



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

So You Think You're Religious?

James 1:26-27

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Introduction

1. Derek Tidball has observed, "Authentic Christian religion . . . is a far cry from contemporary popular understandings, or rather misunderstandings of religion."¹
2. As that statement stands, most of us probably agree. Even if we cannot cite specific numbers, we know of trends like those reported by the Barna Research Group in 2006.²
 - a. Of the 76 million adults who had not attended any type of church service or activity in the six months preceding the report, 62% considered themselves Christian.
 - b. Three out of four of those (77%) "contend[ed] that they are either absolutely or moderately committed to the Christian faith."
 - c. Nearly two-thirds of them (62%) prayed and one-fifth (20%) were Bible readers.
 - d. "Interestingly, nearly one-quarter of the unchurched (23%) [said] that a person's faith in God is meant to be developed mainly through involvement in a local church."
3. Tidball was right: authentic Christian religion is far from current popular understandings.
4. But, before getting too involved in critiquing others, we should ask what authentic religion is. James's definition in 1:26-27 may surprise some regular churchgoers.

Body

I. Keeping Our Faith in Focus.³

A. Both parts of the instruction in 1:26-27 are rooted in Old Testament thought.

¹ Derek Tidball, *Wisdom From Heaven: The Message of the Letter of James for Today*, 93.

² "Spirituality May Be Hot in America, But 76 Million Adults Never Attend Church," March 20, 2006. <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/158-spirituality-may-be-hot-in-america-but-76-million-adults-never-attend-church> Accessed May 6, 2011.

³ James 1:26-27 is part James's emphasis on the poor, explicitly referenced in 1:9-11; 2:5-7; and 5:1-6. Making the "lowly" equal to the "poor" (1:9-10) followed Jewish writings, adding significance to his later call to refrain from worldliness in favor of humility (4:6, 10). The illustration that introduces the section on faith and works also adds to his emphasis (2:14-16).

1. Jewish teaching said that a wise person understood that “silence was generally better, and always safer, than speech.”⁴ (Cf. Prov. 10:19; 26:20).
 2. The same teaching consistently emphasized God’s concern for orphans and widows as the exemplars of the needy and dispossessed in those societies (cf. Deut. 10:18; 24:19; Psa. 146:9; Jer. 7:6; Zech. 7:10).
- B. James’s positive focus in 1:26-27 – on caring for the dispossessed and remaining pure – is also the emphasis of several prophetic texts, e.g., Isaiah 1:11-17.
- II. James’s Definition of True Religion.
- A. James should not be read to say that this is the only part of religion that is important.
1. The rituals in Isaiah 1 had been given by God; Israel thought rite equaled right.
 2. After 1:26-27, James turns to an “assembly” problem (2:2); he doesn’t condemn it, but rather condemns the behavior taking place during it (cf. Acts 21:21-26).⁵
 3. Like Isaiah, James calls for the kind of faith that goes beyond the ritual.
- B. Verse 26 teaches what should not be part of the religion of active faith.
1. We first learn that we can be fooled about real religion – “if anyone thinks he is religious...” (Εἰ τις δοκεῖ θρησκὸς εἶναι, *Ei tis dokei thrēskos einai*).
 2. Next, fleshing out the command in 1:19 to be “slow to speak,” James declares that “a prime requirement of faithful behavior is control of the tongue.”⁶
 3. A “bridle” (see 3:2) had the bit in a horse’s mouth, designed to control its direction; so, James writes about controlling the direction of our lives.
 4. But, he does not write what we might expect.
 - a) Not: “if you don’t bridle your tongue, then you are deceiving yourself” (*contra* the sense of the NIV, NLT).
 - b) But: “if you do not bridle your tongue, but instead deceive yourself, then your religion is worthless” (cf. KJV, NKJV, ASV, ESV, NASB, NRSV).
 - c) Failure to bridle the tongue is placed parallel with self-deception.
 5. How serious is this failure? “this person’s religion is worthless” (ESV).
 - a) “Worthless” (μάταιος, *mataios*) “pert.[ains] to being of no use, idle, empty, fruitless, useless, powerless, lacking truth.”⁷
 - b) But it’s worse still, for here James “is echoing the judgment of Jeremiah (2:5; 8:19; 10:15; 51:18 [28:18 LXX]) against idolatrous religion. In James’s eyes, uncontrolled speech and self-deception put a person’s religion in the same class as idolatry” (McCartney, 128).
- C. James next turns to “religion that is pure and undefiled,” a figure (hendiadys) using two words to express the same thing.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, “Taciturnity and True Religion: James 1:26-27,” in *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*, 155.

