

Pure and Undeclared Religion

James 1:26-27

INTRODUCTION

People of God, religion has come under hard times in recent years. Many Christians are quick to say that Christianity is a relationship and not a religion. Even New Agers say they are spiritual, not religious. By rejecting religion a person can be as vague as possible as to the substance of their faith, what they believe and how they live. Religion, we are told is cold, and legalistic, and ritualistic, and is used only to control people.

Before we believe all the bad press religion receives, it would be good for us to define what religion actually is. The word 'religion' in English is derived from the Latin word 'religare' which means "to bind." Ancient Christian writer Lactantius said in the early 300's, "*We are tied to God and bound to him [religati] by the bond of piety, from which religion itself received its name.*"¹

Religion binds man to God, and binds us to one another so we can conform our lives to Heaven, for the good of society. This is our religious duty and obligation. Thus Jesus taught us to pray 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, one earth as it is in Heaven.'

Our religious worship provides in ritual a shared story that brings the worshiper into greater conformity to God and the Heavenly Pattern.

St. Patrick's Breastplate promotes this idea of the binding nature of religion.

¹ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.ii.iv.xxviii.html>

“I Bind unto Myself today the strong name of the Trinity.” By understanding this as a baptismal hymn, we sing of our entrance into the community of the Triune God and the Church. We bind ourselves together to Christ, to all who are in Christ, including the whole cosmic order. We bind ourselves to do the duty of loving God and His word, as we fight against the Devil and evil wizards. This is religion. It is our binding duty to God and one another.

The Lord’s Supper is also a religious ritual, which binds together the members of the church to give thanks to God for Christ’s death on the cross.

We can hear this meaning when I say in the liturgy, “It is very good, right, and our *bounden* duty, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto Thee.”

We are bound together as a religious society to perform our public duty of giving thanks to God in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which also inspires us to live self sacrificially for one another according to the example of Christ who gave his life for ours.

So, when James speaks of pure and undefiled religion, we need to understand what he is talking about. He is talking about the obligations and duties that Christian people are bound to do which will bring them and their neighbors into more perfect conformity to the Heavenly pattern. He spoke of it early as “the righteousness of God.” It is quite literally God’s Heavenly kingdom come to earth.

James gives us three examples of what this pure and undefiled religion looks like. He is not telling us the whole duty of man in religion, rather, he is giving three very specific examples about issues that are relative to the life of his people at that time.

And the three things he talks about is

1. Bridling the tongue,
2. Visiting orphans and widows,
3. Keeping one unstained from the world.

BRIDLE THE TONGUE

Remember, the Christians that James is writing to have been persecuted by the Jews. Stephen had just been killed, and men, women, and children were being driven from their homes, tortured, imprisoned, and executed for the crime of believing Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.

Jesus said in John 16:2 “*that the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.*” The Jews thought they were worshiping God, performing a religious duty to God and their nation by murdering the Christians.

In typical fashion then, there were some leaders of this new and persecuted church who were so angry about their persecution, so they responded to their persecutors, in the same way. They attacked them in return. They murdered them in return.

The did not listen to Jesus who said the meek shall inherit the earth, and they thought instead that what was needed for them to

bring in the kingdom of God on earth, we must physically fight against our enemies. To perform our public religious duty to God and our neighbor we have to repel these enemies by force, letting them know we mean business.

So they practiced their “religion,” not by being peace makers, but by preaching fiery and angry sermons. By instigating the people with hate-filled rhetoric, and threats of violence and murder. They acted like the Zealots, who would perform their “religious duty” carrying out their binding oaths to murder the enemy.

These new Christians forgot Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount who told them to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them so they may be sons of their Father in Heaven.

So James says that all such manifestations of “religion” is worthless. It is useless. It will not bring about the righteous kingdom that you think you are going to establish.

He says: **If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless.**

A **bridle** is the headgear used to control a horse, consisting of buckled straps to which a bit and reins are attached. Pull on the reins to the right or the left and the bit in the horse’s mouth will turn his head in that direction.

James says that the person who does not bridle his tongue but lets it run free in sin is a person who has deceived his heart about his religion. Instead of being bound to perform a public service of

love for God and neighbor by speaking words of thanksgiving, praise, life, truth, and love, a deceived Christian with an unbridled angry and hate filled tongue works contrary to his religious confession, and to the kingdom of God that he so desperately desires to see on earth.

Maybe you do not realize it, but your words are so very important to the heart of religion. Through the sinful use of words, a person can break the bonds of religion that tie them to their God and to their neighbor.

So important is the proper speaking of words to the stability and harmony of society, that the bride and groom pledge the troth to one another in the Ceremony of Holy Matrimony.

But what is "troth"? Your troth is your bond. Your troth binds you to another person for their good, representing all that you are and all that you have to offer for their benefit. It is directly related to "truth."

If you're "trothless," your words are meaningless, and you're essentially worthless. You have nothing of value to offer another person if your words are not spoken in love and truth. No one can depend on a person who breaks troth, no one believes what you say when you speak, for a person who violates their bond and troth is neither truthful, faithful, or loving.

The Word of God is what created and sustains the universe, and gives all things meaning and purpose. When God speaks He speaks truth and he keeps his words. And everything works in perfect harmony. When we break our troth, and sunder the living

bonds of truth and love that connect us to God and one another, we are anti-Christ. We are working contrary to Christ's purposes in the world, and in us.

A trothless person is therefore a menace to society, their spouse, and the church. Anyone who doesn't bridle their tongue is a destroyer of all bonds of love and harmony. These people have more in common with the Devil than with Jesus.

Thus James tells us that a trothless person's religion is as useless as the Christian faith is if Christ were not raised from the dead. As 1 Cor. 15:17 says:

“And if Christ is not raised from the dead, your faith is *useless*, and you are still in your sins.”

So do not deceive your heart and make your religion useless, people of God. Bridle your tongue. Lay aside all *anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, and filthy language out of your mouth, and do not lie to one another. And put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, forgiving one another, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you ought to forgive one another. And above all put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3)*

VISIT ORPHANS AND WIDOWS

The next issue that James is concerned to address is the religious duty to visit orphans and widows.

Instead of being useless and worthless in religion, by not bridling their tongue, and by being filled to overflowing with hate-filled

and evil speech, James tells them to instead be useful. Go and practice pure and undefiled religion and make yourself useful by visiting orphans and widows in their affliction.

Remember, these orphans and widows would be the wives and children of Christians who have been left behind because their husbands had been killed for being Christian. This is Stephen's wife and children if he had any.

And the word 'visit' carries a lot of meaning. In Luke 1 Zechariah sang the Benedictus which begins: "*Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed His people.*"

To visit orphans and widows is not just to drop by and spend a few minutes with them over a cup of coffee. To visit is to bring relief, to bring healing, to bring deliverance. All through the Bible God comes to visit His people, and it always means God come to deliver and redeem them from a bad situation.

In terms of the Diaconal ministry, it is to relieve God's people from any oppression that is robbing them from experiencing the blessings of their freedom and joy in Christ. That is the theological meaning behind the word 'visit.'

But definitionally, the word "visit" in Greek is related to the word for bishop or overseer – *episkeptomai*. Pastors and elders are to visit the people, providing redeeming oversight, deliverance, care, and provision for orphans and widow for a family that no longer has a father in the picture. That is an example of how to be useful as you practice pure and undefiled religion.

As I already said, when James wrote this letter there were plenty of families no longer had a husband and father in the house because he had been murdered or imprisoned for his faith. And the response by some Christian hot heads was to be useless, and to defile their religion by writing nasty comments on Twitter venting their spleen about how angry they are about the evil enemy. They were writing fiery speeches and recruiting people into a society filled with hatred toward their enemies.

But James tells them to check themselves. When bad things happen, when the enemy persecutes you, when fellow church leaders comprise the faith, do not let your first instinct be to jump to your Twitter account and vent your anger.

Instead be useful. Come along side of a woman and her children whose father is no longer there. Give relief to those who are suffering. Bring food, help pay someone's mortgage, or help pay medical expenses. Be a positive male role model in the life of an abandoned child, and help the widow find a new husband, if possible.

That is the kind of thing God would have you do to practice pure and undefiled religion. For that is the kind of religious duty that manifests the tie that binds you to God and to one another.

Now we don't have any missing fathers here at Christ the Redeemer. So what we want to do is prevent future widows and orphans, by helping men to be better husbands and fathers. Godly fathers and husbands are the single greatest force for good in the world. So we want to perpetuate that.

But we do live in a sinful world. And there are times when men fail. Sometimes a father and husband will abandon and neglect his family. And when that happens the church needs to be ready to step up and provide protection or provision. That is our religious duty. That is how we practice pure and undefiled religion before God the Father, by visiting orphans and widows in their affliction.

UNSTAINED FROM THE WORLD

The third and final example of what pure and undefiled religion looks like is keeping oneself unstained from the world. I have stated several times through this series in James, that the two major issues he is dealing with are the sinful use of the tongue, and the sin of cultivating favor with the enemy.

Both of these are worldly practices that do not promote true religion. They break the tie that binds you to God and your neighbor, by sowing the seeds of distrust and discord in your family, among your fellow Christians, and even among your neighbors.

James says later on his letter that that kind of behavior is friendship with the world, and it makes a person an enemy of God.

We must therefore protect ourselves against the stains of worldliness. We are not to be overflowing with anger, neither are we to compromise our faith to make the cultural elite happy with us. As Christians, we are called to be different, and not affirm all that the unbelieving world affirms. Nor are we to condemn all

that the unbelieving world condemns. We need to strengthen ourselves against the tendency to say “how high” whenever the world says “jump.”

In Matthew 11, Jesus said, *“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,*

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance. We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”

Our generation is the same way. People get excited about something, and they rejoice in it, and they tell others they have to rejoice in it too. If you don’t celebrate what we tell you to celebrate then you are a hater, and we are then justified in trying to destroy your life.

For you are out of touch with the way the world is. You are not in harmony with the new religion. You have to support Trans rights. You have to support LGBTQ-everything. You have to affirm all the woke ideas. And of course the Methodist Church, in lock step says, “Right away!” And they support and rejoice in, and promote and support all that the unbelieving world rejoices in. But they make themselves an enemy of God.

And then the world also says, “No, no, we are now upset about this thing. We are going to protest and burn down cities and form great big mobs to destroy things. And you also must be angry at the issue we are angry about. You must mourn for the reasons we mourn. And if you don’t, then you are going against

the new public religion, and you are not helping to bring in the new kingdom of God on earth.

And on cue the liberal Christians jump right to it. And everyone puts little flags on the Facebook screen to support the current thing, which changes every other news cycle.

If you do not celebrate what the world celebrates, if you do not mourn the things the world tells you to mourn, then they try to cancel you.

That is worldliness. And you should not be afraid of it. You should obey the spirit of the age. And neither should you use it as a tactic against other people. You should not engage in the Christian version of cancel culture. Just because a Christian pastor says something you disagree with, does not mean that you should get that pastor defrocked, in trouble, or make him a target of Twitter mobs.

If you disagree with something a person says, if you think it is really bad, then if you are able, reach out to that person and try to have a conversation with them about the issue. Don't assume motives, don't assume the worst about a person, and don't go about as a slanderer among your people. It is best to keep your mouth shut. Be slow to speak. Pray for that person. And try to come to a better understanding of where they are coming from.

Now I am not saying to do that forever with no resolution ever. I am not advocating being eternally vague and nuanced in order not to offend. That type of stuff leads to liberalism.

But what I am saying is that we should not treat one another as the world treats us: assuming the worst, insulting, slandering, and misrepresenting people, simply because it might get you a few likes on Twitter. Or because you think it will help to push the Overton window a few degrees to the right.

We have a duty to pursue the truth, in love, believing the best about our Christian brothers and sisters. But sadly, that is not the culture that I see Christians cultivating on the internet.

Instead, we are more the people of Jesus' generation than we think. John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, and the people said he had a demon. Jesus came both eating and drinking, and the people called him a glutton and drunkard! But wisdom is justified by its children.

Let us not do to others as they did to us. That is worldliness. Pray for your enemies. Do good to those who harm you. Keep yourself unstained from the world and its wicked ways.

This is how we will practice pure and undefiled religion before God - by bridling our tongue, visiting orphans and widows, making fatherhood great again, and by keeping ourselves unstained from the world. May we all be found useful in these religious duties which bind us to God and to one another. Amen.