
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: the history of God's people

We praise You, Lord God, for Your justice! Without justice we would be lost, and we would not know how to manage the world! Raise up prophets who will reveal the wrongs in our society and culture, and declare Your Word to all who will hear. Raise up men and women of impartiality who will fight for what is honourable and right, so that we may live peaceful lives. Raise up a people of justice who will become a beacon of light in a world of darkness. In all these ways, bless us with Your justice we pray. **AMEN**

For myself

Give thanks to God for some of the small things of life you have not thought to remember in your prayers at other times, such as the clothes you wear, the provision of light, technology, the seasons, and much more. Let your mind range over the many things you encounter in life that you assume will always be there and have never thought about.

For others

Pray for those you have met recently, especially any you have had in your home, as guests, for a meal, or visiting you from church or house group

Meditation

In this world,
What is magnificent can often let you down;
What is grand may hide essential quality;
What is impressive might hide many faults;
And our grandest projects often fail to last.

Why is it therefore,
That even though we know these things,
We still glamorise extravagance and size.
How different from the teaching of Christ;
Who counts hairs on heads and honours the poor

The truth is that;
What is ordinary will often be wonderful;
What is simple can be found to be wise;

What is small could be of great importance;
And the meekness of Christ is an example to us all.

Bible Passage

James 1:26-27

²⁶ Whoever thinks they are religious, but deceives the heart by not keeping a tight rein on the tongue, demonstrates religion that is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and untainted before God the Father, is this: to help orphans and widows in their troubles, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Review

The first chapter of James' letter is a broadside of strong and pertinent advice to the church from this great Christian leader and brother of Jesus. He speaks on a range of subjects, from faith and doubt (1:6), to the rich and the poor (1:9), temptation (1:12f.), and much more. Now, he turns his attention to something rather different, to what is meant by '*religion*' and good religious practice.

In summary, James' message in these two verses is that true '*religion*' can be summarised in this way; '*restrain your speech and do good deeds!*' The contrary side of this message is that amongst many unworthy human attributes that exist, the '*tongue*' has potential to undo what is good. As James puts it here, those who do not keep a reign on it demonstrate '*religion that is worthless*' (1:26). His brief list of what constitutes good religion focusses on the Biblical injunction to promote the cause of '*orphans and widows*' and also on the need to walk the pathway of Christian holiness, '*to keep oneself from being polluted in this world*' (1:27).

If we are to study this passage properly, we must pause at this point and look carefully at the word '*religion*', because it is not a word with which most Christians are comfortable. Most are very coy about the term, and shy away from an attempt to call their faith '*religion*'. An exception to this can be found amongst Christians of more traditional churches for whom the term 'the religious' refers to those who have submitted themselves to 'religious orders', such as the priesthood, monks, nuns or the diaconate. But commonly, people try to separate themselves from the many sects and other religious beliefs within our world, by describing their faith not as '*religion*', but belief in Jesus who is the truth about God, not a manufactured series of beliefs and religious practices.

This is all understandable, but it places the serious student of the Bible in something of a quandary, because the word is used in rather a different way here. The word James uses means '*pious*', or '*god-fearing*', which is a general description of someone whose lifestyle demonstrates to other people his or her belief in God. We could therefore précis James' message here like this; '*if you want to show people your faith in Jesus, then don't speak too much, support the poor, and keep yourself apart from sin*'. James would say that this is '*true religion*', and we must accept this word without allowing our prejudices about the word religion make us gloss over his message. It is perhaps best to think of the word '*religion*' as meaning something like '*faith-in-practice*'; of course, some will have religious beliefs that are not Christian, but that does not mean that a Christian should not demonstrate what they believe by what they do. Jesus calls us to do precisely this.

To start looking more closely at this passage, we should now recall that in much of his letter, James crystallised the teaching of Jesus. So we will now turn to this in order to gain a better understanding of what he says, particularly about the use of the *'tongue'*.

