

## **Jas10 – Authentic Religion James 1:26-27**

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Open your Bibles. Title of the message today, “Authentic Religion.” In our tenth message we are looking at finishing chapter one of James. We are looking at verses 26 and 27 this message.

Here’s the subject: Religion. What is it? How do you define it? Is religion good or is religion bad? Is there an “authentic religion” or should we be against all religion? And we love this line, “It’s not a religion, it’s a relationship.” Don’t we? My question to you, is there such a thing as an “authentic religion” that should emerge from that relationship?

The problem with these questions is the definition of the word “religion.” I could very easily spend this entire message just defining the word “religion.” There are so many definitions of this word; it would just become educational if I tried to explain the way all the ways this word is defined. To so many Christians the word “religion” has only a negative meaning (connotation.) But today we are going to read this statement from God’s Word: ***Religion that is pure and undefiled before God . . .*** Does that mean there is a pure and undefiled religion? Does that mean there is an authentic religion? Well, that depends on how you define the word – which we are going to do this message.

Let’s pray. *Heavenly Father you’ve done great things among us. And you desire now to pierce us with your Word. That’s your desire, Lord. Your desire is to use the scalpel of your Word to drain the poison from our hearts. And so we say right now Lord, do your work. Do your work on us Lord, we are not afraid. We know you and know you are merciful and graceful, that you are compassionate, God. And so we pray drain the poison that’s in our hearts, bring healing to us through your Word, in Jesus’ name, amen.*

Previously in chapter 1, James has said if we are hearers only and not doers of the Word then we have deceived ourselves. And now he is going even further and saying that even in our *doing* we might be deceiving ourselves. Jeremiah 17:9 says our heart is deceitfully wicked and James, maybe more than any other New Testament book, gives us the opportunity to expose our deceitfully wicked heart. The Word of God, through James is challenging, it is piercing and it exposes the deceitfulness of our self nature. We must allow the Word of God to do its job. We must allow the surgeon’s scalpel to reveal the infection in us. We must allow it, so that (through repentance) the Holy Spirit can wash us clean with the cleansing blood of Christ.

So, to prepare our hearts for the healing scalpel of God’s Word, let’s wrestle with this word: **religion**. As I said, there are far too many definitions of this word for me to dive

too deep into it. So allow me to focus our attention on two contrasting definition that we clearly see in our verses today.

Two contrasting definitions of “religion”

#1) *Outward actions WITHOUT an inward reality*

#2) *Outward actions BECAUSE OF an inward reality.*

We are certainly aware of that form of religion that comes from no “life changing relationship” with Jesus Christ. That religion is man’s attempt to reach God or man’s attempt to look a certain way or achieve a certain goal by cleaning up the outside of their lives with no real “inner transformation” by the life of Christ. Most of us can easily point to those people with criticism and scorn. The problem is, this message is *not about them*, this message is about *us*. This scalpel of God’s Word is meant to drain the poison from *our hearts*, not theirs. It really doesn’t do us much good to point this scalpel at them. The only real benefit of God’s Word is when we use it on ourselves. So the surgeon is ready if you are...

The first thing I’d like you to look for in these verses are the two contrasting forms of religion.

**James 1:26–27 (ESV)**

***26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.***

***27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.***

There is a stark contrast between the two forms of religion and it’s seen here even in the Words the Holy Spirit chose. The first “religious” is an adjective. It means: *living according to the tenets (system) of a certain belief.*

***If anyone thinks he is religious...*** If you think you are living according to the Christian belief system...

But the second and third words “religion” are nouns. They mean: *the activity of showing love or worship to God.* In fact this same word is translated “worship” in Colossians 2:18. So, that’s little different that the “worthless” religion, right? Verse 27 makes it clear; there is a form of religion that is pure and undefiled before God.

So, let’s review.

There is a religion that is worthless and offensive to God. It's the religion only focused on the outside. It's about looking right with no concern for a true inner life transformation by the power of God. It is external religion for man's sake. Jesus speaks to those who live in this worthless religion in Matthew 23:27-28. Historically, Jesus was speaking to the Scribes and Pharisees, but today Jesus is speaking to us! (So let's read it that way.)

