

Religion that is Pure

James 1:17-27

¹⁷ Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Hearing and Doing the Word

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. ¹

Do you ever wonder what God really wants from you? Our Heavenly Father who made us and has a will for our lives, do you ever wonder if God just made the world and then just left us to ourselves to figure out the mystery on our own? Is God holding out on us, does God really love us and care for us? James in this passage informs us that God is not trying keep us from the joys of life. It is the goodness of God that is actual a great barrier against yielding to temptation, and being outside the will of God. Once we start to doubt God's goodness, we will be attracted to our natural desires. Moses warned Israel not to forget God's goodness when they began to enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land (Deut. 6:10–15).

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Jas 1:17-27

The solution for temptation is to be found in a close relationship with the Father and a constant response to God's Word. We must rest in the unchangeable Lord of light and rely on God's life-giving "Word of truth" (compare Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:15). There is no reason why Christians have to yield to temptation. He must learn to resist its deadly force, and grow into the spiritual maturity God desires of His children of light (Eph. 5:8; 1 Thes. 5:5). Our spiritual reality results from the proper relationship to God through His Word. God's Word is truth (John 17:17), and if we are rightly related to God's truth, we will not be dishonest or hypocritical.

James calls God's Word "the implanted word" (James 1:21). Borrowing from our Lord's Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23), he compares God's Word to seed and the human heart to soil. In His parable, Jesus described four kinds of hearts: the hard heart, which did not understand or receive the Word and therefore bore no fruit; the shallow heart, which was very emotional but had no depth, and bore no fruit; the crowded heart, which lacked repentance and permitted sin to crowd out the Word; and the fruitful heart, which received the Word, allowed it to take root, and produced a harvest of fruit.

If the seed of the Word is to be planted in our hearts, then we will obey the instructions James gives us. Let everyone . . . be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. In an argument, of course, the one who is listening rather than lambasting is the one who is slow to anger (cf. 3:1-12). Anger fails to yield the righteous life that God desires, the goal to which this epistle is committed.

He said we are to be swift to hear (v. 19a). "One has ears to hear, let them hear!" (Matt. 13:9) "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Just as the employee is quick to hear the supervisor's voice,

and the mother to hear her baby's smallest cry, so the Christian should be quick to hear what God has to say.

Then James tells us to be slow to speak (v. 19b). We have two ears and one mouth, which ought to remind us to listen more than we speak. Too many times we argue with God's Word, if not audibly, at least in our hearts and minds. "One that refrains his lips is wise" (Prov. 10:19). "One that has knowledge spares his words" (Prov. 17:27). Instead of being slow to speak, the lawyer in Luke 10:29 argued with Jesus by asking, "And who is my neighbor?" In the early church, the services were informal; and often the listeners would debate with the speaker. There were even fighting and wars among the brothers James was writing to (James 4:1).

Next we are to be slow to anger (v. 19c). Do not get angry at God or His Word. "One that is slow to anger is of great understanding: but one that is hasty of spirit exalts foolishness" (Prov. 14:29). In the Garden, Peter was slow to hear, swift to speak, and swift to anger—and he almost killed a man with the sword. Many church fights are the result of short tempers and hasty words. There is a godly anger against sin (Eph. 4:26); and if we love the Lord, we are to hate sin (Ps. 97:10). But our anger does not produce God's righteousness (James 1:20). In fact, anger is just the opposite of the patience God wants to produce in our lives as we mature in Christ (James 1:3–4).

In the Sayings of the Jewish Fathers we read: "There are four characters in scholars. Quick to hear and quick to forget; his gain is cancelled by his loss. Slow to hear and slow to forget; his loss is cancelled by his gain. Quick to hear and slow to forget; he is wise. Slow to hear and quick to forget; this is an evil lot."

There was once a poster that reads, "Temper is such a valuable thing, it is a shame to lose it!" There is a time and place for anger. We are to be angry about the things that angered Jesus. James warns us against getting angry at God's Word

because it reveals our sins to us. Like the man who broke the mirror because he disliked the image in it, people rebel against God's Word because it tells the truth about them and their sinfulness.

James tells us to have a prepared heart (v. 21). James saw the human heart as a garden; if left to itself, the soil would produce only weeds. He urged us to "pull out the weeds" and prepare the soil for the "implanted Word of God."

James says we are to practice the Word (James 1:22–25). It is not sufficient to receive the Word; one must respond to it in active obedience. The command is clear, **Do not merely listen to the Word. . . . Do what it says.** One must "become" a constant doer of the Word and not just a hearer. Again, it is not enough to hear the Word; we must do it. Many people have the mistaken idea that hearing a good sermon or Bible study is what makes them grow. It is not the hearing but the doing that brings the blessing. Too many of us mark their Bibles, but our Bibles never mark us!

Now James compared the Word to a mirror. The one who listens and does nothing is like one who glances at his face in a mirror and then forgets what he saw. We are to examine ourselves by the Word of God (vv. 23–25). The main purpose for owning a mirror is to be able to see yourself and make yourself look as clean and neat as possible. As we look into the mirror of God's Word, we see ourselves as we really are. James mentions several mistakes people make as they look into God's mirror.

First, we may merely glance at ourselves. We may not carefully study ourselves as we read the Word. Some read a chapter of the Bible each day, but it is only a religious exercise and we fail to profit from it personally. Our conscience would even bother us if we did not have our daily reading, when actually our conscience should bother us when don't read carefully. A cursory reading of the Bible will

never reveal our deepest needs. It is the difference between a candid photo and an X ray.