⁵ In Acts 21, James recommended that Paul sponsor the four men who were taking a vow, an act that included going into the temple with them for the appropriate rituals.

⁶ Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 128.

⁷ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 621. [BDAG]

1. The words “[derive] from ritual worship but [he] applies it to moral purity.”⁸
2. The purity is “free of adulterating matter” (καθαρός, *katharos* in BDAG).
3. It is “pure and undefiled in the sight of our God and Father”⁹ (NASB) because it imitates his concern for the orphans and widows and all who are in the same category (cf. Psalms 68:5; also 10:14, 18; Sirach 4:10).
4. The test of this religion is whether it cares for widows and orphans (who stand for all who are dispossessed; see Blomberg & Kamell, 94).
 - a) “Visit” (ἐπισκέπτομαι, *episkeptomai*) is better translated “care for” (NRSV) or “look after” (NIV).¹⁰
 - b) 2:14-26 provide commentary. “Given James’s concern that people do things for the needy rather than just say things to them (2:16), it is unlikely that James has only visitation or an intellectual interest in mind here” (McCartney, 129).
 - c) This is brought out by their condition – in distress (θλίψις, *thlipsis*), the social and economic suffering of people who (in patriarchal societies) were without, and thus were at the bottom level of society.
5. Beyond this, they were “to keep [themselves] unstained from the world.”
 - a) This phrase must be understood in light of other uses of “world” (κόσμος, *kosmos*) in James, especially 3:6 and 4:4 (cf. 2:5) where “it signifies the human environment standing in opposition to God” (McCartney, 129)
 - b) While “worldly behavior” would certainly be included, James’s point is larger: pure religion resists the worldview and value system of a world that overlooks or oppresses the likes of widows and orphans.
 - c) In other words, we are to resist the implicit idolatries that put something else on the throne with or instead of God (cf. Matt. 6:24).

III. What It Means.

- A. If we have only begun to unpack the implications of these verses, we need only wait, for the rest of the epistle develops these three themes: wise use of speech, integrity in social responsibility, and a refusal to be friends with the world (see McCartney, 127).
- B. The specific reference to those who stand in biblical literature for the world’s needy and dispossessed suggests two issues of particular timeliness.
 1. Since we live in societies with governmental programs the ancients never envisioned, can we relax and in effect let our efforts supplement the state’s?
 - a) The problem has clearly not been completely resolved.
 - b) Furthermore, while well-intentioned people can debate the proper role of civil government, Scripture’s consistent witness is that, as God’s people, we are called to God-imitating action regardless of the state’s action or inaction.

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 94.

⁹ Both the KJV and NKJV translate the phrase, “before God and the Father,” suggesting the possibility that James is making some kind of distinction between the two. Even if the English article is used in the interest of a literal translation of the phrase, it would be “the God and Father” (τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρί, *tō theō kai patri*). Grammatically, however, the phrase is best translated as in the NASB (see above; also ASV), or perhaps as in the ESV, NRSV – “God, the Father.” See the discussions of the grammar and other issues in McCartney, 128, 130; and Blomberg & Kamell, 94.

¹⁰ See the various definitions and discussion in BDAG; also the elaboration in McCartney, 129.

Old covenant Israel was a geographical and ethnic theocracy; new covenant Israel is not.

2. But how can we possibly solve the problem? There's simply too much distress.
 - a) Derek Tidball's counsel is wise: "We should not berate ourselves if we cannot do everything. But we can quietly start somewhere. As churches we might identify one issue or one group of vulnerable people where we can do something to make a difference" (Tidball, 90-91).

Conclusion

1. As we think about that, consider this: James sounds much like Jesus when he depicted the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46, declaring that our eternal destiny is determined by our faithfulness to look after (the same word as in James 1:27) the sojourner, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned (Matt. 25:36, 43).
2. We've heard that so often it may have lost its force. Consider, then, this poem, handed in to the office of a homeless shelter:

I was hungry, and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger.
I was imprisoned, and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.
I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance,
I was sick, and you left me alone to pray for me.
[Y]ou seem so holy, so close to God [b]ut I am still very hungry – and lonely – and cold.¹¹

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¹¹ In Tidball, 94].