

Pure Religion

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to invite Sheena up. Sheena's going to come and read to us from the letter of James. Yes, I'm reading from the letter of James, chapter 1, verses 26 and verses 27.

It's on the screen, it's in your bulletin, and it's on page 1011 in the church Bibles. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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. Amen. May the Lord bless that reading of His Word. We're in week four, looking at the epistle of James, and Martin Luther, one of the great reformers, started the Reformation 500 years ago. He said that this letter, he called it the epistle of straw. So, hey, so he thought it should be taken out of the Bible, and the reason for that is because he thought that James was teaching justification by works. He thought that James was teaching that the way to get in God's good favor was by your performance. Now, he changed his mind over his lifetime on that, and that was right, because James is not teaching that. James is assuming new birth. We saw that last week, verse 18. He said that God brought us forth. That's a birth metaphor, and if you scan your eyes across the first chapter, you'll see that there's been a little theme that we haven't talked about, and that's that in verse 2, in verse 16 and verse 19, he calls the people he's writing to brothers and sisters, and that means he's talking to believers. He's talking to the scattered believers across the Roman Empire, and even in verse 16 and 19, he doesn't just say brother and sister. He says beloved brother and sister. So, he says that my audience are people who have been loved by God all the way to the point of becoming born again, new birth, new heart, and so he's assuming that, and so what he's doing in the rest of this book is he's assuming the gospel. He doesn't make it explicit, but it's always there, and he's saying that once you're born again, once you have the new birth in your life, now all these imperatives, there's lots of imperatives in this book, commands, things that you need to go and do. He's teaching the teaching of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, lots of commands of how to change, and he's saying now that when you're born again, those commands are no longer laws of condemnation. They are laws of liberty. They are making you more free the more you put them into your life, and so that's his assumption throughout the whole, the rest of this book, and he's already told us the big idea, maybe we could say it in a word in verse 4, you can become perfect, and he doesn't mean sinless. He means mature in that language. So, he's telling us when believers have been born again, that they can grow into maturity, and justification is the ground you're always walking on in this book, and so he's assuming that, and you have to be really aware of that, or you'll start to think like Martin Luther thought about the book, and we've already learned that he's told us suffering can make you mature if you think about it through God's perspective.

If you approach your suffering theologically, it can grow you, and we've learned that you can become mature by breaking the power of canceled sin in your life by growing through hearing the Word and letting the Word really get down into the bottom of your soul and living out of the resources of the gospel. We talked about that last week. That's what it means to become a doer of the Word. The gospel is actually shaping your day-to-day behavior. Now, in our passage today, the two verses we read, the commentators will tell you that these themes, the three things that are mentioned, how you speak your speech, caring for the orphan and the widow, and keeping yourself unstained from the sins of the world, are going to come up again the rest of the book basically twice each. So, we're going to have more time later to dig into specifics on each of these, where we can just focus on them one at a time. So, today we've got sort of the overview. This is sort of his step into the rest of the book, if you will, and it's a practical test. What it is, it's not asking—he's talking to believers. He's not asking you to question your justification. Instead, what he's doing is he's saying, what does it look like when someone who is born again and is committed to growth, becoming a doer of the Word, what does it look like when they are changing? So, it's a practical test. How do you know you're changing?

How do you know you're growing? And that's really what he gives us here. Now, it's the difference between hearing the Word and doing the Word. And you can be a believer in hearing the Word every week, and you can be a believer in not doing the Word Monday to Friday. So, you can be in patterns, as a Christian, of not living your faith out. And so, that's specifically what he's talking about, and who he's talking to, I think. Imagine a medical student. There are a few medical students in the room. Imagine a medical student, and they read the textbook so well, and they memorized the textbook, the anatomy text, Gray's Anatomy. I don't know what text they use. So well. And they can recite it.

They can pass all the exams with distinction. They can lecture the other students on step-by-step how to perform the surgeries. But the day is going to come when that student is handed a scalpel, and they have to actually cut the flesh of a living human being. And boy, on that day, you don't want them to just be a hearer of the Word. You know, you want a hearer of the textbook.

[6 : 07] You want them to be a doer of that text. If you're the patient, you don't want a person who's really good at memorizing texts only. You want a person who's an ace with the scalpel, right? And James is coming to us here and saying that he's calling on believers to look at their life, their religious life, and we're going to see all of life is religious, and ask, am I becoming a doer of the Word, or am I just coming and hearing only? Am I actually changing? Am I actually growing?

Am I actually becoming whole in that way, complete and mature? All right, so he gives us a nice outline, two verses, two points. Worthless religion on the one hand, empty religion, and pure religion on the other. So let's think about those two things. First, worthless religion. Now, to understand what he means by worthless religion in our lives, first, we got to think just for one moment about the word religion or religious. The word religion, we use it all the time in the modern world to talk about the world religions. Christianity is a religion. The Bible only uses the word religion five times, sometimes just as an adjective or adverb, and it means something a little bit different than the way we use it today.

So the way we use it today comes from religious studies in the academy coming down to the popular level, and somebody like Emil Durkheim's famous definition, what is religion? Religion is a system of belief and practice related to sacred things. And so you could think about animism in sub-Saharan Africa, that's religion. You could think about Hinduism in India, or Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, or Christianity in Scotland. This is how we think that that's religion. But the Bible is not using the word exactly like that. Instead, it's a little more nuanced, and the word religion has more of a sense of the practices of a God-fearing worshiper in their day-to-day lives. So it's less focused on the doctrinal side. What does that religion believe? That's not the way the word religion is used. We have other words for that in the Bible. But the word religion in the Bible is really, really focused on how you live your faith out. It's very focused on practice. So we could talk about what's the religion of the Pharisees. That's not asking what's their doctrine. It's asking, it's saying they fast on

Tuesdays and Thursdays. That's the religion of the Pharisees. That's how the Bible uses the word. And so here, James says something very important, very strong. He says that words are religious because everything's religious. So because we're living our lives before God the Father all the time, there is no moment, not a single moment, where we're not religious. We're either following and practicing empty religion, worthless religion, or purified religion. There's no moment because anytime you speak, you speak before God the Father. He sees quorum Deo at all times. And so he says here that words are thoroughly religious. They've got immense power, and you're always speaking them before the audience of God. So in our first verse in verse 26, look with me and see what he says, if anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue, he deceives his heart, but deceives his heart. This person's religion is worthless. Now here, what he's saying is very important, but it has to be clarified just a little bit, because the word that he used, worthless, is the same word that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15 7. And that's when Paul says, if you follow Jesus, but you don't believe that Jesus walked out of the grave on the third day, your religion is empty, or worthless, or futile, or groundless. And there we learn that the word means something more like without reason, empty. So here he says, if you are going to worship every week, if you're religious, and you're hearing the word, to connect it to the whole section, and then you're leaving Monday to Friday, and your speech patterns are not changing, then it's showing that the word is not really the ground of your speech. You see, it's saying your religion is empty or worthless. In other words, the way you're speaking is proving that you're not really letting the word of the gospel become the ground or the reasoning by which you speak. So he's talking to believers and saying, when you go to worship week by week, but you're noticing your speech isn't changing over time, that's a sign that you're hearing the word but not doing the word. You're not letting the gospel become the foundation of your entire life, of the speech patterns, especially in your life. And so he's saying that our speech is a test, in other words, of our spiritual maturity in our day-to-day lives. So you can be a believer, yes, justified by faith, and finding that you're not growing in putting away gossip. You're not growing in stopping speaking words, stop speaking words of discouragement, so often in turning into a person that's encouraging. You're not growing in words of impatience towards patience. You can be a believer, and what's happening there, he's saying, is that we're not letting the word of the gospel we hear from the Bible really becoming the source of our whole lives, the way we live out of that day-to-day.

Now, he gives us an illustration here, and the illustration is that if we're maturing, we'll be bridling the tongue. So this is a horse illustration, right? And he takes this image of a horse, and you take a bit, and you put it in the mouth of the horse, and you take a bridle, and you put it over the ears of a horse, and the big key with a bridle, it will not work unless it's connected to reins, and reins are connected to a rider. And so this image of the bridle is talking, asking the question, really, who is it that's driving your speech? The bridle doesn't work if there's not a rider steering the horse, right? And he's saying, if we're not bridling our tongues, that means that our heart, a gospel-changed heart, is not directing your words. In other words, the heart needs to be the rider. The gospel-changed heart needs to be the rider that's directing the reins of your tongue. Your tongue is bridled, your heart is directing. Why? Because out of the heart, the mouth speaks, Jesus says. In other words, this is a sign of has the gospel really gotten down into the bottom of the soul and started to change the way you talk? Speech is so powerful. God made you to be a speaker, and so it's the first and primary sign of Christian maturity. It's not—he doesn't say how much theological knowledge do you have. That's the first sign. He says, how are your speech patterns?

[12 : 51] Are you discouraging or encouraging? Are you gossipy and slanderous and assuming the worst? Are you growing into a person who's speaking like Jesus more and more over time? It's the first sign and the most important sign of what's really going on deep down in the soul. Now, to connect the whole section, if we are quick to hear the Word from last week, then we become slow to speak. You see, if we're quick to hear the Word, then we're—if we're really hearing the Word, then we're becoming doers of the Word, and becoming doers of the Word means we're slow to speak, slow to anger. And so back to the same application last week, because he's just reiterating it. Slow to anger because slow to speech, that means that when you're insulted, you're not like an over-inflated balloon about, you know, one last little needle prick will blow you up and you'll burst forth in anger. And instead, you're putting on cruciform patterns of speech. Now, the way to explain this is that if you remember the context of this letter, James is talking to people who have been scattered all across the Roman Empire because of persecution, and you can imagine that they are constantly being spoken at in evil ways. They're being insulted. They're being mocked. They're being spit at in the Greco-Roman world. And I think really what he's trying to get at is if you're growing as a believer, the main application is that you're willing to be insulted and not bite back. I think in the context of the letter, that's probably the main thing he's thinking about. In other words, he's doing what he's assuming. He's assuming that we are always thinking in this letter about our elder brother, Jesus Christ. Verse 1, James says, my elder brother, Jesus Christ, I'm his servant. And he's calling us to remember by the power of the gospel that we are following in his pattern of cruciform speech. And just think about him for a second in how he spoke, how Jesus Christ used his words. Isaiah 49.2 tells you his mouth was like a sharp sword. He could speak truth and wisdom with such power. And yet, Isaiah 42.2, he will be mocked, he will be spit on, and he will open not his mouth. He would receive an insult, but he wouldn't give it back. Or Isaiah 53.7, he was oppressed, he was afflicted, yet he was silent before his accusers.

See, Jesus Christ would give a sharp word of wisdom and truth to the Pharisees when they needed it, but when his persecutors came, he would receive insult in silence. And James is saying, are you becoming day in and day out more and more a speaker like that, willing to be insulted and not bite back, not a kind word turns away wrath? This week, let me invite you, because we're going to come back to this theme two more times, but this week, let me invite you to do this. Examine your speech patterns and ask, am I quick to speak and slow to hear, or am I growing as a person who's slow to speak, quick to hear, because I've been shaped by God's word more and more? Do I retaliate verbally when I'm insulted? Am I quick to ask forgiveness and extend forgiveness with my words? Am I verbally extending forgiveness to people who have asked for it with my words? When I'm mocked for my faith, will I receive the insult like Christ and let it die within me like Jesus did? And how do you do that? How do you grow in that? You've got to say, even this week, Jesus spoke the galaxies into existence by the words of his power. Jesus Christ, the Logos himself, the very communication of God, the word himself. He spoke the galaxies into existence, yet he came and he was silent before his murderers. Why? Why? He was silent before his murderers so that he could offer forgiveness for every weaponized word I've ever spoken.

That's how you do it. That's what you say to yourself. Jesus Christ was silent before his murders because he came to be my substitute. His silence is substitutionary, you see. You don't rely on moralism and say, boy, I just need to become a better speaker. No, you say, Jesus Christ's speech was wise and patient for me, so I want this week to grow in my speech, in my patience, in the way I speak. Now, that's the first test. The latter two, secondly, and finally, he calls pure religion. All right, so in our second verse, verse 27, he says, 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. Now, if you look at that language, verse 27, religion that is pure and undefiled, that is Old Testament language. And so, James is writing to Jewish Christians, and so they would immediately pick up on the Levitical context of that language.

And that's language from the Old Testament that's talking about being clean or pure. And you can remember that there's all sorts of ceremonies in the Old Testament to make you ceremonially clean, but they were always pointing forward. And they were pointing forward to the one, the Messiah that was to come. And you can remember a moment like in the Gospels where the leper stands before Jesus, and the leper says, Lord, only you can make me clean. And will you make me clean? And Jesus says, I will be clean. You see, the language of purity or defilement, of cleanliness, uncleanness, was always pointing to the Gospel. And James is assuming that. And he's assuming here that the only way to actually be pure is not by your religious practices, but because Jesus Christ says, I will be clean. Right? So, he's assuming the Gospel here. And another way to think about it then is to say purifying religion, purified practices of your Christian life where your clean heart is actually being, coming out, and the way you live is to visit orphans and widows and to keep yourself unstained from the sins of the world. So, he gives you two ways, two tests to measure, am I growing? Am I maturing? Is my religious practice actually reflecting a pure and clean heart that Jesus Christ has given me? Here are the two great tests. They are to visit orphans and widows, number one. Now, he's talking there about the two groups that are most vulnerable in the first century Greco-Roman world, and calling on us to visit the afflicted, the most vulnerable in our world. And the word visit there is not drop in, have a tea, and a chat. The word visit is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, for the word that really is redeem. So, God visits or redeems the afflicted.

In other words, it's a holistic call to seek justice for people, to visit the orphan, the widow, the most vulnerable, and stick with it till the end. Stick with it till you can bring justice for them in a situation, get them up out of their hardship. The second one is that you're increasingly becoming pure, undefiled, keeping yourself unstained from idols. And if you look at the Old Testament, you'll see over and over again that the most common association with purity and defilement language is three particular sins that the prophets addressed. I think this is what James is getting at.

[20 : 46] Sexual ethics, keeping a biblical sexual ethic, fleeing from idol worship, not letting idol worship grip your heart and become part of your life, and serving the vulnerable in their affliction.

So, if you flip through the prophets, you'll find three things that God says over and over and over again. Serve the widow and the orphan, keep a biblical sexual ethic, and do not worship idols.

Let me give you an example. Amos chapter 2. God looks down at his people, and he says, I'm condemning them. I'm judging them. Why? And he says, they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and they turn aside the way of the afflicted.

They commit adultery over and over so that my holy name is profane. Do you hear? God says, here's the two reasons you are not abiding by a biblical sexual ethic, and you are trampling the heads of the poor. Now, many churches, many churches, we all know very well, you don't have to be a Christian to know that, many churches talk a lot about the first of these two, to care for the vulnerable, to meet the needs of the poor, to enact social justice into the world. And so, many churches really emphasize that, and they talk about being for the world and being in the world.

And we think of those often. Those often do tend to be more progressive churches. On the other hand, many churches talk about purity, holiness, sexual ethics, keeping yourself unstained, staying away from the world, and being protected. And you come here to James, and you read the rest of the Bible, and you realize that God's Word will never let us draw a false dichotomy between them, between being all about justice, all about the poor, all about mercy, and being all about purity, sexual ethics, keeping ourselves from idolatry. You see, one group says you got to be in the world, the other group says you can't be of the world. And what the Bible says is you got to be in the world, but not of the world. You got to be both. You got to be a ministry of mercy church, and a ministry of holiness church, at the very same time. See, the Bible keeps both together. It'll never let us separate the two. And that means true religion just doesn't play the game that often church politics tries to play. The Bible comes through and gives us both at the end of the day.

[23 : 13] And that means that what he's saying really, as we draw things to a close, is that maturing religion, maturing religion, purifying religion, a revelation of a gospel-centered heart that's growing and growing, is simply just to put on the heart of God in your life more and more. And you just think, if you just scan your eyes across the Bible and look at the heart of God, none of these three things are fringe ideas across the Bible. Let me give you a few more examples. Amos 2, Exodus 22, 22, you shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. Deuteronomy 10, 18, he executes justice for the fatherless and for the widow. Psalm 146, the Lord watches over the sojourner. He upholds the widow and the fatherless. Isaiah 117, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Zechariah 7, 10, do not oppress the widow or the fatherless or the sojourner or the poor. Galatians 2, 10, when Paul was commissioned on his first missionary journey, he records, the apostles asked me to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Now, I think the best story from King David's life was when he remembered his old friend Jonathan, who had died, and he remembered that Jonathan had a son, and his son's name was Mephibosheth, a great Bible name. And Mephibosheth was disabled. He was, the text says, lame in both of his legs.

His legs had actually been crushed by running from King David's own men. And he was a slave, and he was poor and homeless. And David had a lot of bad moments. But this was great David's greatest moment. And it was when he remembered Mephibosheth. And he said, because of my covenant love for Jonathan, I want to remember his son. So he sought out Mephibosheth, this slave, this poor man. And he brought him into the king's palace, and he put on royal clothes for him, and he gave him lands and inheritance. He restored all the lands of Jonathan to Mephibosheth. And he said, today you are my son, and you will always eat at my table. You see, Mephibosheth was an orphan. And King David, in his best moment, remembered the covenant love of God that he received, and he wanted to shed that love abroad into the life of that orphan. And for the rest of his days, Mephibosheth would pull himself up, because he couldn't walk to David's table, and he would say, I used to be a slave. Now I'm a son.

And you see, that was David's best moment. He didn't always have good moments. But in that moment, great David was pointing us to great David's greater son, Jesus Christ. You see, the only way that you'll ever give mercy like this, really love the orphan, care for the afflicted, be a person of mercy, is when you realize that you are Mephibosheth. You are the orphan. You are the widow. You are the poor. You are the afflicted. You are the refugee. You are the sojourner. You are the one who God, in his chesed covenant love, sought after from the beginning of history. You can't become a giver of mercy until you realize you are a receiver of mercy. And James is not saying justification by showing mercy. He is saying, for those that have been justified, are you growing and realizing you are an orphan without Jesus Christ? Therefore, you are becoming more and more a giver of mercy all your life. You know, how do you do it? We will finish with this. Last week, we talked about hearing the

Word and then becoming a doer of the Word by letting the Word of the Gospel really embed down in the heart. And that one little Word, that man, remember, who looks intently in the mirror, in the window of the Word. And that's it. What James, I think, is asking us to do in this first chapter is to look intentionally at the Word Himself, the Logos Himself, the speech of God Himself, the giver of mercy Himself, the greatest King Himself, to stare at Him intently, intentionally. And that really does mean, are you looking and beholding Jesus and beholding the Word of the Gospel in the Word of the Bible every day? The way that you actually ingest the Gospel into your heart so it comes out through your speech, it comes out through your mercy, it comes out through keeping yourself unstained from the idols of the Word, is actually by implanting the Word of truth over and over and over again in your heart, and looking at Jesus ten times over every single day for every one look at yourself, every one look at your sin, beholding Him, intently looking in that mirror. Jesus Christ, when you look at Him, what do you say? Jesus Christ was perfectly pure, and He entered the lives of the afflicted. Jesus Christ was absolutely afflicted for you so that you could become pure, and the more you can be with Him, the more you'll become like Him. That's the invitation. Let's pray. Father, we want to change in our words.

[28 : 43] Lord, some of us today come struggling with gossip, slander, discouraging patterns of speech, and many other things, Lord, the sins of speech, and so we give that away today, and we want the Gospel to reshape us and teach us how to speak like Christ, and then, Lord, we also ask that you would teach us how to put on more and more hearts of mercy. So, we feel today probably that we don't know all the ways to do that in our city, and so we ask that until we look at that again, you would give us wisdom and train our hearts to become receivers of mercy more and more day by day so that we become doers of mercy. And then lastly, Lord, we pray that you would protect us from idols. So, teach us what it means to be in the world but not of it. Teach us what it means to guard a Gospel-purified heart from idol worship. So, we ask for these things today as we sing, and we close, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.