



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Worthless Religion: Lessons from Sacred History

James

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### Introduction

1. We have seen that James assumes and applies the Jewish understanding which emphasized that the one and only God is:
  - a. “*creational* (it was Yahweh who created the world),
  - b. “*covenantal* (it was Yahweh who had given the promises)
  - c. “and *providential* (it was Yahweh who was directing the course of history), . . .”<sup>1</sup>
2. We have also seen that James is calling people who profess faith in God to fully submit to him and not be friends with the world (thus at enmity with God) (Jas. 4:4-8).
3. If we know anything about the way the Jews of the second temple period understood and talked about the Old Testament and its view of God, we will not be surprised to find James challenging his readers to avoid empty (vain) views of and approaches to God, i.e., idolatry.
  - a. The connection is in James 4:4’s reference to “adulteresses” (μοιχαλίδες, *moichalides*).
  - b. Prophets dealing especially with the fall and captivity of Israel and Judah frequently used that figure to refer to the people’s apostasy (Jer. 3:8-9; 5:7; 7:9; 9:2; 13:27; 23:10, 14; 29:23; Ezek. 16:32, 38; 23:37, 43, 45; Hos. 2:2; 3:1; 4:2, 13, 14; 7:4).
4. James’s use of “worthless” (μάταιος, *mataios*) in 1:26 also echoes the Old Testament’s emphasis on the problem of elevating lesser things to stand alongside of or replace God.

### Body

- I. “Worthless” Defined and Illustrated in the Old Testament.
  - A. Μάταιος (*mataios*) “pert[ains] to being of no use, idle, empty.”<sup>2</sup>
    1. That meaning leads to the word being used often in biblical literature to refer “to a senseless understanding of reality in contrast to the only valid reality of God. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> C. C. Newman, “God,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 413. Emphasis mine.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> H. Balz, “μάταιος,” in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1990), 396.

2. It is used as a synonym for “sin,” “breath of wind,” “nothingness,” “illusion,” “futility,” “lies,” etc. (Balz).
  3. The most concentrated use of the word — 38x in the Hebrew (הֶבֶל, *hebel*), 39x in the LXX (μάταιος) — is in Ecclesiastes where it describes life “under the sun” (28x in ESV; see also “under heaven,” 3x in ESV) (e.g., Eccl. 1:2, 14).
- B. It was used in all parts of the Old Testament for the idolatry that plagued Israel.
1. The LXX used μάταιος in the third commandment (itself a natural progression from the prohibition of idolatry in the first two commands) (Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11).
  2. It was used as part of the reference to the practices of Jeroboam I (2 Chron. 11:15) and of those who pursued the direction he charted, some of the most evil kings of Israel: Baasha (1 Kings 16:2, 13), Elah (16:13), and Omri, father of Ahab (16:26).
  3. It appears in v 4 of Psalm 24 which declares that the earth is the LORD’s.
  4. It was used by the prophets who denounced idolatry in Israel (Hos. 5:11; 12:1; Amos 2:4), Judah (Isa. 1:13; 44:9; Mic. 1:14), and among the exiles (Zech. 10:2).
- C. Especially noteworthy is its appearance in Jeremiah (2:15; 8:19; 10:3, 15; 28:18 [LXX 51:18]) and Ezekiel (8:10; 11:2; 13:7-9, 19; 21:29 [LXX 21:34]; 22:28).
1. Both were concerned with Judah around the time of the fall and captivity.
  2. Both made repeated use of the adultery figure for the nation’s idolatry (see above).
  3. In light of their use, it is enlightening to compare the way μάταιος was used in the description and explanation of the captivity in 2 Kings 17:6-23.
    - a) See especially v. 15, where two forms of הֶבֶל / μάταιος appear.
    - b) NET translates the key phrase, “They paid allegiance to *worthless idols*, and so became *worthless*. . . .”<sup>4</sup>

## II. Worthless Religion Illuminated.

- A. As we return to James, keep in mind that he demonstrates throughout his writing that his thinking had been completely immersed in Scripture; he “thought Bible.”
- B. It is hard to even imagine that James could have used the word “worthless” without thinking of its Old Testament connection to living for the wrong god/priority.
1. Think of the connection in the prophets between idolatry and immoral living, and especially the Israelites’ failure to practice justice for the orphans, widows, and poor among them (see especially Isa. 1:13; 2:20 [μάταιος is used in both verses] in the context of the first two chapters, particularly 1:10-17).<sup>5</sup>
- C. Notice just two things of importance for us.

<sup>4</sup> NET translators also add this helpful note: “17:15 tn Heb ‘They went [or, ‘followed’] after.’ This idiom probably does not mean much if translated literally. It is found most often in Deuteronomy or in literature related to the covenant. It refers in the first instance to loyalty to God and to His covenant or His commandments (1 Kgs 14:8; 2 Chr 34:31) with the metaphor of a path or way underlying it (Deut 11:28; 28:14). To ‘follow other gods’ was to abandon this way and this loyalty (to ‘abandon’ or ‘forget’ God, Judg 2:12; Hos 2:13) and to follow the customs or religious traditions of the pagan nations (2 Kgs 17:15). The classic text on ‘following’ God or another god is 1 Kgs 18:18, 21 where Elijah taunts the people with ‘halting between two opinions’ whether the Lord was the true God or Baal was. The idiom is often found followed by ‘to serve and to worship’ or ‘they served and worshiped’ such and such a god or entity (Jer 8:2; 11:10; 13:10; 16:11; 25:6; 35:15).”

<sup>5</sup> Notice also the word’s use in Amos 2:4 in light of the context that book generally and 2:6-8 in particular.

1. A “religion” that treats lightly moral living and active care<sup>6</sup> for those for whom God especially cares (cf. Psa. 10:2, 8, 10-14, 18) is put in the same category of vain religion as Israel’s idolatry, no matter how frequent and fervent our coming together (cf. Jer. 7:3, 4; Mic. 6:6-8).
2. The way to guard against such an abuse of “religion” is to follow James in keeping our focus on *God*, especially his activity in creation, providence, and covenant.

### *Conclusion*

1. Psalm 24:1-6 is about glorifying and serving the one and only God.
2. It states and implies some probing questions: “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? . . . [Who] will receive a blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation[?]” (vv. 3, 5).
3. The answers depend on avoiding worthless religion: “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who *does not lift up his soul to what is false* [μᾶταιος] and does not swear deceitfully” (v. 4). Let us always be committed to *worthwhile* religion.

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<sup>6</sup> See the word ἐπισκέπτομαι (*episkeptomai*) in Jas. 1:27; “care for” (NET) is a better translation of the word for modern readers than “visit” (ESV, et. al.).