**Matthew 23:27-28 (ESV)**

**27 “Woe to you, (insert name here) . . . , hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.**

**28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.**

That is the external religion that God hates and that we must be very afraid of.

However, there is also in James 1:27 a religion that is pure and undefiled. This second type of religion we can define this way: *the outward expression of a life that is truly transformed by Jesus Christ.*

**Authentic Religion** is: *the outward expression of a life that is truly transformed by Jesus Christ*

In our verses today we see a picture (in three examples) of a life that has been truly transformed by Jesus Christ. *But* please hear me when I say these are examples. They are not meant to be all inclusive. James is giving us examples in three key areas of our lives to see if we are truly being transformed or if we are just hypocrites like the Pharisees. The first example may pierce us the hardest especially if we think we are doing “pretty good” in the religious category.

**James 1:26 (ESV)**

**26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.**

The picture of bridling your tongue is like holding back a stampeding horse. And if you've ever had a stampeding horse get away from you, you know what it's like to try to hold that back. *That* is the power of your tongue.

The great John Wesley preached once with a woman snarling and sneering at him the entire message (I know how he feels.) After the sermon the woman came up and began to criticize the length of the ribbons that hung down from his new bow tie. And so asking someone to bring a pair of scissors, John Wesley told the woman that if the ribbon of his

bow tie were offending her that she could cut them off, which she quickly did. Then Wesley asked for the scissors and said to the woman, “Ma’am there is something of yours that is also offensive to me because it is also too long... could you please stick out your tongue?”

We can so easily see ourselves as religious but our tongue reveals our true spiritual condition. Our tongue reveals whether we are deceiving ourselves. Our tongue reveals whether our religion is useless.

R, Kent Hughes says,

***An out-of-control tongue suggests bogus religious devotion, no matter how well one’s devotion is [otherwise] carried out.***

Our tongue betrays us. Our tongue reveals our true spiritual condition.

The most consistent damage done in every church I’m aware of its damage done by the tongue. In every church people who’re convinced they’re good Christians continue to damage the body of Christ with their tongue. And the Holy Spirit says they are deceiving themselves and their religion is useless! And I would expand that to say their religion is useless to them but they are truly damaging the body of Christ. Please, please watch out for these people. They say they’re devoted to Christ but their tongue betrays their true condition. James says they are self deceived and their acts of devotion are useless.

And it’s very easy to say, “Oh yeah, I know someone like that. In fact they are sitting two rows in front of me.” But, what if they are saying the same thing about you? Do we have the courage to put ourselves under this scalpel of God’s Word? Are we willing to allow the Holy Spirit to apply this truth to us, personally?

Again, R. Kent Hughes quotes John Calvin:

***When people shed their grosser sins, they are extremely vulnerable to this [one]. A [person] . . . will be a shining light of outward religious observance—and yet will revel in destroying the character of others . . . it is a lust for vilification. This explains . . . the bloated pharisaical pride that feeds indulgently on a general diet of smear and [criticism].***

Please hear this critically important advice. When these people begin poisoning you with slander and criticism simply ask them two things: Ask them to stop talking, as in “shut-up” and ask them to not talk to you again until they have dealt with their sin. That is for their good, it is for your good and it is for the good of the body of Christ.

And if that is you, acknowledge that your tongue is uncontrolled and damaging and that your acts of devotion to God may actually be worthless. And if we'll accept that, hopefully we'll be sufficiently motivated to truly repent and to be transformed from the inside out.

So the first example of authentic religion is the bridling of our tongue. The second example of authentic religion is in verse 27.

**James 1:27 (ESV)**

***27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction . . .***

To visit means to care for, to look after orphans and widows in their difficulty. This is a common example used in all of the Bible of what is required of God's people. It is an example of God calling us to care for those who are unable to care for themselves. And it's not just caring for them "impersonally" or "from a distance" like, "I gave at the office." This is meeting them where they're at, getting to their level and helping them carry their burden right alongside them. It's giving high priority to those the world gives low priority to. It's seeing Jesus in those who have the greatest needs.

