

EXPOSITORY ESSAY:
The Nature Of True Religion (based on James 1:26-27)
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Three aspects of the nature of true religion are: the ability to "keep a tight rein on [one's] tongue"; to care for "orphans and widows in their distress"; and to "keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:26,27). Each of these aspects shows that true religion: is a spirit that pervades the hearts and lives of believers; reveals itself in believers' daily lives; and exerts a positive influence on others (Barton 1076; Burdick 1024).

The first aspect of the nature of true religion is a person's ability to control his speech (Burdick 1024; Moo 85; Stulac 82). A person is to keep a "tight rein on his tongue" (James 1:26). The phrase 'tight rein' is the Greek word 'chalinagogeō', which means "to restrain, govern, or control" (Strong's #5468; Zodhiates 1466). The word 'rein' is used in an equestrian fashion as in the bit controlling the direction of the whole horse (Stulac 82). The bit is only a small device in the mouth of the horse, yet, it has the ability to control the whole animal (James 3:3). In the same fashion, the tongue or what a person says has the ability to control the entire individual because it expresses the heart and core of who the person really is (Stulac 82).

The word 'tongue' is the Greek word 'glossa', which refers to the "tongue as an organ of speech" (Strong's #1100; Vine's 636). James does not specify in this verse exactly what he means by unbridled speech. However, in later portions of his letter, James gives specific examples of what he defines as the evil of the tongue. Examples of unbridled speech are slander, judging, quarrels, fights, swearing, gossip, angry outbursts, harsh criticism, complaining and many other evils (James 1:19; 3:1-12; 4:1-12; 5:9,12; Moo 85, Stulac 82; Barton 1075).

James explains that man can tame many things but he is unable to tame his own tongue (James 3:7-8). A believer should be conscious of every word that is spoken from his mouth. The believer should begin this task by "taking each thought captive and making it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). In addition, a believer needs to obtain wisdom from heaven in order to control his tongue. The wisdom is "peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). A believer must ask for wisdom from God and believe that he will receive it (James 1:5-6).

If a person cannot keep a "tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (James 1:26). The word 'deceiving' is the Greek word 'apataō', which means to seduce into error or cheat (Strong's #538; Zodhiates 207). The word 'religion' is the Greek word 'threskos', which means the outward service to God (Strong's #2357; Zodhiates 742). Examples that could be regarded as acts of religious service are public worship, fasting, and giving to the needy (Burdick 1024). The word 'worthless' is the Greek word 'mataios', which means vain, profitless, useless, purposeless, futile or void of results (Strong's #3152; Zodhiates 949; Vine's 657). Therefore, when a person does not have a tight rein on his tongue, he has been seduced into the error of believing that his acts of service are done for God. The acts of service are not truly humble and done with a gracious heart but are done in vain (Henry - James 1:26). The verbal actions a person expresses speak louder than any observances of religious rituals (Barton 1075). The uncontrolled tongue of a person shows that his religion is an external sham (Burdick 1024). Therefore, a person who wishes to have true religion needs to hold his tongue in

check because it communicates what is at the heart of the speaker and validates his religion as true (Vine's 79; Richards 599).

The second and third aspects of the nature of true religion God considers to be "pure and faultless" (James 1:27; Stulac 83). The word 'pure' is the Greek word 'katharos', which means "without blemish and refers to the purity of heart as well as a ritual cleanness of objects" (Strong's #2513; Vine's 103; Stulac 83). The word 'faultless' is the Greek word 'amiantos', which means "undefiled or free from contamination" (Strong's #283; Stulac 83; Vine's 650). A clean and undefiled religion is one in which one's conduct and character are disciplined in accordance with God's Word (Blue 823). The terms 'pure and faultless' set up a standard of purity for actions done in service to God (Stulac 83).

The second aspect of the nature of true religion is "to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27; Stulac 84; Moo 86). The phrase 'to look after' is the Greek word 'episkeptomai', which means to go and see or relieve, to care for, or to exercise oversight (Strong's #1980; Vine's 662). The phrase 'to look after' is more than just a social call (Burdick 1024). Looking after a person involves caring deeply for his needs and helping him through whatever difficulties he is facing without expecting retribution (Burdick 1024; Foos 61).

The phrase 'orphans and widows' is the Greek word 'orphanos', which refers to the comfortless, the fatherless, the desolate or those who are helpless (Strong's #3737; Zodhiates 1059; Vine's 1162; Richards 271). In the day of James, there were no social programs to care for the needy (Foos 60). The widows and orphans were the most obviously poor in the first century Israel (Barton 1076). The widows had no access to inheritance in Jewish circles and were on the outskirts of society. The widows were unable to get employment and were left at the mercy of family for support. If family members were unable or unwilling to care for the widows, they were reduced to begging, selling themselves as slaves, or starving (Barton 1076). The phrase 'orphans and widows' became a description for the helpless in the world (Moo Baker 1155).

In addition, James is also emphasizing Old Testament teaching (Dempster 586). Helping the helpless is at the core of what it means to be religious (Dempster 586). In the Old Testament, orphans and widows are singled out for special care (Harrison 5). Psalm 68:5 declares that "God Himself is a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows" (Moo Baker 1155). God cared for the oppressed people, whether they belong to the Lord or not" (VanGemeren 867). To care after the orphans and widows is to "share the heart of God" (Foos 61).

The word 'distress' is the Greek word 'thlipsis', which means affliction, pressure, troubled, or anything which burdens the spirit (Strong's #2347; Zodhiates 737; Vine's 17; Stulac 84). The word 'distress' is a term that encompasses many quandaries a person faces. Distress can be: "an apprehensive state of mind; a volatile situation requiring immediate response; a loss incurred in order to gain or accomplish something; physical or psychological damage; physical or mental pain; trouble emotionally or mentally; suffering or painful sorrow; or anxieties or uneasiness" (American - 'distress'). The term 'distress' encompasses so many considerations that just about any person with difficulties would fit in this category.

Therefore, this aspect of true religion reveals itself by a person's actions toward others who are in need. Even though society today has programs in place to care for

the afflicted, it does not negate the fact that God still expects believers to be personally caring for the needy (Foos 61). The care a person gives to the underprivileged and disadvantaged is a demonstration of love for his neighbor and the true nature of religion (Matthew 22:37-40; Galatians 5:14; 6:2; Foos 61; Moo Baker 388).

The third aspect of the nature of true religion is to "keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). The word 'keep' is the Greek word 'tereo', which means to guard, to keep an eye on, and watch (Strong's #583; Zodhiates 1380). The word 'polluted' is the Greek word 'aspilos', which means unspotted, unstained, unblemished, pure and free from moral defilement (Strong's #784; Vine's 596; Richards 487). The word 'world' is the Greek word 'kosmos', which refers to the present condition of human affairs, in alienation from and in opposition to God (Strong's #2889; Vine's 685).

"Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated himself to be separated from the evil attitudes and practices of the world and expects his followers to do the same" (Erickson 646). Believers should remove themselves from certain aspects of the world (Erickson 978). Believers should live a life that shows them to be separate and removed from the world and demonstrates that they are people of God. James called believers to be "morally distinct" from the world or unbelieving societies standards (Stulac 86).

Individuals have applied this verse in different ways. Some believers avoid all secular learning and other's separate themselves from church bodies that do not promote a pure lifestyle (Erickson 979). Others believe this verse means that as true believers they should abstain from smoking, drinking, dancing, and theater attendance (Erickson 979).

In current society, the acceptance of witchcraft must be contended with because countless Christians are readily being polluted by witchcraft from secular society. Television and movies promote witchcraft as fun and exciting. However, God's Word clearly states his hatred of divination, sorcery, omens, witchcraft, spells or mediums (Deuteronomy 18:10-13). A person who practices these things is detestable to God (Deuteronomy 18:12). Therefore, it would seem reasonable that if a person wants to keep himself from being "polluted by the world", he should refrain from being involved in what God considers to be detestable (James 1:27).

Using God's Word as a guideline, each individual believer must determine exactly how and to what extent he plans to keep himself from being polluted by the world. This verse demonstrates that believers should commit themselves to Christ's ethical and moral system and not to the world's (Barton 1076). Believers should not adapt the world's value system, which is based on money, power and pleasure. A person with true religion will not be contaminated by the world's values (Barton 1076).

In conclusion, the nature of true religion combines the purity of heart with the purity of action (Moo 87). The purity of heart is seen through the speech of a believer (James 1:26). The purity of action is seen through a believer's actions in regard to the needy and his personal choice to choose God's standards for his life and not the world's (James 1:27).

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