Introduction

Religion - True Devotion

The word religion is a tough word to wrap our heads around.

- And we probably have negative thoughts about the idea of being religious.
  - If someone asked you on the street, "Are you religious?"
    - You might say yeah, but you'd probably immediately clarify that you're a Christian.

But in our passage today, James isn't saying religion is bad; he's explaining the difference between true and false religion in the church.

Illustration: Larping: Bowling
If you went over to someone's house and they had a bunch of posters about the beauty of bowling, and they had a bunch of books talking about how great it is. And they had a shadow box of their favorite bowling ball above their mantel, you would assume they are very religious about bowling.

- And they said, I am very religious about bowling…that would mean that not only do they know a lot about it, but they would practice bowling and maybe do exercises to help them with it.
- You would be confused if they said, I have never actually been bowling, because I play tennis in my free time.

That would make their "religion" of bowling false. As the kids say, they are larping.

As a working definition, we can say "religion" is the actions and practices of our worship of the one true God.

So we could say religion, in its truest form, is our right response in practice that declares the beauty, worth, and significance of God.

It is a true devotion to something or someone.

With that, let's read today's passage:

Read James 1:26-27
Pray

[change slide]

Purpose Statement

True devotion to the Word of God made flesh has clear outworkings in our words and deeds.

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To support this summary statement of God's Word, we will look at the following arguments:

1. The Religion of our Words
2. The Religion of our Hearts and Hands
3. The Religion of The Word

[change slide]

Point 1: The Religion of our Words

Verse - [26] If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Summary Statement
Our devotion is revealed through the words we speak in the halls

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So, with our definition of religion, in its truest form, is our right response in practice that declares the beauty, worth, and significance of God, James says here:
If anyone believes they're living in right response to the implanted Word of Christ and does not have control of their tongue, then they are living a lie.

The Danger of Deception

Illustration: Halloween mask that I can't see out of
The costume and mask hide who we are from others, and also reduce our ability to see clearly.

The danger is that religion can become a mask that not only hides who we really are, but also something that blinds us to the realities of our souls.

In this instance, the activity that reveals the integrity of our religion is our tongue.
- That is, our words.
- And this is not pointing to the words we sing and say in this room.
- Rather, it is the words we speak in the hallways and our homes.
  - The words we speak at meals and in our cars.

And understand, James is not saying that these unbridled words **betray** our true devotion; rather, they **reveal** our true devotion.
- Our words in the halls betray the things we sing, say, and do in this room.

And to be clear, the unbridled words that empty our religion in this room are those words that do not build up.
They slander and cut others down.
- They are the words of gossip that are even sometimes veiled as "prayer requests"
- They are the words that do not seek the good of others.
- They are the words that do not hope in love.
- They are the words that are quick to judgment.
  - They lack empathy, charity, mercy, patience, and grace toward others.

- They are the words we might even feel justified in speaking and are quickly backed by legitimate support.
- They are the words that are quick to declare our innocence.
- They are the words that seek to separate.
- They are the words that seek to gather support for our base.
- They are the words that flow from our own ambition.
- And we say we are covered in the truth of the Blood of Christ, while we shed the blood of others as our car rides home.
- We say we gaze at Christ, while we glare at those whom He loves.

And I think in this modern age, this is not just the words of our lips; they are also the words of our keyboards.

- We type unbridled comments and messages, and those characters reveal our devotion.

And James goes on to say that because of our gossip, slander, and tearing down of others in the hallways and homes of the church, it renders every act of religion in this room worthless.

- The singing of our songs and the prayers we voice in worship become empty and vained.
- Their weight has been removed, and God is not pleased or mocked by the great costume cover-up that is the empty words and ways of those who clean the outside of the cup and tomb, while death pours out of our mouths and reigns in our darkened hearts.

And I know, even in saying that we hate hypocrisy and fake religion, we FEEL like our hearts are true.
Be very careful, O mortal, if on any level you feel a wellspring of self-righteousness in this moment.

- If your thoughts scream, yes and amen, let's unmask the hypocrites among us!
  - Your heart's slander of others betrays you!
  - Your practice reveals your heart's devotion.

The right and proper response to these things is repentance FOR EVERY person in this place, which includes yours truly.

James tells us this is a work of self-deception.

- It is a lie we tell ourselves, and so we are blind to our own falling short!
- We CAN NOT see it in ourselves.
  - As we will see in a minute, this is all before God; are we really willing to throw a stone at another person in the presence of God?