The second mistake is that we forget what we see. If we were looking deeply enough into our hearts, what we would see would be unforgettable! Isaiah cried, “Woe is me! for I am undone!” (Isa. 6:5) Peter cried, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8) Job was the most righteous man on earth in his day, yet he confessed, “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6).

Mistake number three is: we fail to obey what the Word tells us to do. We think that hearing is the same as doing, and it is not. We Christians enjoy substituting reading for doing, or even talking for doing. Our committee meetings and conferences are no substitute for our active service to God and others.

If we are to use God’s mirror profitably, then we must gaze into it carefully and with serious intent (James 1:25). No quick glances will do. We must examine our own hearts and lives in the light of God’s Word. This requires time, attention, and sincere devotion.

When Jesus, the Great Physician (Matt. 9:12), examines us, He uses His Word; and He wants us to give Him sufficient time to do the job well. Perhaps one reason we glance into the Word instead of gaze into the Word is that we are afraid of what we might see.

After seeing ourselves, we must remember what we are and what God says, and we are to do the Word. The blessing comes in the doing, not in the reading of the Word (James 1:25). The emphasis in James is on the practice of the Word. We are to continue after reading the Word (James 1:25; see Acts 1:14; 2:42, 46; 13:43; 14:22; 26:22 for examples of this in the early church).

James called the Word of God “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25) because when we obey it, God sets us free. “And I will walk at liberty: for I seek Your

precepts” (Ps. 119:45). “If you continue in My Word, then are you My disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31–32).

Now James tells us to share the Word (James 1:26–27). The word translated “religion” means “the outward practice, the service of a god.” Pure religion has nothing to do with ceremonies, temples, or special days. Pure religion means practicing God’s Word and sharing it with others, through speech, service, and separation from the world.

There are many references to speech in this letter, giving the impression that the tongue was a serious problem in the assembly (see James 1:19; 2:12; 3:1–3, 14–18; 4:11–12). It is the tongue that reveals the heart (Matt. 12:34–35); if the heart is right, the speech will be right. A controlled tongue means a controlled body (James 3:1ff). One who is truly religious will demonstrate it by controlled speech. The outward ritualistic practices which a person may think are commendable are considered to be worthless if there is no control, or tight rein on the tongue, otherwise we deceive ourselves.

After we have seen ourselves and Christ in the mirror of the Word, we must see others and their needs. Isaiah first saw the Lord, then himself, and then the people to whom he would minister (Isa. 6:1–8). Words are no substitute for deeds of love (James 2:14–18; 1 John 3:11–18). A clean and undefiled religion is one in which one’s conduct and character are disciplined in accordance with God’s Word. It is apparent that God’s emphasis is not on religious ritual but on right living.

James presents us with the vivid picture of the man who goes to the church meeting and listens to the reading and expounding of the word, and who thinks that in the listening he has worshipped God. He has shut his eyes to the fact that what is read and heard in Church must then be lived out. There is nothing wrong with

Church attendance and Bible reading, but they are only half of our worship; the really important thing is to turn those words that we have heard into action. In our listening to the true word we learn what we are and what we ought to be. We see what is wrong and what must be done to put it right; but, if we are only hearers, we remain just as we are, and all our hearing has amounted to nothing. James is correct to remind us that what is heard in the holy place must be lived in the market place—or there is no point in hearing at all.

But we must also be separated from the world (v. 27b). By “the world” James means “society without God.” As the children of God, we are in the world physically but not of the world spiritually (John 17:11–16). We are sent into the world to win others to Christ (John 17:18). It is only as we maintain our separation from the world that we can serve others. It is not necessary for the Christian to get involved with the world to have a ministry to the world. Jesus was “unspotted” (1 Peter 1:19), and yet He was the friend of publicans and sinners. The best way to minister to the needs of the world is to be pure from the defilement of the world.²

James outlined what God the Father (cf. “Father” in James 1:17) stresses: look after orphans and widows—referring to one’s conduct, and keep oneself from being polluted—referring to one’s character. A Christian with God-pleasing “religion” helps others in need.³

James condemns only what the prophets had condemned long ago. “God,” said the Psalmist, “is a father of the fatherless, and protector of widows” (Psalm 68:5). It was Zechariah’s complaint that the people pulled away their shoulders and made

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jas 1:17

³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:822

their hearts as adamant as stone at the demand to execute true justice, to show mercy and compassion every man to his brother, to oppress not the widow, the fatherless, the stranger and the poor, and not to entertain evil thoughts against another within the heart (Zechariah 7:6–10). It was Micah's complaint that all ritual sacrifices were useless, if one did not do justice and love kindness and walk humbly before God (Micah 6:6–8).

All through history people have tried to make ritual a substitute for sacrifice and service. They have made religion splendid within the Church at the expense of neglecting it outside the Church.⁴ James said worship and service go together.

The story is told by Wallace Bubar that when he was a young boy he was brought up in the Baptist church. On the offering envelop were six boxes, a box for worship attendance, another for Bible brought, another for Bible read daily, one for Sunday School lesson studied, one for prayed daily, and the last for offering given. All of these are good, but James says if you want to demonstrate true worship, true religion then go outside the doors, stand strong when faced with temptation and help someone along your way. That's true religion. Thanks be to God.

⁴ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters of James and Peter*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1976 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 53