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# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

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## So, You Think You're Religious?

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Derek Tidball observed, “Authentic Christian religion ... is a far cry from contemporary popular understandings, or rather misunderstandings of religion” (Tidball 2003, 93). Many of us would agree. Even if we cannot point to specific numbers, we are probably anecdotally aware of trends like those [documented](#) by the Barna Research Group in 2006. Of the 76 million adults who had not attended any type of church service or activity in the previous six months, 62 percent considered themselves Christian; 77 percent of that number said they were either absolutely or moderately committed Christians; 62 percent of them said they prayed; and 20 percent said they were Bible readers (Barna Group 2023). So, Tidball was correct: authentic Christian religion does not match some current understandings. But before we get too involved in critiquing others, we should ask what authentic religion should be. James 1.26–27 should be a primary source for forming our response.

### Defining True Religion

Both aspects of what James says in these verses are rooted in Jewish teaching that said: (1) a wise person understands that “silence was generally better, and always safer than speech” (Johnson 2004, 155); and (2) God is especially concerned for orphans and widows as exemplars of the world’s dispossessed and needy (cf. Deut 10.18; 24.19; Ps 146.9; Isa 1.10–17; Jer 7.6; Zech 7.10).

I would stipulate that neither the Jewish tradition nor James should be interpreted to say that the matters mentioned are *all* that is involved in authentic religion. Isaiah 1.10–17, for example, rebukes the people for not bringing justice to the fatherless and widows (v. 17), calling them to account for thinking that observance of rituals was sufficient for faithfulness to their covenant with God. But it is incorrect to say that Isaiah was against rituals. In fact, he mentioned rituals that had been ordained by God. The problem was not that Israel participated in temple rites that included offering animal sacrifices and Sabbath observances, but that they acted as if the rites were the sum total of honoring God. (One of my teachers summarized the prophetic position as follows: “Rite without right is wrong.”)

Similarly, after his admonition in 1.26–27, James moves immediately to a problem in their assemblies—it’s good to remember that the chapter-verse division was added later and is arbitrary—where his opposition is not to the assembly itself, but to the discriminatory behavior of those assembled (2.1–13). It is also worth noting that to forestall critics in Jerusalem, James counseled Paul to sponsor the four men taking a vow and join them in that temple ritual (Acts 21.21–26).

In defining pure and undefiled religion, he first addresses what it is not, beginning with the possibility of being fooled about its nature: “If anyone thinks he is religious ...” (Εἴ τις δοκεῖ θρησκὸς εἶναι; *Ei tis dokei thrēskos einai*). He then expands on verse 19’s command to be “slow to speak,” declaring that “a prime requirement of faithful behavior is control of the tongue” (McCartney 2009, 128), a topic to which he returns in chapter 3.

Notice the contrast he presents: “If anyone ... does not bridle his tongue *but* [ἀλλ’; *all*] deceives his heart, ...” This is not the if-then statement we might expect, but one which places control of the tongue parallel to self-deception. As McCartney observes:

James puts “not controlling the tongue” and “deceiving the heart” in parallel, both as evidence for the vanity of such a person’s religion, perhaps because deceiving the heart is a verbal activity.... An unbridled tongue can deceive even the tongue’s owner. Self-deceit, then, is a corollary to failure to control the tongue, just as in 1:22 it is the corollary to being a hearer only. Speaking and not doing is the complement to hearing and not doing (cf. 2:16) (McCartney 2009, 128).

Although both a lack of tongue control and self-deception stem from passive decisions, James is firm that the one who is guilty of either is accountable. We should take seriously his admonition and characterization of the result of the failures. We can be among the most overtly religious people in the world, but if we do not learn to control our tongues or honestly assess ourselves, that religion is worthless. The word *worthless* (μάταιος; *mataios*) “pert.[ains] to being of no use, idle, empty, fruitless, useless, powerless, lacking truth” (Bauer 2000, 621). In using it, 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 2009, 128).

Having established what true religion is not, James turns to what it should be (v. 27). He employs a hendiadys, the use of two words to express the same idea. The words *pure* (καθαρός;

*katharos*) and *undefiled* (ἀμίαντος; *amiantos*) are “derive[d] from ritual worship but are applied by James to moral purity” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 94). To be *katharos* is to be “free from adulterating matter” (Bauer 2000, 489); to be *amiantos* is to be “untainted” (Louw & Nida 1989, 537). The untainted religion in view is pure and undefiled “before God the Father” because it proactively imitates his intentional concern for orphans and widows, who stand for all who are dispossessed (cf. Ps 10.14; 68.5; Sirach 4.10).

But the test is not complete upon acknowledgment of the needs of the downtrodden (cf. Jas 2.14–17). True religion is active, as expressed in the verb *visit* (ἐπισκέπτομαι; *episkeptomai*), better translated “care for” (NRSV) or “look after” (NIV). As McCartney writes, “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 2009, 129). This is important because of the “affliction” (θλίψις; *thlipsis*) of the groups, the social and economic distress of people who, because they are without, are at the lowest level of a class-segregated society.

Beyond active care for the poor, authentic religion is also concerned “to keep oneself unstained [ἄσπιλος; *aspilos*] from the world” (Jas 1.27). James’s intent here must be understood in light of other uses of the word *world* (κόσμος; *kosmos*) in the letter, especially in 3.6 and 4.4 where “it signifies the human environment standing in opposition to God” (McCartney 2009, 129). While this would certainly include “worldly behavior,” the point encompasses more: pure and undefiled religion resists the worldviews and value systems of a world that overlooks or oppresses widows, orphans, and other outcasts. In other words, we are to resist the idolatries, both overt and implicit, that put someone or something else on the throne with or instead of God (cf. Matt 6.24).

## Considering One Matter of Practice

The biblical emphasis on active care for the world’s needy challenges us to address a problem that is not going away. We should especially think about what it means to act in societies with governmental programs the ancients never envisioned. Can we let social programs take care of the problem or at least let our efforts supplement the state’s? While well-intentioned people can debate the proper role of a civil government in responding to the needs of its citizens, we should take note of Scripture’s consistent witness that, as his people, we are called to God-imitating action regardless of the state’s involvement or neglect. We should also reflect on the implications of the fact that, while old-covenant Israel was a geographical and ethnic theocracy, new-covenant Israel is not.

That said, how can we possibly resolve the problem? There’s simply too much distress. 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 2003, 90-91).

As you think about that, think also about 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 used in James 1.27) the sojourner, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matt 25.36, 43). We may have heard that text so often that it has 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.  
you seem so holy, so close to God.  
But I am still very hungry—and lonely—and cold (Tidball 2003, 94; quoted from John Stott).

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