When Jesus was teaching on the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 he says:

**Matthew 25:34–40 (NLT)**

***34 "Then the King will say to [the Sheep] . . . 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom . . .***

***35 For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.***

***36 I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'***

***37 "Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you [and do these things for you] . . .***

***40 "And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!'***

How we handle the least of these, how we treat the most needy in our lives what priority we give them reveals our true level of transformation in Christ. It reveals whether we are living in *authentic religion* or in *worthless religion*. Again, let's not deceive ourselves, let's not lie to ourselves. Instead let's allow the conviction of the Holy Spirit to bring us to true repentance and true transformation in our life with Christ.

Finally, the third example, if we can handle one more, is at the end of verse 27. Let's read this from the NLT.

**James 1:27 (NLT)**

***27 Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means . . . refusing to let the world corrupt you.***

If bridling our tongue and caring for the helpless haven't knocked us to our knees, certainly this third blow should. Authentic religion is refusing to let the world corrupt you. We are seeing here three areas that James will return to over and over again in all areas of genuinely living for Christ.

Bridling our tongue,  
Caring for the helpless,  
Being separate from the world.

The Greek word is **KOSMOS**. It means the world system. It's the system of logic and desire that drives this world. And James say to authentically live for Christ is to refuse to allow this world system to corrupt you. One commentator put it this way: ***"It's becoming so Different FROM the World - that you can become the Light OF the World"***

If you are living in darkness, how can you be the light of the world? But how can we be the light of the world while protecting ourselves from the world? **How can we be the light of the world while protecting ourselves from the world?**

The answer is having the life of Jesus Christ in us. The life of Christ in us must be so big that we can be *in* the world but not *of* the world. Our relationship with Jesus must be so real and so strong that we have the power to refuse to allow the world to corrupt us.

The answer to all three of these challenges is a real, genuine, ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. *Authentic religion is having such an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ that every area of our life is transformed.* Our tongue no longer does the damage it used to do. Our care for those in need is no longer dismissed and ignored like it used to be. Our lives are no longer corrupted by the world system of sin like they used to be.

Authentic religion is the outward expression of an authentic, transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. As Romans 12:12 says, authentic religion is presenting yourself to God as a living sacrifice...Not being conformed to this world, but being transformed by the power of God living inside you... and *that* transformation will absolutely show in your actions.

There is an external, deceiving surface display of religion that God says is worthless. But there is also an authentic religion that is pure and genuine and acceptable to God. That authentic religion comes only from having an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ. It can only come from the power of Jesus Christ truly transforming your life from the inside out. And so, authentic religion is the outward expression of an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ.

There are false religions all around us and we may even be able to quickly point them out. But this single, biggest false religion – the false religion we should be (by far) the most concerned about – is the false religion of our own lives. This is where we are able to go through the motions, where we are able to come to church and act right, yet be living in total self delusion. Deceiving ourselves into thinking we're okay because we are acting religious, but having not authentic relationship with Jesus Christ, thus making our religion worthless.

The answer is to repent and to allow Jesus Christ to live fully and completely in our lives, transforming us from glory to glory into his image, as you behold his glory, 2 Corinthians 3:18 says. Every day in every way, be changed from the inside out because of the life of Christ in you.

*Let's pray. Lord Jesus, please forgive us. We repent, Lord. (If this is you, man, get to repenting. Don't struggle with this. Recognize that you've been living a religion that's worthless, external. That you care more about what other people think of you than what God sees. Allow yourself to be laid open on the altar. Allow God to drain the poison out of your black heart. And I will do the same.) Lord, right now, we give you full right, full access, forgive us, Lord, and change us. We repent of our worthless religion. And we say Lord Jesus, we want you. We want you personally, we want your life. We want your power, we want your Spirit. We want to be transformed from the inside out by just being in love with you, by beholding your glory. Lord we want to be transformed from the inside out. Come into our lives and fill us to overflowing. Save us. Make us yours, fill us with your Spirit and give us authentic religion. In Jesus' name, amen.*