-23; 25:41-46; LK 12:8-10; 14:25-33, etc.

^{ix} Thomas R. Schreiner & Ardel Caneday, The Race Set Before Us, IVP, 2001, pg. 96

^x Doriani, pp. 57-58

^{xi} R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith That Works, p. 80

^{xii} R. Kent Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man, Crossway, 1991, reprint 2001, p. 142 – emphases and ellipsis in original quote

^{xiii} This is John MacArthur’s take on this passage as preached in his sermon on this passage in Luke, which can be accessed on gty.org

^{xiv} Doriani, pg. 59

^{xv} John MacArthur, Sanctification & Sin, CD, GTY

^{xvi} Doriani, pg. 60