



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Worthless Religion: Practices That Lead Nowhere

James

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Introduction

1. At the heart of James is the expectation that followers of “the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1; 2:1) will live so as to be God’s friends, not his enemies (2:23; 4:4).
2. We have seen that, as he exhorts his readers toward that goal, James:
 - a. Mentions God’s name and titles no fewer than 27 times.
 - b. Applies the Old Testament understanding of God as the creator who seeks covenant with his chosen people and providentially cares for them.
 - c. Includes echoes of OT references to Israel’s idolatry and subsequent unrighteous practices that could not be overcome by ritual devotion (cf. Isa. 1:2-31; Jer. 8:18-9:9).¹
3. In part 1, we noted James’s use of “worthless” (μάταιος, *mataios*) in 1:26, including:
 - a. Its meaning: “to be of no use, idle, empty.”²
 - b. A summary of its use in biblical writings to refer “to a senseless understanding of reality in contrast to the only valid reality of God. . . .”³
 - c. Multiple examples of the word’s use throughout the Old Testament, especially in showing the “under the sun” perspective in Ecclesiastes (38x) and its use in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.
 - d. How 2 Kings 17:15 summarized Judah’s demise: “They paid allegiance to *worthless* idols, and so became *worthless*. . . .” (NET).
4. In today’s study, we will review the primary idea from James that we noted in light of these things and notice the other New Testament references that use μάταιος (*mataios*).⁴

¹ Notice the practical themes found in James that appear in these representative prophetic texts: e.g., a concern for the poor and mistreated versus too much concern for prosperity, slanderous speech, and acrimony between brothers. At the heart of Israel’s unrighteousness was allegiance to vain, empty gods (Isa. 1:3-4, 21, 29; Jer. 8:19; 9:2).

² 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.

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

⁴ I am focusing only on the adjective μάταιος, the form used in James 1:26. Other forms appear in the New Testament in passages that have essentially the same emphasis we have seen in part 1 and will see in the passages we will study below. For the noun, ματαιότης, see Rom. 8:20; Eph. 4:17; 2 Pet. 2:18. For the verb, ματαιώω, see Rom. 1:21.

Body

I. Worthless Religion Illuminated: Review.

- A. A “religion” that treats lightly moral living and active care for those for whom God especially cares (cf. *Psa.* 10:2, 8, 10-14, 18) is put in the same category as Israel’s idolatry.
- B. 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.

II. Examples of Worthless Religion: Surveying New Testament Texts.

- A. Besides James 1:26, *μάταιος* (*mataios*) is used just five other times in the NT.
- B. Two are in contexts calling people away from idolatry (*Acts* 14:15) or reminding believers what they had left behind (*1 Pet.* 1:18).
- C. Two are in *1 Corinthians*, amounting to warnings against implied idolatry.
 - 1. 3:20 quotes *Psalm* 94:11 and rounds off Paul’s two-plus chapter exposure of the human wisdom with which the Corinthians were so enamored, a consequence of their Greek background (cf. *1 Cor.* 1:17, 19-22, 24-27, 30; 2:1, 4-7, 13; 3:18-20).
 - 2. 15:17 uses it to describe how “futile” faith is if Christ has not been raised.
 - a) 15:19 provides commentary on one important reason for this futility.
 - b) But, the background of Greek thought is again significant: many Greeks had a view of an afterlife; what they had trouble understanding was a bodily resurrection. 15:17 undercuts their view as “futile.”
- D. In light of the general use of the word in both testaments, the fifth New Testament text raises some interesting questions about futile religion.
 - 1. *Titus* 3:9 — “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and *worthless*” (*μάταιος*, *mataios*).
 - 2. The context helps us understand Paul’s point.
 - a) 3:1-3 amount to a reminder of and call to live consistently with conversion.
 - b) 3:4-7 underscore that we are able to enjoy new life because we have responded to God’s grace “poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (v. 6).
 - c) 3:8, 10-11 highlight the contrast in ways people seek to practice the faith.
 - (1) We can “be intent on engaging in good works” which are “good and beneficial for all people” (v. 8, NET).
 - (2) Or we can major in minors, silly controversies, picky details, and quarrels about points of the law that stir up trouble and expend a lot of energy, but are ultimately “worthless” and distracting from what we’re called to do (vv. 9-11).
 - 3. I do not suggest that *Titus* 3:9 amounts to a direct denunciation of idolatry; I do intend to call attention to the fact that Paul used the same term used for idolatry to describe the false practice of religion he criticized. If not idolatry per se, it’s in the same family, the same category.

Conclusion

1. It's hard to imagine anything more important to leave you with than an exhortation to deepen your knowledge of God so that:
 - a. You are completely devoted to him.
 - b. You are committed to being his friend, not the world's friend.
 - c. You are pursuing that friendship by humbling yourself and submitting to him so that he, not you, is really Lord of your life.
 - d. You are so devoted to submitting to him that you come to know what is most important to him and demonstrate that you know that by your attitudes and actions.
 - e. You come to value those whom he values and have a religion that treats them right (Jas. 1:26-27; 2:1-7; 4:1-3; etc.) even as you are living right (1:26-27).
2. As we move forward, let us have just such a *worthwhile* religion!

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