And so, before we move on, we groan our in prayer as David did in our Psalm from a few weeks back: **Psalm 139:23–24**

[23] Search me, (NOT THEM) O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
[24] And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (ESV)

Summary Statement
Our devotion is revealed through the words we speak in the halls

Transition:
Paul then moves to the practices of our True Devotion toward God.

[change slide]

Point 2: The Religion of our Hearts and Hands

Verse - [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.

Summary Statement
Our devotion is revealed in our practical care of the helpless and what is conforming us

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On the Other Hand

Again, last week we talked about how this is all born out of having received the implanted word of God.
James is talking about the false and true responses of those who have been given new life in Jesus.

The pure and undefiled activity of those who have received the Gospel of God in Christ Jesus is to attend to the great need of the orphan and widow.

- In that context, the orphan and widow were helpless.
- They had no way to support themselves.
- They were the ones that humanity had cast off.
- They were unfit to survive, and so they were left vulnerable to many different dangers and abuse, as they lived their lives in the margins.

And so James says, worshipper of the one true God, bridle your tongues, and instead of cutting down each other, use your hands to go and build up those in great need.

- Stop throwing stones at one another from the shelter of your homes, while widows and orphans are suffering in the streets.

And while James is **not trying to be exhaustive** here by saying these are the ONLY acts of right religion, he is saying this is certainly a part of right religion.

- Right worship of God will include acts of compassion for those in need.
- This, at the very least, is not simply an addition to our religion; it is A NECESSARY activity of any right religion!
- This is not a coordinate to be considered; this is a revelation of our understanding of all the coordinates.
  - You cannot truly LOVE the truth of God and neglect the helpless.

Visiting

Illustration: Advertising YOU
In marketing, they say the most irresistible word to use is the word "you"
Because it puts you in the center of the story.
And you see something interesting, or beautiful, and you click and inspect, and read, and learn about all the ways these things would help you…
Advertising is REALLY Good at showing you what you need, and it is really bad at looking to the needs of others.
No one is inspecting the ad that says, come find out what someone else needs.

And the language of "visit" here in James carries the weight of looking after, to lean toward and into, to inspect.

- This means that our care for the helpless is not a passive "as we go" mentality.
- This is more than our heads simply being on a swivel.

The truth is, when you live in an affluent suburb, you can insulate your daily life.

- Out of sight and out of mind.
- And our algorithms of normal life only feature the plight of those like us.
- And we say, if I SEE someone in need, we would be willing to consider, and we never "visit" or seek out the need that is just beyond our privacy fences.
- And unfortunately our churches can become the same.
  - We gather as a people of similar circumstances, and our needs are the only needs.

Before God the Father

And importantly, James mentions who the true audience of our religious activities is.

- The self-absorbed religious activities of man may fool us and other men, but the true audience of our religion is before God the Father!
- This is the one before whom you sing your song; He is the only true arbiter of what is acceptable.
- Don't be confused; He is the true destination of our offerings and hearer of our songs.
- Our prayers are unto Him.
- Our obedience and disobedience of His commands are unto Him.
- And so, it is in fear and trembling that we stand before a Holy, Holy, Holy God and hear what He has to say to us as those whom He has loved.
- And it is before Him alone that we hear what He has called us to from His breathed-out word with a posture of, I'll think about it for an hour and consider if I should respond.

And we are continually left untransformed, because we grieve the work of the Spirit in us, because hearts are made hard when we learn the religion of disregarding the truth we hear each Sunday.

This is Not New

And this clarification of right religion is not new.

Please open your Bibles and read this with me:

Isaiah 58:1–3

The problem is that the people of God are confused about why their religious activities seem to fall on deaf ears.

- They are seeking Him daily, and **they delight to KNOW His ways**!

Because knowing the TRUTH is their ultimate coordinate!

And YET we hear that they are frustrated in their worship!

- WHY is our offering not acknowledged?
- They fast before God, and yet He is unaware.

Let's read on to see the problem:

Isaiah 58:4-12

Okay, look back at verse 10…

[10] if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

And I know, if your inner lawyer hasn't already screamed objection, I'm sure they are doing so now.

- And I know what we are all hoping for here: something that softens the language.
- We need a therapeutic version of this passage, a version that says, but listen, don't take that too seriously, no need for discomfort.
- Look around at others to define the right response to God's word.
  - See what the religious culture says is right worship.

