

Sermon for Sunday, June 27, 2011
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The Test of True Religion
James 1:26-2:7

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion 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.

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? (James 1:26-2:7)

Introduction: Religious talk may not be religious reality

I was once part of a large mission project. Most of us stayed in the same house, so we were together many hours a day. One man rose first; we spotted him on the porch, reading his Bible at sunrise. One evening, he told me, "I am excited to go to bed each night because I'm that much closer to my time alone with God in the morning. I can't tell you how close I feel to God." I felt like a spiritual dung beetle next to this lion of the faith.

Months later, our spiritual lion was in legal trouble for doing things that were both sins and crimes. Sadly, he had been doing them for years. Our spiritual giant was a giant hypocrite.

This would not surprise the apostles. Paul knew religious talk can be cheap. He said, "Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Cor 7:19) and "What counts is a new creation" (Gal 5:15). James agrees. He wants devotion to God that proves itself in action. He names three proofs of true spirituality: True religion is "to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:26-27). Will you join me in considering how you measure up?

This test of true religion fits James' emphasis on doing God's will. It also appeals to spiritual activists. Many of us long to say, "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it." That's one reason why some people love James: his commands are so clear, so graphic, so ready for action. It is stirring to read, "Anyone who knows the good he ought to do, and doesn't do it, sins" (4:17).

But James is also concerned about blindness and hypocrisy. Remember, James says, we dare not merely listen to the word. It's a mirror to the soul, revealing our moral and spiritual flaws, so we can amend them. When we obey the law, it gives freedom and blesses us (1:22-25). Yet we can gaze at the word without listening.

It's not enough to profess a religion. James says we should be slow to speak (1:19). If we profess faith and have no deeds, it's vain (1:27, 2:17, 20).

Religious claims can be empty - words without true faith. But "religion" can be a positive thing, if religious claims prove genuine. In James 1:26-27, we see three tests of true religion. True religion 1) controls the tongue, 2) looks after widows and orphans in distress, and 3) remains unpolluted by the world.

Religious people may profess orthodox doctrines and faithfully attend church. But the proof of religion lies in our behavior, James says. He unfolds the meaning of these marks of true religion - controlling the tongue, caring for the needy, and shunning the world's pollution – in the rest of the book.

The three signs of true religion

First, true religion bridles the tongue. Angry talk, gossip, and deception are leading failures of speech, but James has quite a litany of verbal sins. His concern for right use of the tongue pervades his letter.¹

- He warns against self-justifying speech. When tempted, no one should blame God, saying "God is tempting me" (1:13-14).
- He condemns the careless speech that wishes well, but never lifts a hand (2:16).
- He questions the superficial claim, "I have faith" if no deeds confirm it (2:18).
- He deplors tongues that praise God one moment, and curse people the next (3:9).
- He chides those who slander and judge their brothers (4:11).
- The tongue can boast, curse and spark conflict. True religion reins in these sins.

Second, true religion visits orphans and widows in their distress. Orphans and widows form a pair. They represent the poor, defenseless members of society. While mankind exploits the defenseless, God protects them. He is "a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Ps. 68:50). God watches over them (146:9) and curses those who deny them justice (Deut. 27:19). God commands Israel to follow him and show kindness to the needy. They receive a portion of Israel's tithes. They must be given the opportunity to work; gleaning the fields of Israel (Deut 26:12-13, 24:19-21).

Care for orphans and widows is essential to true religion. Kindness to them is pure. It is mercy for the sake of mercy, since widows and orphans cannot return the favor. Widows and orphans are likely to be poor for a long time.

There are many ways to be poor – financially, emotionally, socially, physically. And there are many ways to care for the poor – staying alert to your neighbors and friends, or by joining formal or informal church projects.

Kindness to the needy is God-like. We sustain aliens, widows and orphans because he sustains aliens, widows and orphans (Ps. 146:9). Moses says the Lord "shows no partiality.... He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (Deut 10:17-19).

God doesn't love the poor more because of their poverty, nor does he love the poor more than the rich. But the rich have resources to take care of most physical needs. The godly poor cry to God. They have no other hope, and he hears them.

¹ Johnson 254-5

We should care for orphans because the gospel says we are poor. The gospel of Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Blessed are those who know their spiritual poverty. They know that apart from God's grace, they are estranged from God and more desolate than orphans. By faith in Jesus, we are adopted into God's family. Therefore we care for widows and orphans and adopt them.

Third, true religion is unstained by the world. From one perspective, the world is God's creation. But the world is also a system of values that often contradict God's will. James says, "Friendship with the world is hatred toward God. Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (Jas 4:4).

The Bible never tells believers to leave this world. We should remain pure while staying in this world. We do not stay pure by abandoning society. We do not gain purity by giving away our radio, TV, computer or i-pad. We should avoid entertainments that promote sin or glorify sin. Again, we don't flee the world, but we don't let it corrupt us either. If someone tells a crude joke, we don't have to leave the room. But we don't join in with a similar joke of our own. Physically, we dwell in the world, but morally, we keep our distance. So true religion is undefiled.

The nature of true religion 1:26-27

The phrase "true religion" sounds strange to some people. Many evangelicals think "religion" is negative: Rituals of worship, ceremonies void of meaning or biblical basis. "Religion" supplants true spirituality: incense, chiming bells, vestments. Someone said, "Religion is what is left when the Spirit leaves the building." Religion is for men of tepid faith. They want to add a dash of transcendence to life. *Religious* people don't talk about their faith. They say, "My religion is my private concern." Nonsense! Our faith should be as public as anything else. Some Christians say, "Christianity is not a religion." Or "Jesus came to condemn 'religion.'"

Yes, some religious activities lead people away from God. In fact, "religion" is usually a negative word in the New Testament (Acts 26:5, Col 2:18). There is a piety that removes us from God. The Pharisees had such a piety. They honored God with their lips. But while they heaped up good deeds – as they defined them - they neglected the weightier matters: justice, mercy, faithfulness (Matt 23:23). Their hearts were far from God; their worship was nothing but "rules taught by men" (Isa. 29:13, Matt. 15:8).

Still, James seems to favor "religion." Public displays aren't necessarily evil. Ceremonies may be valid or invalid. The Lord himself instituted some rituals: baptism, the Passover, the Lord's supper. He ordered believers to worship him in an incense-filled temple, filled with choirs and priests.

James says, "Does the show of religion frighten you? A religion that never shows itself publicly frightens me. Theology, hidden faith, lack of action alarm me. Give me something visible. Prove your faith is real by 'doing the word'" (1:25).

James has a strong interest in genuine faith. Earlier, he said genuine faith perseveres through trials and receives the word. Now he says genuine faith acts certain ways. James explores these marks: Good deeds to the poor in Chapter 2, control of the tongue in Chapter 3, life in the world in Chapter 4.

Yet instead of launching into these topics, James begins with the apparently trivial problem of favoritism. In a moment we'll see why he does this.

A test of true religion – favoritism (2:1-4)

James states his theme: Those who follow Jesus should not show partiality. Indeed, faith and favoritism are incompatible. To translate literally, "Do not hold faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ with favoritism." The word translated "favoritism" is a neologism, a compound word meaning "receive a face." That is, believers should not prefer one person over another because of their appearance – face, clothes, or any aspect of their outward appearance.

Favoritism is almost constant in human society. You probably play favorites. Years ago, a group researched the way clothing affects perceptions. They put a man on the street in a business district in New York City, pleading for cash with this line: "I've lost my wallet and need money for a taxi to the airport. This is my name, address and phone number. If you loan me the money, I'll repay you as soon as I get home." They put the same man, wearing the same suit, on the same street, using the same line on consecutive days. But in a year when beige was considered proper attire, he wore a beige overcoat one day and black the next. The result: his proceeds on the beige day doubled his proceeds on the black day. That's favoritism.

We play favorites. We judge by appearances, but God does not. Scripture says, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

James sketches a scene to illustrate his point. God's people have gathered. Seats are scarce. Two men arrive at once. One wears the fine clothes and golden rings of wealth. The other wears the shabby rags of poverty. Someone near the back watches them enter and makes a decision. The rich man will take the last good seat. The poor man will stand in a corner or sit on the floor.

We do not know if the people have gathered to worship, to study, or to resolve a dispute (cf. judgments, courts in 2:4-6). We don't know if the two men attend regularly or not, if they have friends in the assembly or not. We know just this: two men enter a gathering of believers. One wears gold, the other wears rags.

Today, a gold ring indicates marital status, not economic status. And if everyone wears blue jeans, clothes don't mark status as much. But we still have ways of identifying social rank: bearing, speech patterns, conversation topics, who you know, your leisure activities – did you vacation with relatives in Lubbock or travel to Tuscany last summer? All these establish social rank. Of course, today's ushers have been trained. They would never put a poor person on the floor. But we still find ways to favor people who look and act like us.

Favoritism violates all three elements of true religion.

OK, favoritism is wrong, but why does James begin a discussion of true religion with such a trivial issue? It's hard even to stay aware of low grade favoritism. Every culture and subculture does it; it's human nature. Yes, favoritism seems like a trivial issue, but the little things reveal the heart. The English have a saying, "The true gentleman uses the proper fork even when he dines alone." The little things reveal whether our religion is true or false. Trivial as it seems, favoritism touches all phases of true religion.

Remember: true religion helps the poor. But favoritism insults and dishonors the poor, even though God loved them and chose them for himself (2:5). True religion helps the poor, favoritism insults them.

The poor are forever told to sit on the floor. If there is one place where everyone should get equal treatment, it's the church. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Everyone who is seated with Christ has a prime seat. Rich and poor, young and old, male and female: all come as sinners in need of Christ and his grace. Whoever we are in the world, sin reduces us, sin makes us orphan, but God adopts us into his family by grace. In God's sight, we are one. Therefore the church should treat everyone the same way. When we play favorites, we deny the gospel. By the gospel God has "chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world" (2:5). Favoritism means the poor get a seat at the back and sit on the floor even at church.

Second, true religion is unstained by the world, but favoritism is so worldly. It practices the world's inclination to prefer the rich over the poor. Favoritism rejects God's decision to grant equal honor to rich and poor. Favoritism forgets God's will and seeks the favor of the rich by giving them special attention. Favoritism is foolish, since the rich often use their power to exploit the poor, drag them into court and slander God's name (2:6-7).

Third, true religion controls the tongue. But favoritism uses the tongue to hurt the poor. Verbal snubs can wound. So favoritism fails every test of true faith: it abuses the tongue, is stained by the world, and insults the poor.

Favoritism is common, but James calls it false judgment (2:4). It contradicts the gospel, for God chose the poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom (1:9).

Lessons learned from favoritism

Favoritism is a social sin. It denies that God has chosen the poor (2:5). In the ancient world, the poor were despised or ignored. They were exploited through slavery and controlled through handouts. We still have ways of despising the poor, although some things have changed.

Today we differentiate between the poor. Our society is a meritocracy so people in each generation have to earn their place. If someone has ability, training and a good work ethic, they will probably rise. If not, they may fall. So financial poverty does not, by itself, make someone an outcast. If a poor young man or woman is bright, talented, winsome, and attractive, we treat them well because we foresee their future. If they are financially poor, but otherwise rich, we will treat them with respect. So we follow James most truly when we respect all of the poor:

- Those who are poor in personality - the dull, the complaining.
- Those who are poor in mind – the slow, the uneducated.
- Those who are poor in body – however we see that.

We should honor poor students who bristle with potential and we should honor unskilled laborers who will probably stay poor. In the gospel, God honors every son and daughter who believes in him. The church is a family, not a club, and favoritism has no place in a family.

When we love and receive all kinds of people, it shows God's ways are becoming our ways. We follow the Lord when we refuse to play favorites.

When James says that God has "chosen those who are poor in the world" (English Standard Version), he means those who are physically and financially poor, not just the "poor in spirit." This does not mean God refuses to save the rich. There are many wealthy believers in Scripture. Yet most of the first

Christians were powerful or noble because most ancient people were poor (1 Cor 1:26-29). If God grants his kingdom to poor believers, we must respect them (2:5-6a).

By contrast, James adds, it's senseless to bestow special honors upon the rich. We should love the rich even as we love all mankind, but God has not especially chosen or favored them. Therefore, we should resist the temptation of favoring the rich and powerful in the hope of getting something back. Don't bother, James says. Let no one be dazzled by wealth or fawn over them.

James charges rich unbelievers (as a class) with three sins: exploiting poor Christians, dragging them into court, and slandering the name of God.

"Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?" Israel was a small and densely populated. The rich, Isaiah said, would "add field to field, until there is no more room" (Isa. 5:8). In James' day, wealthy landowners and merchants concentrated ever more land and wealth. They drove the poor from the land, making them poorer still.

"Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?" The wealthy used their influence to gain a veneer of legality as they threw the poor off their land. They charged high interest rates, imposed fines, then used the courts to force the poor to forfeit their inheritance (Amos 4:1, 8:4-6; Jer. 7:6, 22:30. But God forbids Israelites from impoverishing their countrymen (Lev 25:35-43, Deut 15:1-11).

"Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name?" We don't know about this one; perhaps rich Jews slandered Christians for their claims about Christ, for their worship of Christ, and for their determination to follow his teachings.

The spiritual hope

James chooses his example wisely. We recoil when we meet a shabby person who smells bad, even if they share our faith. Caught off guard, we easily favor the rich over the poor. Does this mean we fail the tests of true religion?

That is the question. At first, it seems that James simply tells us we ought to pass the three tests of genuine faith. We must help the poor: treat them with dignity and assist them. We must not say, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed" (2:1-5, 15-17). We must do something.

But meditative readers wonder. Do I favor the rich? Do I help needy brothers, or am I content to offer kind wishes? If so, I have failed the first test. Our doubts intensify in the next section, on control of the tongue. It begins, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers... [because] we who teach will be judged more strictly... If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man... All kinds of animals, birds, [and] reptiles... have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue" (3:1-2, 7-8).

True religion controls the tongue (1:26), but James says, "No man can tame the tongue." Therefore, we fail test two. The same thing happens with test three. True religion is unspotted by the world, but James says we try to love both God and the world (4:4). Is that true for you? I know it often is for me. I want to please God and the world. I want God's reward, but I enjoy the world's rewards too. James says we even quarrel and fight to get them (4:1).

Feeling miserable now? James asks. Good, for we are ready for James' gospel only when we see that we cannot pass the tests of true religion. He says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (4:6, 10).

The simple question, "Do you play favorites?" humbles us. Our failure obligates us to humble ourselves before the Lord and acknowledge our sin and pray:

“Lord I am a sinner and I can't stop sinning. I play favorites. I am stained by the world. I ignore the needy. My tongue is out of control. My only hope is your mercy. Forgive me, for Jesus sake.”

This prayer is good for everyone. It is a good prayer if you aren't sure that you are right with God. Ask for mercy if you hope you are going to heaven because you try hard to be good. Listen: however hard you try, you will never be good enough to earn heaven. But God is gracious enough to give heaven to those who repent and believe.

Prayers of repentance are also good for those who know and love Jesus. We asked already him to forgive our sins. But because we sin daily, we need to repent again, ask for grace again, and rest in the gospel again. We will never pass all the tests. Thank God, Jesus has passed them for us, and made us members of his family. In the gospel, he has cared for us in our poverty.