

## James 1:26-27

### I. Neg: Worthless religion. (26)

#### A. Condition: If someone thinks himself religious, but does not control his speech (26a-c)

##### 1. If someone considers [themselves] to be religious (26a)

“consider” has a connotation of presumption without certainty

The person assumes that they are devout/pious, but it may or may not be true. James gives one test (among many possible) that would disabuse them of this notion if they fail the test.

“religious” in the New Testament means devout, pious, properly living out their religious beliefs. It is a positive word (even though this word has a negative connotation in modern times).

The church should keep this word with its positive connotations, and fight for clarity of language when people use this word in a Biblically incorrect way. Religion is never a problem, but hypocritical religion is a problem. Religion is not a problem, but empty religious rituals without a corresponding heart reality is the problem.

We should say what we mean and communicate accurately. We should advocate for clarity and precision in our speech and resist the devaluing of good New Testament words just because someone wants to make a rhetorical point without being Biblically informed.

To say that “Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship” is not Biblical. A true relationship with the God of the Bible will naturally involve religious activities.

##### 2. Even though he does not control his speech, thereby deceiving himself (26b-c)

###### a Neg: Not exercising control over his tongue (26b)

This is a word picture taken from controlling a horse with a bit and bridle. This one is not willing or not able to control his tongue, and it runs away like a wild horse.

We all know from experience how difficult it is to control our speech. In many ways there is temptation to say things that are untrue, rude, hateful, spiteful, selfish, proud, crude, cutting, deceptive, discouraging, etc.

James later talks about how difficult it is to control the tongue (3:3-12), but here he emphasizes that it must be done or our religion is vain.

###### b Pos: But deceiving his own heart (26c)

James claims that one must first deceive themselves before they can think well of their religious performance, while having uncontrolled speech.

The human heart is expert at self-deception. We excuse ourselves of many things that we would not excuse in others. And we think too highly of ourselves.

James challenges us to be honest with ourselves, by holding up the standard of God’s Word against our lifestyle as the only true measure of our religion.

#### B. Effect: The religious expression of this one is useless (26d)

“religious expression” usually refers to the rituals and outward activities of religion.

James says these are functionally no different than any other activity if they aren’t connected with an underlying reality of true religion

James says that in this case, their religion is empty, powerless and completely useless.

People can fool themselves, and they can sometimes fool others, but they can never fool reality, because you cannot fool God.

Only genuine religion and godliness has any real power and significance.

Pos: God-approved religion. (27)

James now turns to describe this genuine religion and godliness which he commends as an alternative to the empty profession of religion without reality.

C. This is religion which is morally pure and undefiled before [our] God and Father (27a)

“religion” is the same word used above, translated “religious expression”

James describes the possible expressions of religion that are free from guilt and any moral or ritual defilement, with God as the standard

Some expressions, activities and attitudes of religion can be impure and defiled, especially when measured by our self-deceived heart

But James mentions that which is measured as pure by God’s standards.

D. To look after the defenseless and to keep morally pure (27b-c)

1. To care for orphans and widows in their affliction. (27b)

“to care for” means to take the initiative to visit people with helpful intent – to look in on them and to look after them

James mentions two classes of people that were especially vulnerable and needy in his culture – orphans and widows

James’ qualification (in their affliction) could be understood in two ways: either to give them special care in times of affliction/difficult circumstances, or to give them consistent care, assuming that their lives as orphans/widows are characterized by difficulty

Modern Christians need to take care to avoid two opposite mistakes in this regard:

- 1) We can elevate care for the disadvantaged to the core of Christianity, and thereby neglect or forsake the centrality of the cross of Christ. Our horizontal responsibility to other people can never overshadow our vertical relationship with our God.
- 2) But we can also focus on our vertical relationship in an unhealthy way that will neglect our horizontal responsibilities to people made in God’s image. James is pointing out that true religion – true relationship with God – will result in our caring for truly needy and dependent people in our midst. To forsake the truly needy is a sign that our hearts are not fully following God. The quality of our relationship with people flows out of the quality of our relationship with God. Therefore, our relationship with God is the highest priority.

2. To keep yourself morally spotless from the world. (27c)

This is the counterpart to the previous statement.

We need to be involved in society in order to care for the truly needy in Christ’s name. But at the same time, we need to avoid letting the society be involved in us. We are to be in the world, but not of the world. We are to influence our culture, yet not allow our culture to influence the church.

No compromise is allowed or healthy in this matter. We are to remain spotless.

“the world” in James (like in John and Paul) has connotations, not just referring to the planet or human society in general, but referring to humanity characterized by neglect of and/or rebellion toward God. It is humanity living without considering any demands or requirements of God.

This pressure to go along with the secular system is intense in our current culture, but we cannot have true religion if we give in to this temptation.

The world is happy if the church takes care of orphans and widows, as long as it does not bring God into the picture. The world wants the benefits of God without God. But that is impossible, and we cannot go along with this mindset or we will likewise be drawn into their judgment.