If you have read through any of the Gospels, you will be familiar with Jesus' many battles with the scribes, Pharisees and religious authorities of the day. In the Sermon on the Mount (e.g. Matt 6:1-18) He denounces their interpretation of the ancient laws of Moses as pious nonsense. In response, they corner Him and try to trick Him with questions into blaspheming against God or breaking the law (Matt 12, 16:1ff, 22:15 etc), they wanted to limit His influence on the people of Israel and Jerusalem. What is interesting here is that the opposition to Jesus here is verbal. Now Jesus did not believe that words were evil. He taught that words were important and should be used with care, both in prayer (Matt 6:1f.) and in all normal life, and He demonstrates this within His ministry. On one occasion He is said to have dealt with a situation 'with a word' (e.g. Matt 8:16) and He also asks people sometimes to remain silent or at least be careful in what they have to say (e.g. Mark 9:30, 14:61).

In his letter, James continues this teaching when he fights against false teaching (3:14), and says here, *'keep a tight rein on the tongue'* (1:26). Too many words lead, he says, to deception. These are strong words, but they are Scripture, and it does not take much thought for us to appreciate why James might say this, after reflecting on the life of Jesus. It is also quite possible that James had also seen what damage the 'tongue' could do to draw people away from the pure Gospel. Jesus had been hounded to death in Jerusalem by people with silver tongues, and James was naturally cautious about people who spoke too much. This is wise advice.

After pointing us to the dangers of the tongue and too much speech, James describes further what counts as *'good religion'*, or *'faith-in-practice'*. To this end, he refers to the classic Biblical examples of what we might call *'good works'*. Almost every point at which the Old Testament speaks of the obligations of Israel, it tells us that the 'law' requires God's people to be generous to *'widows and orphans'* (as in Deut 10:18, Micah 6:8, Isaiah 1:17 etc. and also Matt 5:3ff, 19:21 etc). These were the true poor of Israel because without male protection in their day, they had no income, no possessions or land, and no means to provide for themselves. In God's graciousness, however, He obliged all God's people to leave the gleaning of the harvest to them (see the story of Ruth), and gave instructions about including them in all Israel's festive activities (Deuteronomy 14:29f., 16:11f., Psalm 68:5 etc.). Today, we must take these principles and apply them to the true poor of our time, whoever they are.

The last feature of this passage is found in its last sentence, in which James appeals to his readers to be serious about *'keeping oneself from being polluted by the world'* (1:27). Above, I described this as a call to Christian holiness, but why? The notion of holiness in Scripture is precisely that of being 'set apart' from the world for the purposes of God. Of course, no human being can live completely separated from the world, though monks and hermits have attempted to do this through the centuries, with remarkable regularity and with varying success. For the everyday Christian, James' words are perhaps more helpful, because they identify a state of heart in which the believer strives to resist the world's ways. This does not mean complete separation from the world, but an uncompromising attitude towards its conventions and practices, in favour of what is holy before God. This is the best pathway of Christian holiness.

So James continues to show us something of the pathway of Christian living. His words are indeed concise and his teaching focussed on that of Jesus. Surely, we can all take these elements of teaching and do our best to apply them?

Discipleship

Application

The practice of religion

There is no escaping James' challenge here. We all know well that words often light a fire that cannot easily be extinguished, exacerbating even minor problems. We also know that if our faith has degenerated into a matter of church attendance on Sundays, then we are far away from the practical godliness and discipleship to which we are called, and our speech about God and the church will probably reflect this. How can this be rectified? We can start only by accepting our problems and presenting them to the Lord in repentance. Then we will be in a position to learn from Him and find the discipline to speak in a way that is pleasing to Him.

The use of the tongue

The way we use words differs in each generation, and today, we often encourage people to 'speak their mind'. Unfortunately, with this encouragement, some will quickly express their feelings without careful consideration, and others will remain silent because they feel they cannot compete. Damage is caused in the church when people say too much, both in the church and outside. Wise considered speech is something to be valued in any culture and in any age, and James identifies this as god 'faith in practice'.

Ideas for what to do

- Write down a list of occasions you recall when you think that words someone has spoken have undermined the truth of a situation. How should this be dealt with?
- Pray to God for wisdom in speaking the truth at all times, and read again some of the scriptures in this passage to help you understand more about the scripture's advice about the use of the tongue.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What impression do you gain of what James calls 'religion' in this passage of scripture?
2. Is it possible to learn to change the way you 'use your tongue'? Why is it so hard to change the way you speak to others? What is involved apart from the tongue?
3. How are you involved in helping the poor of the world? What ought you to be doing to help the poor of the world?

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Friend, give us peace in the midst of strife, joy in the midst of unhappiness, and grace in the midst of trouble. By this we know your love and affection, and may we never take it for granted. Thank You Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN.