

“PURE RELIGION”

Intro: We have come in our study of the Epistle of James to the last two verses of chapter 1. In these verses James made use of the words, “religious” and “religion.” The only other time that we find this particular word in Scripture, is in Acts 26:5 when the Apostle Paul was defending himself before King Agrippa. The word “religion” in English is found in Galatians 1:13, 14, but it is a different word in the Greek text. In those verses it would bear the translation, *Judaism*. But, in our text in James, he was using the word which referred to the outward manifestation, or performance, of the way in which a person demonstrates his relationship, as well as his service, to God. It can be “pure,” or it can be *impure* or *defiled*. It can be a true expression of a person’s relationship with God, or it can be just a show. If it is just an outward performance without an expression of a person’s inner relationship to God, it is hypocrisy. This is what it was with the Pharisees. With Paul before he became a Christian, it was sincere, but he was sincerely wrong. He described it himself as what he was doing “ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13).

Here in the Epistle of James we have the only place in the NT where the words “religiously” and “religion” are used for true Christian living. Evidently those Jews who were saved did not use it for their relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ because it spoke to them of a relationship to God that was based upon works. But James’ use of the word is one reason many NT scholars believe that his epistle was written early rather than late in the history of the church. But James is emphasizing the “pure religion” must be inward as well as outward, that is, it must come from the heart, and that if it does, it will be seen in the way a Christian lives as well as in the way a Christian serves the Lord. That is the reason that James wrote in chapter 1, verse 27 that if a Christian’s religion is to be “pure and undefiled” it must be “before God and the Father.” A true child of God is primarily concerned that his life and his service are pleasing to God, are the way God intended that they should be.

My Pastor, when I was growing up, said that “religion” was not a good word to use when speaking of the Christian faith. He said that it was a word which belonged to the religions of the world which all are concerned more about works. I have always appreciated his emphasis, but I have also learned that there is a good and proper use of the word “religion” and “religious” if it retains the idea of a person’s heart being expressed in his daily life. But I prefer to follow what my Pastor taught, and what the NT certainly emphasizes, that it is not the right word to use for a Christian’s relationship with God. And it is primarily a true relationship with God, inwardly and outwardly, that is James’ reason for writing to his Jewish brethren in Christ. And what is important for Jewish Christians, is just as important for Gentile Christians, which is what we are.

“Pure religion,” then, is that which is “pure and undefiled.” “Pure” is the positive word; “undefiled” is the negative. “Pure” here means all that God intended that our relationship with Him should be; “undefiled” means free from anything that would be displeasing to God, such as it will be if we are concerned about our outward performance, but give little or no attention to the condition of our hearts. We are inclined to think more about the outward because that is what people see. But God is the only One Who can make us truly pleasing to Himself in our hearts. The Lord told Samuel that “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). It is not that the Lord doesn’t look on our outward appearance, but He starts with the heart. Many of the Jews of the OT had it exactly the opposite way. The Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, said this about the people of Israel, “. . . this people draw near Me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor Me, but have removed their heart far from Me, and their fear of Me is taught by the precept of men” (Isa. 29:13). That is what James was telling his Jewish brethren that we all need to avoid.

Now the question is, “What is ‘pure religion’? How do we keep our relationship to God ‘pure’?” To answer that question, let us go back over what James has been saying here in chapter 1 which has led up to verses 26

and 27.

1) We need to have a true understanding of the Gospel and our salvation. See James 1:17-18.

Salvation is a gift. Everything about it is a gift, even our faith. Cf. Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 12:2. See also Titus 3:5-8. We work *from* salvation, not up to it.

2) We need to become those who are “swift to hear” (Jas. 1:19). And from what James went on to say, it is clear that in this verse he is talking about *hearing the Word of God*. We are to be reading the Word of God for ourselves. We need to hear it as others read it, or teach it. We are to believe what we read. It is to be received with meekness (v. 21). We are to be humbled by it, and to be submissive to it (v. 21). The Lord implants the Word in the hearts of those who really know Him. If a person claims to be a Christian, but he or she has no real desire to read the Word and to learn from the Word, that person probably has not yet become a Christian. The Apostle Peter told generally the same people to whom James wrote what their attitude should be toward the Word.

There are great doctrines to be learned from the Word of God, doctrines about the Bible itself, doctrines about God, about Christ, about the Holy Spirit, about ourselves (the Bible is a mirror), about sin (we learn about sin from the Bible, not by experiencing sin), about sanctification, about glorification, about serving the Lord.

The only way we can become discerning about the teaching we can hear from different groups, is by becoming familiar with the Bible for ourselves. This takes time. It is easy to get in with the wrong group. I am always concerned about that when I hear that someone has been saved, or has professed to be saved.

But there is another word here in James 1 that we need to pay attention to. It is in verse 25:

3) A true believer will *continue* in the Word. This means not only that he or she will live by the Word to begin with, but that a true believer continues to read, continues to grow, continues to obey. Many start out fine, but they soon fall by the wayside. Why? It is usually because they have not truly been saved. **Illus:** What Jonathan Edwards learned following the Great Awakening back in the 1740's. Many ministers and church people became critical of the Awakening itself. Others were given to emotionalism and considered that the real evidence of salvation. See what we learn from the parable of the sower in Matthew 13.

I met a young woman yesterday. She was from Roumania. She was a nurse, and very intelligent to talk to. She was married and had one child. I am sure that she was a good wife and a good mother. But when she found out that I was a pastor, she opened up and talked to me about herself. She had been raised as a Catholic, but at the present time wasn't going to a Catholic church, or any other church, but she said that she knew that she needed to settle down in some church. But she went on to say that her main reason for going to church was to worship God, and that it didn't make any difference what kind of a church it was, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and so on, because she could worship God in any church. Now what was she telling me? She was telling me that doctrine is not important. She was telling me that she did not understand what worship is. But I am afraid that she was telling me unintentionally that she really was not a Christian.

Churches today are neglecting the teaching of the Word, and so there are hundreds of people in our churches, attracted by music, or by the crowds that go to certain churches, by preachers who are careful not to offend anyone by talking about sin, but who want to make people feel good about themselves. But the Gospel is not being preached, and people are being attracted to certain preachers and their churches, *but I am afraid that in most instances it is not to Christ!*

But let me mention three other ways that James said that we can identify one in whom there has been a true, saving work of God.

You see the first of these three in verse 26.

4) A true Christian can be identified by the way he uses his tongue. Notice how James emphasizes things that we need to do to ourselves, and for ourselves. We can only do what we need to do as God works in our hearts by the power of the Word of God which the Holy Spirit uses in our lives. But we have definite responsibilities before God concerning our lives.

Anybody who does not bridle his tongue, even though he professes to be “religious,” James says that he is self-deceived, and that “this man’s religion is vain.” James used the same word “bridle” in 3:2. We start with the tongue, but the whole body needs to be bridled. Our minds, our eyes, our ears, our hands, our feet – every part of our bodies need to be bridled, but interestingly we begin with the tongue. But notice that both the tongue and the heart are mentioned in this verse.

What is a bridle? It is the headgear that you put on horses or mules to restrain them, and to make them go where you want them to go. It is essential training for these animals, and also in controlling them after they are trained.

Of course we know that a Christian is not going to take the Name of the Lord in vain. But I have heard professing Christians to do take the Name of the Lord in vain. They will say, “O my God,” or “Good Lord.” You can hear it all of the time on TV and radio. But there is more to what James is saying here than a reference to profanity. When people talk all of the time about themselves, rather than about Christ. Or when they tell you about some book that they are reading, instead of telling you what they recently read in the Bible. These are things that we need to be on the lookout with ourselves as well as with others. Dirty jokes, or suggestive comments, are often made by a person who claims to be a Christian. But his speech contradicts his claim to be a Christian.

But let us move on to verse 27.

5) Again we come to a positive and a negative. We will come to the negative as the last of what James has mentioned in this verse.

“To visit the fatherless and widows” – Probably the primary emphasis here has to do with “fatherless” and “widows” in the church. That, at least, would be the starting place. But it has to do with those who have been left as such by death. The visiting that is referred to has to do with continuous visiting, not just a one time event. A mark of true Christians is that they are concerned for each other, always on the lookout for an opportunity to help someone in need, to be a spiritual blessing to them. Our generation is very much an I, me, and mine generation. Christ was always mindful of the needs of others, and, if we know Him and are walking in fellowship with Him, that will be our concern too.

The negative side remains:

6) “To keep himself unspotted from the world” (v. 27). Every believer needs to be constantly aware of the world’s warfare against a holy life. The Apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 1:19 that our Lord was “without spot,” meaning He was perfect in holiness, never contaminated by the world. And so if we are keep ourselves “unspotted from the world,” James meant that we are to always seek to be like Christ.

Concl: As we can all see, this is not the end of the epistle. James has much more to say. And after he has said all that the Spirit of God directed him to say, there is more that other writers of Scripture have said. We will never attain it all until we are with the Lord, but we must continue in the Word, in prayer, and in obedience to the commandments of Scripture. James in this passage calls it “the perfect law of liberty” (1:25). “Perfect” means that it is complete in itself. We do not need anything beyond the Word to enable us to attain and maintain “pure religion.” It is a “law” (not speaking only of the Mosaic law, but of all the Word of God) because we are under an obligation to obey His Word. And it is “liberty” because there is freedom to be found in obeying the Lord, freedom from being dominated by sin, and free to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord.