

# TRUE RELIGION

*SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN*



Catalog No. 101121  
James 1:26-27  
5th Message  
Steve Zeisler  
November 21, 2010

In this message we will consider the final two verses of chapter one of James.

Looking back on verses 22-25—we recall that it is not good enough to merely listen. We must act on what we've heard. James used the image of a mirror. He said those who hear, but don't act, are as a man who looks into a mirror, sees the reflection and turns away forgetting everything he has seen. This is the problem of knowledge absent obedience; of information that stays on the surface, producing no change.

In contrast are those who “look intently at the perfect law that gives freedom” and choose obedience. Jesus said that we will know the truth and it will make us free. The good news of God's grace enables us to be honest and move forward in hope. This chapter ends describing three tests we can apply to discover whether our response to the gospel is genuine.

James 1:26-27:

**<sup>26</sup>Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves (literally ‘lying to one's own heart’), and their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.**

It is folly to imagine that God is pleased with an external form of religious behavior in a person who cannot bridle his or her tongue. Yet, we easily gravitate to false status, don't we?

Our son David is the commissioner of an eight team fantasy football league. I am the GM of the Water Buffalos, currently mired in fifth place. A virtual identity (thinking I'm an NFL executive) easily captures our imagination. We can choose an attractive avatar, engage in heroic actions,

grow famous and wealthy in worlds that seem to suit us better than the real one. When a story grows tiresome we can start over with different super powers as often as we like. In the words of James 1:26 we are prone to ‘lie to our hearts’ about ourselves.

The oldest version of such deception relies on religious appearance as a mask for reality. Dutiful attendance, correct phrasing, and proper appearance make a claim to right standing before God without reference to the heart. Jesus denounced those who practice righteousness before a human audience—praying aloud to be noticed, fasting with a long face, ostentatious generosity (Matthew 6), and those who claimed titles and insisted on VIP seating (Matthew 23) that falsely suggested God's favor.

James will help us face reality. His three tests for self examination are: 1. Can we control our speech (a reined in tongue)? 2. Do we genuinely care for the poor (widows and orphans)? 3. Do we refuse moral compromise (worldly pollution)?

1. What do we say? What do we learn about ourselves by what we hear ourselves say? The familiar children's rhyme: “stick and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me,” is a lie. Physical injuries heal much quicker than the wounds of the heart that come from hurtful words uttered by people who matter to us. Conversely, we can accomplish great blessing by speaking the right word in a critical moment. Speech is powerful. The universe exists because God spoke. A marriage is begun with vows exchanged. Love comes alive when it is articulated.

So the question then becomes: how do we rein in our speech? How do we refrain from empty chatter, defensiveness, and lies; or speak with boldness when we should? How do we know when to be quiet, when to give counsel, and when to sing?

Matthew 12:34 declares: “The mouth speaks what the

heart is full of.” The good person, brings good things out of the good stored inside; and, the evil person brings out evil from within.

The only way to bridle a tongue is to undergo a cleansing of the heart. We can only obey James’ directive by letting God free us from the stored up fear and selfishness that will otherwise determine our speech.

2. The second means by which we test a true or false religion is found in how we treat the poor. In the ancient world, a family without a male head of the home would lack provision of basic needs and be vulnerable to attack. Psalm 68:5 declares: “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.” This verse and others like it throughout Scripture, remind us that the Lord is particularly concerned for those who are in desperate circumstances.

I think two lessons flow from this. First, if “God our Father” spends himself in the cause of widows and orphans then we who are his children should enter the family business, shouldn’t we? Our passions and behavior should imitate our Father’s concerns. We should be like him.

Secondly we might observe a connection. If God is father to the orphan and father to us (his sons and daughters) then there is no important distinction between the privileged and the underprivileged. Ministry can have air of condescension, or not, depending on what we believe about ourselves and about “them.” We must be sure that we serve a God who has been merciful to us, who deserve nothing, and that we are privileged to join with him as he extends mercy to others.

The phrase, “to look after” in the NIV translates a word that means to visit. It cannot be accomplished from a distance. Writing a check to a charity and advocating change in public policy are important in their own right, but they do not accomplish what James insists upon. A real relationship with hurting people is required: going to their homes (and welcoming them in ours), greeting their children, an awareness of “their distress” in particular, not generic concern for the ‘plight of the disadvantaged.’

Of course real relationships open us to heartbreak.

Sometimes nothing practical can be done to help and we weep with those who weep. But the person who wants to please God with honest spirituality will visit the poor in their distress.

3. The third test James identifies (v. 27) is remaining unpolluted by the world. This has to do with a compromise of values, not surface behaviors like smoking, swearing, R-rated movies, etc.

Consider an analogy to politics. Newly elected reformers always claim they will clean up the prior mess and “things will be different from now on.” Yet over time the lure of power, money, cronyism, and double dealing corrupt the new government so that they end up little different from their predecessors. It is this type of compromise in the things of God that James is warning against. We can’t serve two masters. We must not sow to the flesh and to the Spirit at the same time.

The surest alternative to compromise is gratitude. The siren song of the world fades when we take time to thank God for his love for us; for his gifts to us; and for the hope of glory that lies before us.

In conclusion, there are three different Greek words used in the first chapter of this letter (v.16, 22, 26) that are translated in the NIV with the English words “deceived” or “deception.” The emphasis is hard to miss. James begins his letter by sounding a warning against lies, falsehoods, and delusions. Don’t be deceived!

We are apt to pray with a double mind and blame God for the manipulations of our flesh. We easily ignore his outstretched hands, preferring the sound of our own voice to words of truth. In acts of grave foolishness, we ‘lie to our own hearts.’

Three tests of ourselves have been offered us, none of them difficult to understand. An unbridled tongue tells us what is stored inside—will we ask for God’s help? Unconcern for the poor distances us from God’s mercy—will we learn what matters to our Father? Worldliness declares our dissatisfaction with what God has given us—will we grow in gratitude?

O Lord, help us hear, help us obey.

---

Discovery Publishing © 2010. Discovery Publishing is the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This message from the Scriptures was presented at PENINSULA BIBLE CHURCH, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306. Phone (650) 494-3840. [www.pbc.org](http://www.pbc.org)

Scripture quotations are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.