

Thoughts on James 1:26–2:4

26 – If anyone thinks himself to be religious...

- “thinks himself ” – This emphasizes that such a person relies on his own definition of “religion” and does not test his thoughts against the measure of God’s word. Thus he is self-deceived in thinking that his “religious actions” are the sum and substance of what is necessary to obtain the grace of God.

- “To be sure, many people believe that church attendance, praying, or even fasting is the equivalent of being religious. Not so, says James, because such activity may be merely outward show. That is formalism, not religion.” (Hendricksen, p. 64)

- The adjective “religious” which James uses, (θηροσκός, thrēskos) is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures. The corresponding noun θηροσκεία, thrāskeia) however, which is also used in vv. 26 & 27, is found two other times in the Apostolic Scriptures (Acts 26:5, Col 2:18) and carries the meaning:

an expression of devotion to transcendent beings, esp. as it expresses itself in cultic rites, worship.... (BDAG)

- The word “religious” is not necessarily negative, for James uses this same term to define true worship. His point here is that those who engage in religious ritual but who lives are not characterized by an increasing conformity to the revealed will of God, are self-deceived and seeking to deceive others into thinking that their religious activities are the sum and substance of true worship to God.... and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart

- James once again brings up our “speaking” (v. 19) as a primary “litmus test” of a life characterized by a growing, genuine faith which honors God by living righteously. It is obvious as we consider the whole of this epistle, that for James, the use of the tongue is an essential element of living in a way that honors the Lord and proves our true desire “to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Yeshua the Messiah” (2Pet 3:18).

- In 3:1–12 he will discuss the great evil that can be done by the tongue; in 4:1–12 he will give more examples of impure speech, and in 5:9ff he teaches us not to grumble or to engage in false oaths.

27 – Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

- The sense of the word “to visit” (ἐπισκέπτομαι, episkeptomai) as used in the Scriptures, means more than just stopping by to see someone for a short time. “To visit” in the Hebrew Scriptures takes on the sense of “to care for,” “to bring help,” and even “to reckon things according to justice.” Note, for instance, Ps 106:4–5, in which the Psalmist prays for God’s visitation.

Remember me, O Lord, in Your favor toward Your people; Visit me with Your salvation, that I may see the prosperity of Your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation, that I may glory with Your inheritance. (Ps 106:4–5)

- To “visit the orphans and the widows in their distress” is to be the hands and feet of the Almighty Himself Who promises to care for those who are helpless, and orphans and widows were used as an illustration of individuals who often have great needs.

A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling. (Ps 68:5)

The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow. (Ps 146:9)

He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien. (Deut 10:18)

- In our current text he uses the metaphor of the horse and bridle (χαλιναγωγέω, xalinagōgeō) to describe what it means to be “slow to speak” (v. 19). The bridle and bit in the tender mouth of a horse enables the rider to turn or slow, or even bring the animal to a standstill. But how does the “bridle” metaphor work in James’ teaching? The primary answer is to consider who holds the reins of the bridle.

- For the true believer, the Ruach HaKodesh, the Spirit of God, is constantly moving the child of God to follow His leading, to put to death the deeds of the flesh and to live righteously. As our lives are more and more submitted to obedience to God’s will, and in tune with the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our lives, we will more and more willingly allow the Spirit to “hold the reins of the bridle” and thus to lead in paths of righteousness.