

What is Acceptable Religion?

James 1:26-27

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Some of you will remember the name *Jim Fixx*. He wrote the book on running in 1977 titled, *The Complete Book of Running*, which became the best-selling non-fiction book to that time. Fixx was famous for his expertise on how to run, its health benefits, & he helped fuel running's popularity. On July 20th, 1984, Jim was found lying beside the road, dead of heart attack on his daily run. He was 52. This was a guy who looked, from the outside, to be one of the most in-shape, healthy guys you'd ever come across & yet things weren't well.¹ That's the point James drives home in our text today. Looks can be deceiving! We can look religious, we can look like we've got it all together, we can look like a true Christian, without truly being one. That's terrifying! & James here is just following Jesus. Jesus Himself told us in the Sermon on the Mount, **Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter** (Mt 7:21-23). It's chilling to think we can deceive ourselves into thinking everything is good with our religion when it's not. Here's the good news: James tells us to lose our outward display of religion & find the gospel instead. James says we can lose our self-deceived religion & find the gospel & he wants us to do that so we're not like Jim Fixx. None of us want to die self-deceived. James 1:19-27

James has clearly taught us (1:22-25) that if we're merely **hearers** of God's Word, we've deluded ourselves because we must also be **doers** of God's Word. Our salvation is proven by our obedience to God. In vss 26-27 James gives another warning about deceiving ourselves with false religious doings. These doings aren't necessarily bad in themselves, but the practice of them can delude believers with a deceptively comfortable sense of religiosity. The word **religion** in our text indicates *outward worship*. If we carry a Bible & are somewhat familiar with it, if we read Christian novels, attend church twice a month, sing the songs, look like we're listening, & if we give, we can deceive ourselves into thinking we're OK. James (along with Jesus) argues that what's inside you will show itself on the outside in some way. & neither taught man's works themselves can save anyone. But

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Fixx; www.active.com/articles/the-legacy-of-jim-fixx

for those who've looked upward to God & to God alone for the unearned gift of salvation (17), who've received new life by God's will & work alone (18), that inner gospel transformation manifests itself outwardly in true **religion**. God transforms us from the inside-out & James says this is how it looks:

1. Controlling what's inside you, especially in your speech
2. Caring for those outside you, especially those in need
3. Keeping outside worldliness from corrupting you inside

1. Your Conversation – Control Your Tongue 26

James compares the tongue to a powerful, rearing horse which will take off on a wild ride if the reins are not kept firm. If you've ever tried to control 4,000 lbs of Percherons who are ready to work & all you've got are 2 thin reins & your voice, you get the idea. Tongues are hard to control. There are actually people who consider themselves **religious**, who follow their list of rules but who have galloping tongues. Therefore, they're in a state of self-deception. In fact, all their religious worship is **worthless** & an exercise in futility.² An out-of-control tongue suggests false religious devotion, no matter how well one's duties are carried out. *A true test of a man's religion is not his ability to speak, as we're so apt to think, but rather his ability to bridle his tongue.*³ Jesus Himself explained this in a heated exchange with the Pharisees: **Either make the tree good & its fruit good, or make the tree bad & its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart** (Mt 12:33-34). The tongue will inevitably reveal what's on the inside. This is especially true under stress. What kind of speech must be reined in? All kinds! Paul says, **Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths** (Eph 4:29). There's also lying: **Therefore each of you must put off falsehood & speak truthfully to his neighbor** (Eph 4:25). Gossip & filthy speech is also condemned. The outwardly religious person characteristically avoids filth & lying, but falls easily to slander & back-stabbing. These sins come from the unbridled tongue. They're ones who are constantly carping, critical, & judgmental. John Calvin, himself often the victim of such speech, wrote:

² Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 8, James*, p 52

³ Lehman Strauss, *James, Your Brother*, p 64

When people shed their grosser sins, they are extremely vulnerable to contract this complaint. A man will steer clear of adultery, of stealing, of drunkenness, in fact he will be a shining light of outward religious observance—and yet will revel in destroying the character of others; under the pretext of zeal ... but it is a lust for vilification. This explains ... the bloated pharisaical pride that feeds indulgently on a general diet of smear & censure.⁴

Sometimes the slander is whispered, sometimes inferred, & sometimes shouted, but it always comes from a sinful heart. To try to be clear, James doesn't mean that those who sometimes fall into this sin have a worthless religion, because we're all guilty of this at times. He's saying that if anyone's tongue is habitually unbridled, though his church attendance be perfect, his Bible knowledge envied, his prayers many, his tithes generous, & though he **considers himself religious ... he deceives himself & his religion is worthless.** True Christianity controls the tongue.