And that is a very effective way to comfort yourself, as we will all do what needs to be done to be justified before man.

- But, again, James just told us that this is about the right religion before God.

Unstained

And James ends this chapter by writing that part of our undefiled devotion to God is that we keep ourselves unstained from the world.

That is, keep watch over yourselves, and make sure that while you live IN the world, you are not becoming OF the world.

- And I think we can find what James has in mind by looking at what He has already said and what he will say.

The kingdom of man is quick to speak, and quick to anger.
The kingdom of man has no bridle on its tongue and keyboard.

- It seeks to win at all costs, even if it means cutting down the other.
- We can see it clearly in politics.
  - Campaigns are fueled by fear of the other.
    - Platforms are built on slander and destruction.
    - Being slow to speak and merciful is a weakness to be avoided at all costs.
      - You can't build a voting base on the orphan and widow, for they have no power.
      - So our voting is like our purchasing; it puts us at the center of the story.

And it leaks into our churches, and as James will go on to say in our next passage, instead of pursuing the poor, we prioritize the wealthy.

And that is the defilement of the kingdom of man.

- It is not of the Kingdom of our God!

And my heart screams, "Yeah, but… be reasonable." James is just giving us a sentiment, a truth to be understood.

- But much to the grief of the Rich Young Ruler, who sought to control God and get eternal life through the measured responses of his religious activities, and was told by Jesus to do the unreasonable work of selling all he had and giving it to the poor, I cannot find that comfortable lukewarm doctrine of God to eisegete into this text.

And also, understand the greater goal of our personal consecration.

- If we are meant to declare the compassion of God in Christ Jesus, then we must not only **do** what He did, but also **live** as He lived.

Hebrews 12:1–2
[1] Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (ESV)

The writer of Hebrews is making this same connection.

- In order to "do" the race that is set before us, in order to follow Christ in His sacrificial work to those in great need, we must "lay aside every weight of sin which clings so closely"
- The defilement of sin distracts and blinds us to the joyful work of following Christ to a daily cross of self-denial for the sake of those in need.

Summary Statement
And so, our devotion is revealed in our practical care of the helpless and what is conforming us

Transition: Thirdly and finally, let's take a minute to consider the big picture.

[change slide]

Point 3: The Religion of The Word

Summary Statement
True devotion/worship before the Father begins with beholding Him.

The Judgment of Truth

This week, as I considered James 1:26-27, I wondered: how much weight should we give this section?

- What level of emphasis should a church put on the pursuit of compassionate care for those who are helpless?
  - Is compassion for the marginalized another church program?
  - Is this meant to be a core value of the church?

I was reading through Matthew, and in **chapter 24**, Jesus talks about the end of the age and that no one knows when it will be; then he begins **chapter 25** by telling them to be ready, and then I read the section labeled the final judgment.

- And I was ripped apart, as it seemed that the Living God was declaring what true devotion to Him looks like.

I really need us all to see this together.
So if you have a Bible, please read this with me.
Matthew 25:34-46

And I am ruined.
Forgive me; I have been so consumed by my own headlines, I've been deceived.

Church, if you read this passage at face value and said, " What does it look like to DO OUR FAITH, what would you say?

- And please, pause the "yeah buts" for a minute, and let's allow ourselves to humbly hear the very heart of God in this text!
  - Hear what He cares for, hear what delights Him.
  - Hear who our King associates Himself with by saying, as you did or didn't do to one of them, you did or didn't do it unto me!

Does this not cut through so much clutter?

- Remember, our King gave us a very clear commandment to obey.
- Love God with everything you have, and love your Neighbor as yourself.

- And remember that Christ used the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain who our neighbor is.

And this all broke me.

- Like a sword that penetrates and divides my very soul and spirit, all the way down, and separates the joints and marrow.
- Seriously, on some level I felt not just exposed, but undone by seeing this heavenly final assessment of true religion.
- I became and am convinced that something has got to change!

Grace Received

And in all of this at the same time, the Gospel crescendoes in my heart!

And hear me clearly: While the Gospel of Jesus removes condemnation, it does not remove the conviction of this passage.

- If anything, the Gospel further provokes my heart, as I behold what He did for me!

Romans 5:5–9 (NASB95)
6 For while we were still **helpless**, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

While WE were helpless!

