

James' Letter

2: True Religion

We are still in the introductory portion of James' letter where James is providing some general statements that sum up main ideas and key words from the letter as a whole. In this second half of the introduction, James builds on his teaching about why followers of Jesus should remain steadfast when their faith is tested. In doing so, he makes an appeal to the goodness of God despite the sin and evil that we experience in this world, and he explains the importance of receiving and responding to everything that God has said. According to James:

True religion is trusting that God is good and therefore responding in obedience to everything that He has said.

God is Good (1:12-18)

Scripture clearly affirms that God does in fact test us in order to expose the legitimacy of our faith and to reveal the nature of our hearts. So what does James mean when he says:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. (v. 1:13)

James is saying that God never lures or entices people towards sin. God *will* test our commitment to Him, but He will never tempt us to do any evil.

James goes on to declare that sin proceeds from no other fountain but man's own heart and desire. This is a difficult truth for many of us to digest because nothing is more common among men than to play the blame game when it comes to our own faults and failures. However, we can't free ourselves from our guilt of sin by blaming God. And to take it a step further, we can't even try and free ourselves from our guilt by blaming Satan. All too often, we blame shift our sinfulness on God or the deceptive lures and traps of Satan.

In your opinion, who is to blame for a fish that is caught on a hook? Is this the fish's fault or the fisherman's?

Think about it, a bait and hook is not tempting without a fish's inward desire to snag an easy meal. The fish is enticed by its own appetite; not the worm.

Satan's tricks and traps are utterly powerless without the corrupted desires of man's own heart. Temptation always comes from within, and therefore we are always the ones responsible for our own sins. When we are lured and enticed by our own sinful desires, we fail to recognize the hook and end up like the fish in a place where we are not meant to be.

And so, we need to understand that God will expose, but He will not entice.

God is good and only gives what is good. As James says, "Every good gift and perfect gift is from above and comes from our Father in heaven." God's perfect character does not change, but it is His desire to change us into becoming new creatures who become like Him and reflect His character (v. 1:17-18).

And so, we don't need to let our mind wander into negativity because of a hard situation that we might find ourselves in. We don't need to get discouraged and end up reducing our image of God and His goodness. Satan likes to make us think that God is holding out on us for some reason (Genesis 3:4-5).

The subtle whispers of demonic forces lead us to wonder:

"If God is so good then why is He not blessing me? If God is so good then why would He let me struggle or suffer like this?"

James urges us, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers" (v. 1:16). We can rest assured that God only works for our good and nothing ever changes His character. If it comes from God then it is good even if we cannot immediately see or understand the good in it.

God gives us goodness that makes us better not goodness that makes us happy. It is His desire to transform us into new creatures who become like Him and reflect His character. He uses all things in life (even trials and evil) to carry out this plan for our lives. At the end of the day, we must understand that it is better for me to be like Jesus than for me to be comfortable and without pain.

As any professional athlete can tell you, training and preparing your body to perform at its best is a long and painful process. Building muscle hurts. But we can be encouraged and know that God is always good and works all things together for the ultimate good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

True religion begins with trusting that God is good, and that He only does what is good for us.

Receive and Respond (v. 1:19-27)

As those who are intended to become more and more like Jesus, we must learn how to listen to God in the calm and unhurried silence of peaceful solitude. We are given example after example throughout Scripture where Jesus would remove Himself from chaos and seek out a private place of solitude where He could pray in silence to His Father in heaven.

God does not look to compete over the distractions and mental noise that we constantly fill our minds with. And so, if we want to hear God speak to us, we need to take care of the chaos and clutter in our own heart and mind that tends to drown out the voice of God.

Our lives here in this culture and society are full of constant distractions that hinder us from hearing what God might be trying to teach us. Spending regular time in stillness and silence is a lost art that we definitely need to rediscover.

We need to start approaching God humbly prepared as a silent student ready to let Him speak hard truth directly into our life. And then with honesty and sincerity, we can examine our lives with a willingness to repent and be changed.

James uses an agricultural comparison to describe the way in which we are to receive the Word of God. He says:

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (v. 1:19-21).

In order to cultivate a heart and mind where God's words can take root and grow, we must begin by getting rid of all the trash in our lives that obstructs and suffocates what God has said. We must receive all that God has said with a disposition that doesn't seek to resist it.

The seed of God's Word flourishes in clean hearts and minds that are ready to receive everything that He has said with humility and a mental readiness to be instructed by Him. Only then are we on our way to true growth in our faith and becoming more like Jesus.

However, cultivating a humble heart that receives God's Word with a mental readiness to grow in our understanding and faith is only half the battle.

James goes on to point out:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (v. 1:22-25)

To continue the agricultural metaphor a bit further, if the seed of God's Word does not sprout and eventually produce fruit in our lives then it is obvious that the Word of God was not implanted in our hearts as we assumed it was.

If our hearts and mind are truly receiving what God says about life then it will inevitably lead us to respond in obedience to what He has said.

Simply hearing, learning and studying your Bible does not produce spiritual growth; spiritual growth is only produced through understanding and doing what God says we should do.

What good is it to have knowledge of what to do and then not do it?

What good is it to check yourself out in the mirror in the morning and see that you need to shave and comb your hair before you go out and then just walk away and not do anything about it?

If we study intently what God's Word might be revealing to us then we should respond with a desire to do something about what we discover.

True religion is trusting that God is good and therefore responding in obedience to everything that He has said.

Simply thinking and claiming that we are a follower of Jesus is worthless.

We don't necessarily see someone as authentic and genuine because they talk a big game. We wait and see if their talk matches their walk and if doesn't then we begin to discredit their authenticity all together.

Our response to God's instruction is the evidence or proof of our salvation. A true disciple will always become like his Teacher. If we lack a heart that desires to do what the Lord asks us to do, can we truly say that we are followers of Jesus?

True religion is a devoted love for God that leads us to love those around us like Jesus did — especially the weak and powerless (v. 1:27).

And so James is pointing us back to how Jesus defined true religion.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

We must trust that God is good, love Him enough to obey what He has said and devote ourselves to loving others as God transforms us into new creatures who are becoming more and more like Jesus.