It's said that once while John Wesley was preaching, he noticed a lady in the audience who was known for her critical attitude. All through the service she sat & stared at his new tie. When the meeting ended, she came up to him & said very sharply, *Mr. Wesley, the strings on your bow tie are much too long. It's an offense to me!* He asked if any of the ladies present happened to have a pair of scissors in their purse. When the scissors were handed to him, he gave them to his critic & asked her to trim the streamers to her liking. After she clipped them off near the collar, he said, *Are you sure they're all right now?*

Yes, that's much better.

Then let me have those shears a moment, said Wesley. I'm sure you wouldn't mind if I also gave you a bit of correction. I must tell you, madam, that your tongue is an offense to me—it's too long! Please stick it out ... I'd like to take some off.⁵

Spurgeon says of our tongues & speech:

That which is in the well will come up in the bucket, & that which is in the heart will come up on the tongue. An unbridled tongue denotes an unrenewed heart. Oh, that God would ever give us grace in our heart to move our tongue aright! Then, as the water guides the whole ship, our tongue will guide our whole body, & the whole of our person will be under ... control.⁶

If we could play back the tape of your speech this past week, what would we hear? Again, we know James doesn't mean Christians are perfect & never stumble in this. He says in Js 3:2-3, **For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.** The point of the bridle image in both places is that control of the

⁴ *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, & Luke Volume 3 & the Epistles of James & Jude*, p 274

⁵ www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/78779/wesley-responds-to-criticism-by-sermoncentral

⁶ Cited by www.preceptaustin.org

mouth affects the whole being & direction of life. True Christians still have sin in their heart but they can & must control it before it comes out verbally. RC Sproul wrote:

*a true Christian keeps a tight rein on the tongue. James will have much more to say about the tongue later on (James 3), but here he seems to refer to people who continually prattle. They say whatever pops into their head, without listening to or caring about what others are telling them. They are too full of their own self-important ideas. Such people are not open to the Word of God. They are not open to those God has appointed as teachers in His church. We must read the Scriptures ourselves, but we must also listen to teachers, or the Bible will come to simply mirror our preconceived ideas, rather than the mirror of what God thinks & demands of us in vss 23-25. The test of submission to the Word is openness to what is taught.'*⁷

We're all to be **doers** of God's Word. But if we're **doers** who can't control our tongue, we're not practicing **pure & undefiled religion**.

2. Your Compassion – Care for the Needy 27a

The word translated **pure** is the Greek word we get the word *catharsis* & *cathartic* from. **Undefiled** means without contamination, unpolluted, untainted, unsoiled, & unstained. The Pharisees considered themselves pure & undefiled. They practiced ceremonial washings & cleansings & were walking Mr. Cleans. They did a good job showing off super-religious, squeaky-clean externalism with their long robes, tassels, prayers, & boasting of their giving. But man's most demanding legalism cannot clean up an inwardly depraved heart. Only Jesus can do that. James says *don't go by religion in man's sight, let me tell you what is pure & undefiled true religion that is pleasing in God the Father's sight: visiting orphans & widows in their distress*. It's no coincidence that God is described as **Father** in the same verse that mentions orphans, which highlights God's very nature that's often repeated as the **father of the fatherless**. The self-righteous religionists may not care for orphans, but the Father in heaven does & so will those who have His nature within them. Psalm 10 says of God: **The unfortunate commits himself to You; You have been the helper of the orphan ... To vindicate the orphan & the oppressed (14, 18)**. & to people who won't, God has strong words of rebuke. Jer 5:28-29 says, **They do not plead the cause, The cause of the orphan, that they may prosper; & they do not defend the rights of the poor. 'Shall I not punish these people?' declares the LORD, 'On a nation such as this Shall I not avenge Myself?'** & Prov 23:10-11 says **don't go into the**

⁷ Before the Face of God: Book 4

fields of the fatherless, For their Redeemer is strong; He will plead their case against you. God is Defender of the defenseless, Helper of the helpless, & Father to the fatherless. He provided for them primarily through His law & through His people in an ancient world where unwanted kids were often left to die. The early Christians were known for rescuing babies & bringing them into their family. Orphans weren't cared for by the state, foundations, or orphanages. & without family, they were certainly in **distress** as vs 27 says, indicating desperation & vulnerability. **Orphans & widows** were the most helpless people in Jewish society, their **distress** (literally pressure) came from their desperate need of food, shelter, & clothing. James uses them as representative of all who are in need. Religious observances, no matter how perfectly observed & appropriately reverent, are empty if there is no concern for the needy. This thought is used by Jesus when He says to His disciples: **I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you** (Jn 14:18 NIV). Obviously, orphans, without a protector & provider, are in a desperate state & in great need. Hosea 14:3 says of God, **in You the orphan finds mercy.** & if we're truly in Christ, there will be mercy in our heart as well.

When James says **visit** those **in distress**, the term **visit** includes care, concern, & compassion within as well as Christ-like outward actions. We need a mercy that manifests & helps a brother or sister as it can. The test James lays down moves from your mouth to your mercy. How's your mouth? How's your mercy? We may participate in an elegant call to worship & prayer, heartily sing the hymns, solemnly repeat the Apostles' Creed, reverently pray the Lord's Prayer, & listen attentively to the Word preached, but if we ignore the needy around us, our worship is nothing but ashes on the altar!

Orphans & widows aren't the only types of people we must show the mercy of Christ to. But widows & orphans are a frequent example that God explicitly speaks of & uses to show us His own nature. Orphans were to be taken care of & taken in by God's people. Sometimes it was within their own family as in the case of Esther who had no father or mother but Mordecai took care of her like his own daughter. One of the most beautiful pictures in the OT is Mephibosheth, who wasn't in King David's biological family. In fact, he was from his enemies' family, but had no parents & was

crippled, a visible picture of the **distress** James speaks of. David said to him, **Do not fear, for I will show you kindness or mercy ... you shall eat at my table always. ... Mephibosheth ate at David's table, like one of the king's sons ... So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate always at the king's table**, he was accepted into his family. **Now he was lame in both his feet** (2 Sam 9:7-13). There's no natural explanation for that; it's a supernatural work in the heart of a man after God's own heart, a God who is merciful to the needy. To bring that even closer to home, the only explanation as to why we're saved & can have a seat at God's table is that His mercy rescued us as even more needy & helpless spiritually, & He adopted us into His own family! He brings us into His family as children of the King. Praise the Lord for His amazing, adopting grace! We, who are orphans, who have no claim on God or His righteousness, who have no right to His mercy, were visited by Jesus & brought into His own family.

What does visiting **orphans & widows** look like now? Obviously, not all of us are gifted for the same ministry. We won't all take care of widows, be foster parents, or adopt children. But some of us will & all of us can apply vs 27 in some way. True religion, religion God accepts, cannot exist apart from caring for those who are in distress. Physical distress, emotional distress, financial distress, relationship distress, & on & on. John put this truth in unforgettable words: **If anyone has material possessions & sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions & in truth** (1 Jn 3:17-18). James is telling us that our care for the needy must not just be by supporting social programs or through the hands of others, but personally. We're to be involved in their **distress**, the pressures of life which squeeze them in their circumstances, pressures due to illness, fractured relationships, unemployment, or family tensions. James insists that acceptable religion reaches out to people in their needs. Worship that pleases God involves throwing ourselves on the altar & before the needy in service to them. We may plead a lack of time & resources but we always make the time & investment for what we truly want to do. Caring for others is **pure religion**. It's not my job any more than it's your job. & if you have no care for the needy, like the Pharisees who walked around the needy man in the road in the story of the Good Samaritan, that's what James would call **worthless**

religion. In Luke 11 we see another interchange with Jesus & the Pharisees. Jesus gets right to the heart of their problem which was a problem with their heart. They were clean religiously to outside observers but were corrupt inside & they didn't care for the helpless & needy or others outside of their clean, comfortable, sanctified circles. We read in Lk 11,

Now when He had spoken, a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; & He went in, & reclined at the table. When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal. But the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup & of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery & wickedness. You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But give that which is within as charity, & then all things are clean for you.