- We were without hope, without power, without any ability to even put ourselves in a place to receive the favor of God.
- We were living in the kingdom of death and dust, lame on our mats and unable to walk to the pool of healing.
  - In a manner of speaking, our tombs were already sealed, and we were bound tight in the grave clothes of our own self-absorbed defilement.

And it is in this completely helpless state that Jesus emptied Himself of what was His.

- And again, this work of Jesus is not a warm sentiment; it is not a creed or confession; it is not a distant doctrine of systematic theology; it is an actual bloody death in the flesh, with the full cup of God's wrath being poured out upon Him.

And what's more, Jesus is not simply a martyr for a good cause; He died in the place of His enemies!

See it for yourself:

7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.
8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.

And see it again here!

God did not just tell or teach us that He loves us.
Romans 5:8 says, He **DEMONSTRATED** His love toward sinners, so that we could be saved from His just wrath as those who have rejected and rebelled against Him.
If He did not demonstrate His Love, we would still be in our tombs.

Love in Truth is love in action

- We did not pursue Him; we could not!
- He visited; He pursued us in our tombs.
- So that we might be saved!
- That we might have life.

And He was tempted in every way and did not sin.

- While he lived in the world, he was not of this world.
- He lived undefiled and without stain before the Father and man.

So Then, Therefore

And so then, therefore!

We must see that our religion is not a set of actions and behaviors to earn a place in the kingdom of God.

Our religion is a response to the actions of the King who in a very real, tangible way, gave everything for us.

This is Witness, and every act of the true religion of God is born out of Witness.

- We are those who have first received this implanted and regenerative word of unimaginable grace!
- And we live a life that testifies to what we have received.
- Hearts, Hands, and Mouths that all show and tell the compassion of a King on His helpless enemies.

So what are we going to do?

- We do not now scramble to prove we are sheep and not goats!
  - We take our need for righteousness to God!
  - And find full satisfaction in the person of Christ!
- Before we demonstrate His Love we must first see that:
  - He is the bread that satisfies our hunger.
  - He is the living water that quenches our thirst.
  - He is the Righteous Clothing of God that covers us.

He is our true religion.

- And having received Him by the grace of faith, we now follow and obey Him in love.

And maybe the term social justice comes to mind.

- But that misses the point of this passage and what God is clearly calling us to.
- This is God's heart! This is what He loves.
- And so, I would hesitate to call these things anything less than the TRUE LOVE of GOD by those who are truly His!

Summary Statement
True devotion/worship before the Father begins with beholding Him.

Transition:

[change slide]

Conclusion

We are the Aroma

What now? What is the first step of response?

If we are to live like Jesus, we must live a life that demonstrates our love for Him.

We must FIRST go to Him!

Anything else would be a costume.

Illustration: My Child was being held by the man with cologne

I knew who he had been with.

And he could not help but smell like him.

Jesus calls us to this same thing, as we consider what our true devotion should look like.

John 15:5–10

[5] I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. [6] If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. [9] As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. [10] If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

Apart from Christ, we can do nothing.

That is to say, that apart from Him, all of our good works are emptied.

- They point to us, and not Him.
- We are meant to bear the fruit of Christ for the glory of the Father!
- And again, we walk as secure Children in Christ, and not orphans or enemies of God.
  - And in that security, we KEEP His commandments to Love God and therefore ACTUALLY Love others.

What the Bible is saying, what Christ is saying to His disciples, is that those who have seen their need, and in humility have received the implanted word of God, leading them to a relationship with Him, will absolutely carry His aroma!

- They will not be the unforgiving servant who was forgiven but did not forgive others.
- They will do what He did in the flesh.
- They will bear the Fruit of the Spirit!
- They will give the hungry food; they will give the thirsty a drink; they will show hospitality to the stranger in their land; they will clothe the naked.
- And in doing so, they are doing UNTO HIM!
- The King who associates with the lowly.

And we continually remember religion will not save us!

- But that does not make it bad.
- True Religion is the unmasked, right response to the one who has saved us!
- We are not performing; we are demonstrating!
- We are not producing; we are professing!
- We are witnesses who now find our joy in testifying!

We are revealing the God who as Psalm 68:5 says,

(He is the) Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. (ESV)

Church -

[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.

True devotion to the Word of God made flesh has clear outworkings in our words and deeds.

Pray

[change slide]