

26 – If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless.

In the final two verses of chapter one, James is drawing together the general principles he has emphasized in the previous context, i.e., verses 22–25, and giving concrete terms to themes that will be emphasized throughout the epistle. These final verses of our chapter conclude the theme of self-deception that has knitted all of vv. 13–27 together.

In vv. 13–15, the person who blames God for his sinful behavior is deceived (v. 16) and is an impostor, cloaked in religious garb but having never experienced the life-changing reality that is the result of true saving faith and the indwelling Spirit of God. Such life-changing work is then described by James in vv. 17–18 which describe the abundant good that God accomplishes for His children, who have been “brought forth,” that is, “born again” by the “word of truth,” and are thereby the “first fruits” of the final, redemptive harvest.

Then, in vv. 19–25 James points out important characteristics of those who have been redeemed by faith in Yeshua. These include “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger” and “doers of the word,” that is, having lives that align with the truth of the Scriptures.

In one sense, then, the admonition regarding a proper use of the tongue, caring for the poor and disadvantaged, and keeping oneself unstained by the world which we have in these concluding verses of chapter one, form a fitting crescendo to James’ emphasis upon godly wisdom which is to characterize the life of all who are true disciples of Yeshua.

If anyone thinks himself to be religious – First, in instructing his readers in what it means to serve God, he describes how not to serve Him, and then in the following verse (v. 27), he gives key characteristics of genuine service to the Almighty.

Thus, James describes some characteristics of the impostor, that is, one who “thinks himself to be religious” but bears no true relationship with God. The use of the verb “thinks” emphasizes that such a person relies on his own definition of “religion” and does not test his own thoughts against the measure of God’s word. As such, 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.¹

The adjective “religious” which James uses, (θρησκός, *thrēskos*) is found only here in the Apostolic Scriptures. The corresponding noun θρησκεία, *thrēskēia*) 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....²

Thus, the word “religion” is not necessarily negative, for James goes on to describe “true worship,” using the same Greek word. The point is this: those who engage in religious ritual but whose lives are not characterized by an increasing conformity to the “law of liberty” (v. 25), that is, the revealed will of God, are self-deceived and likewise are seeking to deceive others into thinking that their religious activities are the sum and substance of true worship to God.

It is important to be reminded that the Hebrew word-group sometimes translated in our English Bibles as “worship” is עָבַד/עֲבָדָה (*ʿāvad/ʿāvodah*) which basically carries the sense of “service” or “work.”³ Note, for example, Deut 6:13, 10:20.

You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship [serve] Him (אֱתוֹ תַעֲבֹד) and swear by His name. (Deut 6:13)

You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him (אֱתוֹ תַעֲבֹד) and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name. (Deut 10:20)

This opening phrase of our verse is a call for each of us to assess our true motivations and our true intentions as we gather together in our respective communities to worship and as we live out our faith in all aspects of our lives. In the so-called “Messianic movement,” the inclusion by some of the many rabbinic and synagogue traditions offer dan-

1 Hendricksen, *James*, p. 64.

2 BDAG, “θρησκεία,” p. 459.

3 For other references using *ʿāvodah* in the sense of “worship,” see also Ex 12:25; 13:5; Num 4:47; 1Chron 9:28; Neh 10:38; 1Chron 28:14; 2Chron 34:13 (often translated as “service” [to the LORD]).

gerous paths which could well lead to thinking that participating in the “traditions” is the sum and substance of true religion. We must be diligent to distinguish between man-made traditions and that which is commanded by God. Surely if traditions are used honestly to remind and help in being diligent to obey God’s commandments, then these are worthy. But it is easy to allow traditions to become the focus and to lose the very substance to which the traditions were to point. Once again, the word of God, the Scriptures, are the touch-stone against which all aspects of our faith must be tested and shown to be true.

...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). For 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.

In our current text he uses the metaphor of the horse and bridle (*χαλιναγωγέω, xalīnagōgēō*) 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. If the metaphoric reins are held by the unbeliever himself, that is, he is relying upon his own inward strength to bridle his tongue, he will fail. For the unbeliever has no desire to control his tongue but will use it to satisfy his own desires and goals. Being controlled by his own self-serving desires, he has no ability to “bridle his tongue” for the sake of others. Indeed, the unregenerate heart is unable to please God (Rom 8:8) and to consistently put what pleases Him above the desires of the flesh. Jeremiah describes the unregenerate heart this way:

The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it? (Jer 17:9)

For the true believer, however, 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. Thus, by the strength and knowledge given by the Spirit, the child of God grows in

the spiritual ability to put to death the desires of the flesh and to submit to the righteous ways of God. Moreover, when the believer gives in to the sinful flesh, the Spirit grieves, and His grieving inevitably brings the child of God to repentance and thus to growth in living righteously as a trophy of God's grace and power.

Note also James' teaching in our verse, that the one who does not bridle his tongue "deceives his own heart." This teaches us that the "religious unbeliever," when considering his own needs as of highest importance, is self-deceived into thinking that this is proper and good, so that putting others down in order to exalt himself is normal and right. But in reality, this is a deception of the "natural man."