But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint & rue & every kind of garden herb, & yet disregard justice & the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues & the respectful greetings in the market places. Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, & the people who walk over them are unaware of it."

One of the lawyers said to Him in reply, "Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too." But He said, "Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers."

In a similar passage in Mt 23:23, Jesus rebukes the supposed religious leaders for neglecting the weightier matters of the law, which are justice & mercy. It's not that other religious duties are unimportant or unnecessary, but as one translation puts it their are **more important matters of the law** such as **justice & mercy** (NIV). If they'd read Micah 6:8 they would know this is what God always wanted in the OT as well: **what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness.** The OT often expresses that Godlike, true religion is justice to widows & mercy to orphans. In Lk 21 Jesus makes an object lesson of a widow:

He looked up & saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. & He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins. & He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on (2-4).

This widow was in poverty & had hardly anything to live on, & she gave her last 2 coins. We often think of that as only an illustration of sacrificial giving. But listen to Js 1:27, **Pure & undefiled religion in the sight of our God & Father is this: to visit orphans & widows in their distress.** True religion doesn't abuse the poor. It ministers generously, graciously to their needs. It's as if Jesus says, *Woe*

*to you who abuse widows, the distressed, the downcast, the poor, the sick with your lying promises to get their money.*⁸

Gal 6 tells us, **Bear one another's burdens, & thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself (2-3).** Sounds like Js 1:26.

Real religion reaches outward away from self! The **one another** passages in the NT relate to one another in the churches being written to. Gal 6:10 says, **So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, & especially to those who are of the household of the faith or family of believers (NIV).** Because James speaks of **brother or sister** in need in Js 2, we should especially think of those within the body of Christ. Are you bearing each other's burdens in this body? Can you think of someone you've tried to minister to in some way recently, in a simple way by an encouraging phone call, stopping to visit with someone, encouraging them, praying with them, asking how you can help? Don't just think of food or finances, think of practical & emotional & spiritual needs among us. Don't think Sunday is *the real religion* day. James says it's all week long. There are many ways to apply this & I don't want to limit your thinking to one type or one segment of the population. But I also don't want to limit the intent of God's Word in James by not thinking of ways to apply. But just doing merciful acts to an orphan or widow (or homeless or helpless), giving to charity isn't necessarily true religion either. There must be love behind it. 1 Cor 13:3 says, **if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, & if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.** Js 1:27 says, **pure & undefiled religion is this: to visit...** You say, *but visiting is the pastor's job.* That's not what the Bible says. This verse isn't addressing pastors, it's addressing all Christians, all who have a true relationship with the Lord & therefore have true religion in His sight. Ministry is every Christian's job, or I should say, privilege. Maybe your excuse is you don't know what to say or do, but go anyway & visit to express your concern, comfort as you can, & at least be there for them. Control your tongue, care for the needy, ...

3. Your Character – Uncontaminated Life The 3rd dimension of acceptable religion is **to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (27).** James moves from care for those outside you to keeping

⁸ John MacArthur, *Abusing the Poor*, www.gty.org/resources/sermons/42-251

pure on the inside of you, from charity to purity. While getting your hands dirty helping, keep your heart clean. James will say more about worldliness later, so we'll talk more about it later. Avoiding worldliness in your heart is an important part of pure & undefiled religion. In fact, if you do everything else in this verse but fail here, your religion has failed & is faulty. As important as mercy & charity is, inner purity is equally vital. I don't have to tell you that today's world is polluted. It always has been. Isaiah's lament is being lived out today as well as then. Evil is called good & good evil, & light is darkness & darkness is light (5:20). Charles Spurgeon said:

*Charity & purity are the 2 great garments of Christianity. I sometimes fear lest we should by no means insist too much on purity, but should certainly insist too little upon charity. The visitation of the fatherless & widows in their affliction is not left optional. It is not to be the privilege of a few worldly men who give all their substance to orphanages. Every Christian is bound to wear his part ... Yet charity without purity will be of no avail. In vain should we give all our substance to the poor, & give our bodies to be burned, if we do not walk in the way of holiness, "without which no man shall see the Lord." If we do not come out from the world, & keep ourselves from its polluting influence, we have not yet learned what pure & undefiled religion really is. We may be very orthodox in creed, or we may be very far advanced in our knowledge of religious matters (**thinking ourselves to be religious**, as Js 1:26 says) ... but we are in the sight of God only as sounding brass, or an annoying cymbal, unless, by divine grace, we have learned to keep ourselves unspotted from the world.⁹*

It's so easy to become self-deceived by our religiosity.

The word **keep** came from a word that originally meant a guard or warden. The verb meant to keep an eye on, keep something in view, to attend carefully, to watch over. It speaks of guarding something in one's possession. In the Greek OT of Prov 4:23 it's translated **guard your heart above all else** (NIV). We read there,

Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you a deceitful mouth & put devious speech far from you ... Watch the path of your feet & all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil (24-27).

That's a great expansion of the end of James 1:27, **keep yourself unstained**. The idea is to observe attentively & to keep watch over. We're to be constantly vigilant to remain undefiled. The *keeping* or *guarding* is to be done by us, with the Spirit's indwelling power, not by others. Sadly, too many of us have a tendency to focus on the faults of others & forget what we look like in the mirror of God's Word!

By the world, what's that mean? Not the physical creation but the fallen world system headed by Satan (Jn 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, Ep 2:2-note; 1Jn 5:19, Re 12:9) & run mainly by unredeemed men & women who are alienated from God & hostile to His will & Word. It refers to this present evil, man-centered, world system, its thinking, patterns, & lifestyles. Think of the world like an ocean filled with water. We're to be like boats. A boat's purpose is fulfilled when it's on the water. But it's function & usefulness deteriorates when water gets in the boat. When too much of the world gets into u we're defiled by it. We must keep ourselves firmly anchored in the water of God's Word but not let the water of the world pour into us. Paul has a parallel thought as he writes to Timothy, **if a man cleanses himself from these worldly influences, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work** (2 Tim 2:21). From the book of Genesis, Lot is an example of a man who was stained by the world. He started living towards Sodom, disregarding the spiritual climate of the area because of its prosperity. Eventually he moved to the wicked city & became a part of its leadership. A little of Sodom moved into Lot! Many today are a lot like Lot!¹⁰ Don't let that be true of you.

Maybe you're thinking, *I look at my life & sometimes I say things I shouldn't say. Sometimes I know there are needy people & I don't show them loving compassion. Sometimes I get lured in by the world's philosophy. Does this mean I'm not truly saved?* Let me answer that with a question. When you realize you've sinned in this area, what is your reaction? If your reaction is, *I hate that within me*, & you repent & confess it, that's the reaction of a redeemed heart. It's not our perfection that proves our salvation, it's the reaction to our imperfections that does that.

James shows us that acceptable religion means keeping a tight rein on our tongue. We must be free from gossip & slander or our religion is worthless. 2nd, true religion means hands-on caring for the victims of the pressures of life. 3rd, acceptable religion is a pure life. The 3 dimensions of acceptable religion involve our *words*, our *hands*, & our *hearts*. May we live daily in all these dimensions for God's glory! PRAY

¹⁰ David Guzak,

Jesus, in His love & mercy, visited us in our need. He left the beauty of heaven for a barnyard birth. He left behind the purity of heaven to rescue us from the impurity of this world. He walked among us, talked with us, lived with us, ate with us, laughed with us, & wept with us. He rubbed shoulders with sinners like us. He knew the Pharisees & called them hypocrites. But He never became a sinner or a hypocrite. As the Son of God, He lifted the fallen but did not fall Himself. We will never bridle our tongue, reach out to the hurting, or keep ourselves unstained by the world in our own power. We need Jesus. We need His righteousness credited to our account & we need our sins atoned for. Jesus did this through His death & resurrection. That's what we remember as we come to the communion table this morning. PRAY PASS

I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; & when He had given thanks, He broke it & said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor 11:23-24).

We remember Him as we eat of the bread together.

In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread & drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (25-26).

We remember Him as we drink of the cup together.