

James 1:26-27 – April 10, 2022
Do I Consider Myself to be Religious?
J.D. Farag

For those of you that are here, if you're able, I'll ask you to stand. If not, where you're seated is fine. You can follow along as I read.

Beginning in verse 26, James by the Spirit writes, **"Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless."**

I'm sorry, I'm chuckling. "

"Religion [verse 27] 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."

Let's pray, if you would please join with me.

Oh, Lord, thank You for your Word and this passage that we have before us today here in Your Word. Lord, this particular passage is one that really requires the Holy Spirit to open up the eyes of our understanding so that we can see what it is that You want to show us here. Because arguably at first read, it's a little bit - I don't want to use the word "confusing," but it can be easily misunderstood.

And so Lord, would You give us understanding? Would You clear up this issue regarding religious and religion for us today? And in so doing, Lord, would You minister to us? And as now we're in Your Word, Lord, we want Your Word to be in us.

We search the Scriptures. But the reality is, is that the Scriptures search us, and that's what we want You to do today is by the Holy Spirit, as only You can, search our hearts and see if there be anything at all that is hindering us or keeping us from knowing You, hearing You, loving You, Lord.

And Lord, If there is, put Your finger on it. And as You're always so gentle to do, and faithful too, just, would You remove it, Lord? Because we don't want anything to hinder us in our relationship with You, and certainly religion can do that.

So Lord, we're asking You to bless our time together in Your Word today, We pray in Jesus' name, amen and amen.

You can be seated. Thank you.

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So what I'm hoping to do today with the help of the Holy Spirit, is answer this often asked question of: Do I consider myself-religious?

Doubtless, you've been asked this or you yourself-have said this. "Well, I really don't consider myself to be a religious person."

And of course, that is fraught with all kinds of misinterpretations and misunderstandings. And a lot of it has to do with the word "religion."

And so many are quick to say, well, religion is what man does for God, but Christianity is what God has already done for man. And that's true. But, and there is a but here, according to James, by the Holy Spirit, there does seem to be something more to this matter of religion because he says that there is a pure religion, a faultless religion that is acceptable in this sight of the Lord.

And then he defines it, so we need to address it. If you'll kindly allow me to, we'll start by addressing what true religion means then ask and answer three questions in this regard.

Now first, and this is important, the word for "religious" in the original language of the New Testament Greek is always used negatively. What you'll find throughout the pages of Holy Writ is whenever this word "religion" or "religious," the "religious leaders," it's always in a negative sense, has a negative connotation. It's this connotation of someone who fancies themselves as being outwardly religious when in fact inwardly they're anything but in the true sense of what pure, undefiled, faultless religion is.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the *Colossians* in *Chapter 2* beginning in *verse 20*, he says, **"Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world."**

This is important, by the way, it's going to come back into play at the end. "If you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world do you subject yourselves to regulations - 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle, ' which all concerned things which perish with the using, according to the commandments and doctrines of men?"

And then he says this, *verse 23*, **"These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, [Oh, you appear so religious]"**

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(Oohmmm- meditation chanting)

And he goes on to say, not just "**self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.**"

Wow, this is what James is saying. The Apostle Paul is echoing this here, and this is true. Religion says, "Do, do, do!" And Christianity says, "Done, done, done."

Because religion, again - Example: Islam is a religion, false religion, and Mohammed is a false prophet and Allah, false god. And by the way, please know that Allah is not the same as Jehovah. Allah is the name, not the title. Allah is a false God. Islam: a false religion. And Muhammad: a false prophet.

Now, what is Islam? Well, it's a religion that says this is what you must do for God. That's religion. And it's the opposite that's true because it's not what I must do for God, it's what God has already done for me. He became a man, and He died for man.

So all of this talk of being religious; I would consider myself to be a religious person.

Okay, what does that mean? It's all outward. And oh, by the way, it would seem that it's also, as we just read, self-imposed. Now, why is this important? Because it's saying outwardly, I'm a religious person, which has absolutely no value.