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (1Cor 2:14)

...*this man's religion is worthless.* The primary quality of "true religion" is to do that which pleases God and not to live in a manner that puts one's own desires above Him. A religion that puts man's own desires as primary is worthless because, as God defines "religion," that is, true worship, any religion that puts anything or anyone as having greater value than God, is by its very nature, "false." Surely, then, to put one's own desires and fleshly values as primary is to put God in a secondary position, and thus to live as though there is a power and will greater than God, which is blasphemy. "...Let God be *found* true, though every man be *found* a liar." (Rom 3:4)

The Greek word translated "worthless" is *μάταιος* (*mataios*) which carries the sense of "useless, fruitless, powerless, or even lacking truth." That which is "worthless" cannot achieve that for which someone would seek to use it. It is like someone trying to chop down a large tree with a pocket knife!

This is the third time James has admonished his readers not to deceive themselves (cf. 1:16, 22). As an apostle, James is fully aware of counterfeit "religions" that are entirely concerned with outward forms of "religious practice," going through the motions of their religious ceremonies as though they are honoring God, but according to James, their "speech" gives them away. If then, the unbridled tongue is a mark of "worthless religion," let us who are true followers of Yeshua, commit ourselves to put away any manner of "evil speech" (*lashon hara*) and to let our conversations be for the glory of God and for the strengthening of one another in the faith.

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.

Now James reinforces a foundational truth, namely, that those who are truly born from above will seek to know the truth as God has given it, not as formulated by fallen mankind. He therefore gives God's definition of true religion. He does so, not by giving us a comprehensive definition of "pure religion" nor giving us the details of true and acceptable "worship," as though there is one acceptable "form" God requires. What James does give us is the basic and foundational elements upon which all true religion is based, namely that one who has been given true saving faith will therefore seek to put God and His will as first in all things. And as a result, he will also have a self-giving love for others. In doing so he follows the teaching of Yeshua, Who, when asked "which is the great commandment of the Torah?" He answered by quoting Lev 19:18.

One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Torah? And He said to him, 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Torah and the Prophets." (Matt 22:35–40)

James speaks of "true religion" as "pure and undefiled" (*καθαρά και ἀμίαντος*). "Pure" (*καθαρός, katharos*) carries the basic sense of "being clean or free of adulterating matter."¹ This word was used both of physical substances as well as metaphorically of one's thoughts, actions, etc. "Undefiled" (*ἀμίαντος, amiantos*) is used in the Greek literature in a figurative manner, dealing with morals or religious values, but also of substances. This same term is used by the writer of Hebrews to describe Yeshua our heavenly High Priest.

For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; (Heb 7:26)

1 BDAG, "καθαρός," p. 489.

In our text, the doublet “pure and undefiled” should most likely be taken as a hendiadys,¹ meaning that the two words are combined to offer a single meaning, namely, that the worship God ordains and receives is completely pure, meaning it is in line with His infinite holiness, and therefore cannot be added to by that which is contrary to Him.

...in the sight of our God and Father is this – This phrase is added to emphasize that the definition of religion that is “pure and undefiled” is not something that changes over time, for the eternal God Who does not change is therefore always defining what He will accept as the worship given by His people.

The phrase “in the sight of” answers to the Hebraic sense of “before God” (לִפְנֵי יְהוָה / לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהִים), used throughout the Torah to express the very presence of God in dealing with mankind. The point is clear: God is active in the worship and religion of His people. He is not far off or somehow vacant. Whether our lives as individuals or as gathered together in the *ekklesia* Yeshua promised to build, He is here with us, and thus His very presence must define that which is “pure and undefiled religion.” How do we know what that is? Once again, we go to the Scriptures and allow them to guide us in that which our Lord receives. Our worship is our service to Him, and our service to Him must be in line with His self-revelation in the written word and in the incarnate Word, Yeshua our Messiah.

...to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. – Now James gives two examples, which again are not an exhaustive list, but rather define what it is to “love God” and to “love one’s neighbor as oneself.” Both of these represent people who, by no fault of their own, are unable to “pay back” the kindness someone shows them.

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.

1 “Hendiadys,” literally meaning “one through two,” is a literary convention often found in the Hebrew and Greek of the biblical text, meaning “the expression of a single meaning by two words connected with “and.” An example in English would be the expression “that is ‘well and good.’”

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)

“Pure and undefiled religion” is when we truly desire to be like Him, to walk in the footsteps of our Messiah, Yeshua, and to please Him by living in accordance with His own desires and holiness.

...and to keep oneself unstained by the world. – God has given us the example we are to follow, and that example is Yeshua Himself. He is the perfect example of what it means to “be in the world but not of the world” (Jn 17:14). Thus, the two aspects, to “love God” and to “love one’s neighbor” are not contrary to each other. We do not keep ourselves “unstained by the world” by isolating ourselves from the world. We are to be lights to the dark world, showing and telling forth the glories of our God and the salvation He has secured through the work of His Son, Yeshua. But as we are to be “in the world,” we are not in any way to mimic the things of the world, i.e., that which is contrary to God and His righteous ways. Rather, we are to practice godliness. Peter, in his second epistle, reminds us that we are to be constantly anticipating the return of our Lord Yeshua, and he writes:

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless....
 (2Pet 3:14)