And like both the Apostle Paul and the Apostle James, it's worthless, inconsequential. Here's an illustration. So let's say you're in town and you come upon a sign and that sign says, this is not the way to Kaneohe.

[Laughter]

Wait, have you seen that sign? (Chuckling) I mean, how worthless is that? Of what value – Listen, if you've got a better illustration, you let me know afterwards; I'm happy to use it. This is the best I got, so...

I mean, that's what religion is. It's like that sign that says, this is not the way. Well, that's worthless to me, that's of no value to me. I need a sign that says, this is the way, this is the direction, and this is how many miles to get there.

Now, that's of value to me. That has worth. Now we can talk.

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Okay, well, let's talk about it. Thankfully, the text before us today provides us with that sign, that redirection, if you prefer, as it relates to what religion is not and what true religion is. So it's with this understanding that I would like to pose three questions that all of us, myself included, would do well to ask ourselves.

And as we begin with prayer, let's all of us allow the Holy Spirit to really search our hearts concerning this. What I'm hoping to accomplish is that we can, in asking and answering these questions, answer the ultimate question of: Do I consider myself-to be a religious person sincerely and more importantly biblically?

Because the average person on the street, as it were, when you share the gospel with them, that's their perception of you.

Oh, you must be a religious person.

And then we should be ready with an answer to give to everyone who asks of that hope that lies within us. Well, actually, I am not religious.

In fact, you know - have you heard this one?

Before we jump into this, have you heard this one? You probably, even maybe yourself, referred to this one. I don't believe in organized religion.

Oh, praise the Lord because that's a good thing, by the way, so you know, organized religion. Religion, religion.

Well, here's the first question, and it's a doozy. It's in verse 26.

Am I a talker?

Ooh.

Now, James is going to take and tackle the taming of the tongue in great detail, I might add, when we get to chapters 3 and 4. Actually, virtually the entirety of Chapter 3 is about this little piece of flesh in our mouths that we call the tongue, that we use to praise God and curse man.

So - but he brings it up here first.

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And the question becomes one of why? Why would he exhort us to keep a tight rein, as some of your translations render it, bridle the tongue, here in Chapter 1, when he's going to devote quite a bit of time to it by the Holy Spirit in Chapter 3, and then again he's going to even refer back to it in Chapter 4? So why here? Why now?

And I don't know if you noticed this or not, and it would be good to point this out so we don't miss it. We talked about it last week. He brings up being self-deceived again. He said that in the prior verses, and now he's saying it again?

Do you get the impression that this is a serious issue, this propensity that all of us have to deceive ourselves?

Do we really understand and fully grasp what that means, that we can so deceive ourselves as to lie to ourselves and believe our own lies?

Now, this is going to be germane to our understanding as we get into this. So again, the question is: Why would he talk about bridling the tongue?

Now, in this context, it almost seems at first read to be out of context, like it doesn't quite fit in with what he just got done saying and now what he's saying concerning religion and being religious.

This last week I spent a little more time and did a deeper dive into this. And I want to share with you what I found because it really makes sense and fits in with the context of being a doer of the Word of God because that's what this is in the context of.

Now, again, he's going to talk about the tongue in Chapter 3, but he's talking about it right now in the context of being a doer of God's Word. So I turned to an old English commentary, and I want to share with you some excerpts and some edits just because it's such an old English commentary.

But the commentator gets right to the heart of the matter concerning this tongue, bridling the tongue, reigning in the tongue. You know, God, gave us a fence, a white picket fence to keep that thing in.

[Laughter]

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You probably could have gone the rest of the day without that picture. But listen to what he has to say. **"The apostle, having shown the blessedness of those who are doers of the Word, now shows who are only listeners and do not put the Word into practice."**

And he gives as an example the evils of the tongue.

Question: Before I comment on the words any further, I will inquire why James places so much weight on this one thing. It seems so insignificant in itself and seems to have so little reference to the context.

Answer: This is usually the hypocrite's sin. Hypocrites, of all people, are least able to bridle their tongue. They have too good an opinion of themselves. Self-love is the ground of hypocrisy. They do not search themselves or suspect themselves of any evil. They are too easy on themselves but too severe on others.

Those who seem to be religious are the most free in criticizing and complaining about others. They are aware of the guilt of their own spirits and so are most prone to suspect others. Criticism and complaining is a trick of the devil, which excuses indignation against their own sins. Gracious hearts reflect most on themselves. There is such a quick interchange between the tongue and the heart.

That, says the Apostle, is why their religion is worthless. They cannot keep a tight rein on their tongues.

Seneca said, 'Speech is the express image of the heart. ' And someone greater than he said, [Speaking of the Savior] **"Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,"** *Matthew 12:34*.

Stay with me. You've got somebody, and notice the specificity with which James, by the Spirit writes it, they consider themselves religious. Oh, self-imposed, as Paul writes to the Colossians, self-imposed religion. In other words, that's how they see themselves, fancy themselves.

And wouldn't it stand to reason that someone who considers themselves to be religious - I'm sorry for the - I'm trying to get the point across.

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Doesn't it makes sense then and wouldn't it stand to reason then that someone who consider themselves to be religious would be condescending towards and critical of you?

Because after all, they're better than you because they consider themselves to be religious. It's all outward. And so interesting that it comes from the heart that is full of oneself, it's all pride. It's one thinking more highly of themselves than they ought.

They're full of themselves; they consider themselves to be religious, spiritual. And in order to keep up that facade, in order to keep that thing going, they've got to tear you down to lift themselves up and keep themselves up.

You know what's sad?

This can be said of many a marriage where the husband in his cowardly insecurity and carnality will tear down his wife the way he speaks to her, how critical he is of her. I'm going to use that as an example because there are those who have this critical spirit.

And you will almost always find that a critical spirit is synonymous with someone who, like James just said, considers themselves to be superior, considers themselves to be religious, and they do that to bolster themselves up.

And you know it because of what comes out. Good illustration I heard, just thought of; I think it's the Holy Spirit. What's in you will come out of you when you're bumped.

Watch this. You're carrying around a bucket, okay? And it's full of you, (chuckle) anyway. Okay, just work with me on this, okay?

So someone bumps you, or hits you, or offends you or whatever. Isn't what comes out of you that which is already in you?

So if you're full of yourself, what's going to come out? Oh! **"Because out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks."**

That's what James is saying here. So let's get back to our question. Am I one of those that just - You know, when you get to Chapter 3, it's more about slandering. Here, I think it's more about criticizing because after all, you consider yourself to be religious. And so it's more about cutting and criticizing.

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And how about this? Again, just allow the Holy Spirit to search your heart on that. How about complaining?

You know what complaining says?

This is unsuitable to me. This is unfitting for me because after all, I consider myself to be above this. That's where complaining comes from. It's birthed out of this very thing.

When you criticize and complain, what are you saying?

I mean, you don't have to say it, you already - but that's what comes out of your mouth. Oh, wow! It's all about you, isn't it?

We taught our kids this song when they were growing up. (singing) The world, it doesn't revolve around you, and life, it isn't fair. Ba boom, boom, boom. Everybody!

The world doesn't revolve around you! And life isn't fair. Get over it! Or as my wife always tells me, build a bridge and get over it.

So you know. It's all pride.

And so what do we do?

Oh, we start - It comes out because that's what's in there. **"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."**

And so we start talking and we don't stop. And that fence is open wide, and that tongue just gets going and starts talking, and it's not reined in. And it's criticizing and complaining.

And I'm going to take it one step further and then I'm going to move on because I'm getting a little convicted myself.

[Laughter]

Of course, I'm the pastor (chuckling). So we don't call it complaining, as pastors, we call it lamenting. It sounds so much more spiritual. You know, when things aren't going your way because after all, everything revolves around you, and so you start complaining and criticizing and blaming, by the way.

So what I wanted to do in taking it a step further before I move on is how about when - and we're going to talk about this at the end.

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How about when that critical spirit and complaining and blaming is towards God?

We're complaining and murmuring. That's what James is talking about here. There should be a holy fear, a holy fear of the Lord when it comes to keeping a - And by the way, how about our testimony and our witness when we're talking to the world but we're talking like the world all because of a tongue that we don't rein in?

Here's the second question, the first part of verse 27. Am I inconsiderate?

I find it most interesting that James, by the Spirit, would emphasize how that there is such a thing as pure religion in the sight of God, the religion that is acceptable to God. It's a religion that is considerate of those in need, specifically helping the helpless, particularly those who are orphans and widows that are in desperate need in their distress. And this is one of those places where you have to ask yourself "why" again.

Okay, why is that the qualifier?

Why is it so specific to the orphans and the widows? Well, first of all, in that day, in that culture, if you are an orphan or a widow, that was like a death sentence. And to help an orphan and to help a widow in that day, in that culture, was in effect, to save their life. That's pure religion.

But we still have this question of: Okay, why though, why is that what is acceptable in the sight of the Lord? Why does God deem that as pure religion?

That's pure religion, undefiled religion, as some of your translations render it. Answer: Because think about this, the orphan and the widow cannot do anything for you in return. See, you've heard that worldly expression - I'm kind of getting ahead of myself because that's going to be the next one which we'll spend the remainder of our time on.

But you know how the world says it, right? "You scratch my back; I'll scratch yours."

Oh, that's how it is, huh? What if I can't scratch your back?

Okay, well, no deal, no deal.

Oh, in other words, I'm only going to help those who I know will return the favor. I'm only going to be considerate, and you know - I'm asking the Lord to search my heart.

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You have to understand before I get up here on a Sunday morning, as is my privilege to every week, I have to own this. You cannot impart that which you do not possess. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, I can have the message, but does the message have me?

And I got to confess that sometimes I am so inconsiderate of others. And why is that?

Because it's self, it's me, it's everything revolves around me. What about me? It's that unholy trinity: me, myself, and I.

We are so inconsiderate, aren't we? When was the last time, and I ask this of myself, when was the last time that I did something for someone who I knew would never be able to return the favor? What was it? When was it?

Well, whatever it was and whenever it was, do you know that in the eyes of the Lord, whew! That's what I'm talking about right there. Now we're talking.

In My eyes, that is pure, undefiled You want to be religious? That, I'll accept that one. You want to fly under the banner of religion? I'll accept that because that's pure. There's no ulterior motives. It's a pure motive when you help those who can't help themselves.

And again, one last thing on this, and Jesus speaks to this in the gospels. Do you know that when you do something for someone like that, it's like you're doing it for the Lord? Think about it in the context of being a parent and someone does something for one of your children.

Well, let's flip it around since you're looking at me like that. How about somebody does something to one of your children? I'll never forget when my daughter came home from school one time, very young, and she was crying. I'm like, What happened? She was like, Oh, a boy was mean to me. I'm like, I will find him. Where does he live?

[Laughter]

That's my daughter! That's my daughter. You don't do that; it's like you did it to me.

Well, we'll flip it back. When you do something for someone like that, it's like you're doing it as unto the Lord.

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When did we give You a glass of water, Jesus? When did we feed You when You were hungry, Jesus?

I'll tell you when. When you did it to the least of these, My brethren, you did it for Me.

He's the God of the orphan and the widow, the fatherless. God takes notice of the orphan.

And you know what's really interesting is in the gospels, I find the Savior always attracted to the least and the last. They were attractive to Him.

It was the religious leaders [religious leaders] that were repulsive to Him. The harshest words that ever came out of the Savior's mouth were reserved for the religious leaders of the day. But it was the least and the last, the helpless.

I remember as a young believer, I hadn't read the Bible yet for the first time all the way through, and so I was kind of a blank slate, and I just assumed the same things that you probably assumed that were in the Bible.

You know that one verse that, you know, 'Cleanliness is next to godliness'. Well, that's in the Bible, right? No, it's not.

Okay, yeah, how about this one? 'God helps those who help themselves.'

Okay, that's not in the Bible. You knew that, right?

Okay. It's the opposite that's true. God helps those who can't help themselves. He's the God of the helpless.

And Jesus, in the gospels, You find Him going out of His way, and you've got literally crowds thronging and clamoring just to get to Him, just to touch Him.

How about that woman with an issue of blood? She gets to Him, crawls to Him just to touch His robe. What faith is this? And Jesus stops everything.

Wait! Who touched My robe?

Oh, He knew. He was wanting to draw attention to it.

And could you imagine?

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All the attention now is focused on her, and all she says is, I just knew if I, you know, I had enough faith to believe that if I just got to You and just touched the robe, Your robe, that I would be healed, and she was!

And Jesus was so moved by that. And He always draws attention to that. Here's a woman probably been to all the doctors over all the years. None of them could help her. All they did is charge her.

Sorry.

[Laughter]

Send her the bill.

[Laughter]

I mean that, with all due respect, but totally helpless, totally hopeless.

And what does the Lord do?

Oh, instantly she's healed. He knew that it had gone out from Him into her, and she was instantly healed. It's such a powerful account. 12 years of that!

And then there was also a 12-year-old girl at the same time. Oh, powerful, so powerful!

What's my point? These are helpless people. These are the down and the out, the least and the last, the lame and the blind and the cripple.

Remember the parable that Jesus taught?

You've got have this huge wedding feast; it's very prophetic in its typology. You've got this huge wedding feast. He sends his servants out, 'I want you to get the invitations out.'

And so they go out and they get the invitations out, and no RSVP's.

And God's like, really? Okay, forget them. I want you to go out to the streets to the lame, the blind, the crippled, the least, the last. I want you to give the invitation to them.

They RSVP'd.

You see the prophetic connection there?

It's always the least and the last.

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Why is that?

Because then God alone gets all the glory. God alone gets the glory. No flesh will glory in His presence.

Well, I wanted to save enough time, lastly, for this third one. And again, it's a doozy. They're all doozies, but it's in the second part of verse 27.

And the question is simply this: Am I worldly?

Do you want to close in prayer right now? Because I sure do.

All right, well, not so fast. This is very interesting for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that we're in the world, but not of the world. And now we've got James telling us to not be spotted or remain unstained by the world.

How am I going to do that?

I'm in the world, but don't let the world get in you. You're in the world, but not of the world.

But that's the problem, isn't it?

Let's kind of bring it full circle back to this issue of murmuring and complaining. I don't want to, but it's here and we have to.

Okay, so God gets the Israelites out of Egypt, which is a type of the world, by the way. Now He's got to get the Egypt out of the Israelites.

You know what happened, right?

There were these what are referred to as the mixed multitudes.

Who are they?

Oh, they're Egyptians that made the Exodus with the Israelites. So replete throughout the account of the Exodus, you have these times when they're out in the wilderness, and there's no water, and they start complaining.

And I mean, you talk about the complaint being against God. **"Were there not enough graves in the Egypt that God had to bring us out here to kill us?"**

And how about those times when God just says, Okay, really?

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And here comes the snakes and starts killing them. That's called a deterrent. It's Old Testament, I realize that, but... I just delivered you out of Egypt.

Looks like that's not even half the battle. The battle really is getting the Egypt out of you, getting the world out of you. I mean because you got too much Egypt in you. And the mixed multitudes surely don't help.

How about that account when they got sick and tired of the manna?

Every day: Manna, manna, manna. There's only so much you can do with manna. Manna burgers, manicotti. I mean, that's it.

[Laughter]

We want meat to eat! And they're complaining and murmuring and whew!

Manna: a type of Christ, by the way. For those of you that were with us during that study, fascinating typology. The manna is Jesus.

So apparently, they wanted to spice it up. And the manna was no longer good enough. They were bored with the manna, tired of the manna.

We want flesh!

Oh, that was your first mistake.

We want meat to eat. Can you just here them? We want meat! They're like walking down the streets with the signs, 'Meat to eat!'

Okay, you want meat to eat? So God says, I'll give you meat. That's fine.

So He sends the quail, and they gathered.

The measurement is homers; it's the first reference of baseball in the Bible. But they gathered, you know, (Chuckling) all this quail.

And it's very graphic, but we're told that they were so indulgent in the flesh that while the meat was in their teeth, they died; they choked on it.

God gave them over to it.

What's the point or Pastor, do you have a point?

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Yes, I do; I have a point.

That's the world. That's the world.

We're in the world, but is the world in us?

Does God have to get that Egypt out of us?

Because deep down inside we still crave the meat to eat. And oh, isn't it interesting that they have like this selective memory about what it was like when we were in Egypt? The leaks and the onions, the buffet.

Like, where did you - were we in the same bondage and slavery in Egypt? I never got buffet.

[Laughter]

I know that's a little bit silly, but you get the point, right?

They wanted what the world had to offer. Here's God faithfully, every - without fail, every morning that manna was there.

Everything they needed; God provided.

But it wasn't enough for their worldly appetites.

You know how it is with some foods you can develop a taste, an appetite. I think about the Mediterranean cuisine. Not everybody can, you know, not everybody likes that kind of food. You really got to acquire a taste.

I have victory in acquiring a taste for that food. But I mean, it's an acquired taste.

And isn't it interesting that sometimes the more you eat of something, the more you crave that something that you eat of?

Take sugar, for example. What is it about sugar and starch and even carbs for that matter, where the more you eat of that, the more you crave that?

There's something to that in the spiritual sense.

We've kind of got this appetite, this craving for the things of the world, and as such have become stained by the world.

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And what James is saying is, okay, you consider yourself to be religious. Let me tell you what pure undefiled religion is that's acceptable to God in the sight of the Lord. It's caring for the widows and the orphans in their distress.

And there's a second part to that. Remaining unstained, unspotted, undefiled, polluted by the world.

Yeah, but I'm in the world.

Yeah, but you don't have to be stained by the world.

Don't let the world and the appetites, the worldly appetites - listen, I'll be careful how I say this because I'll be misunderstood.

We're in the world. There's nothing wrong with having things in the world.

But the problem comes when those things have you, those appetites have you, when the world has you. Deep down inside, you crave the world, and you become stained by the world.

So let's recap and then we'll close.

Am I a talker? Do I just let that tongue go on and on, complaining, criticizing, murmuring, blaming?

Am I considerate? Am I considerate of those in need, those in distress, especially in our day and age, right, with this world the way it is, knowing that it's pure in the sight of the Lord because the person that I'm considering and helping can do nothing in return?

And then lastly, have I maintained this being unstained by the world, though in the world? Has there been things that have kind of crept in and taken up residence in my Christian life that are worldly? Have I developed a taste for, an appetite for the things of the world?

The Lord delivered us out of the world, the slave and bondage to sin in the world. Now let Him get the world out of you because, by the way, He's coming soon to take you out of the world.

I just picture when the rapture happens. Some of us are going to be like, Hey, can I take this?

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Reminds me of that story, lastly, I'll close with this. A guy shows up in heaven with all this gold, and the Lord's looking at him going, Dude, what, what's that?

Oh, it's gold.

And the Lord looks at him, and says, Dude, why would you bring asphalt up here? We use that for the streets.

[Laughter]

Okay, Kaponu, you better come up and save my bacon again. Why don't you stand up? We'll, close in prayer.

That's the world, isn't it? I think of that hymn of old, 'The World Behind Me, the Cross Before Me.' You can have this world but just give me Jesus.

Oh, Lord, I thank You. Tough stuff, but it's good. We need it. We may not want to hear it, but we need to hear it, Lord. (Sighing)

Lord, we want to be all of these. We want to bridle the tongue. We want to be considerate of the helpless, the orphans, the widows of this world. We want to be unstained by this world. Lord, thank You.

Thank You that we can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, not in and of ourselves, we cannot in our own strength and our own energy, just by our will power, strong will power, we can never do this unless You empowered us and enabled us by the power of the Holy Spirit to do this.

But this is what we want to be in Your eyes. So Lord, thank You for the "how" of the Holy Spirit to do the "what" of Your Holy Word, in Jesus' name, amen.