

X. James in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel Life According to James
“True Religion”
James 1:26-27
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
January 19, 2014 – Morning Sermon

We are in our tenth study of the Gospel life according to James. We are studying James 1:26-27 but for context I will begin by reading James 1:19-25 and then we'll focus in our study and how this glorious text relates very powerfully to our subject matter of the sanctity of life. This is God's Word. It's the truth, infallible and inherent. James 1:19-25 says [19] *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; [20] for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. [21] Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

[22] But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. [23] For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. [24] For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. [25] But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. What is the blessing of his doing? James is about to tell us in James 1:26-27.

The grass withers, the flower fades, God's Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may this His Word be preached for you.

Before I get to James 1:26-27 you will see the word 'religious' come up three times in those verses so as I begin I'd like to ask how many have heard this phrase. "Christianity is not a religion, it's relationship." There was a time I actually used to say that. Is that accurate? Is it true or false? There is a corollary, a companion statement that I hear a lot and that is "Pastor, I'm a Christian, I'm just not religious." If statement one is true then statement two ought to be true. If Christianity is not a religion but a relationship then it seems to be okay to say 'I'm a Christian, I'm just not religious.' Even though we kind of get a sense of the heart behind those statements, is it accurate Biblically? I remember a discipleship book that was going around years ago that was titled How To Be A Christian Without Being Religious.

Every time I hear 'Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship' there is a little piece of me that wants to come back with trying to work my way through this and I will say hopefully very graciously "Oh so the first amendment of this country doesn't cover you?" The first amendment says you will not prohibit the free exercise of religion, so I guess that doesn't cover us since Christianity is not a religion? All of our forbearers who used to write and talk about the Christian religion must have all been mistaken or even more precisely, what would James say about this?

This is James, the half-brother of Jesus, who would die for the faith and pastor at the church of Jerusalem with thousands of members. What would James say about the phrase 'Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship'? James is most likely the first book written in the New Testament and was written about fifteen years after the resurrection of Christ and fifteen years prior to the death of James, himself. It is a Gospel

book of wisdom that takes all the anticipatory wisdom of the Old Testament books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and brings them to fruition in this Gospel wisdom book, James.

Before I get to what I think James would say in James 1:26-27 let me review quickly to make sure we're all up to speed. We are in the tenth study of the book of James that falls on the sanctity of life Sunday and because of its content I didn't feel any necessity to change our normal course of study. We are studying this epistle of five chapters and it's the most quoted book. It is a book of Gospel wisdom. The theme of James is the Gospel life is a life of persistent ministry and joyful maturation in a sin-cursed world informed by the God-sent gift of wisdom from above.

In other words, you have a Gospel foundation in Christ. You have a Gospel motivation which is the love of Christ. Now you're getting a Gospel reformation of your mind with Gospel wisdom which then allows you to make decisions to the glory of Christ as you encounter the challenges of life. One of those things we encounter is trials so he gives us trials to give us the first Gospel wisdom maxim in James 1. Gospel wisdom maxim one is the multi-faceted and inevitable trials of life are designed and sent by the sovereign grace of God to "prove" (a test shows you what you know) and "improve" (a test also reveals what you need to know) your Gospel life while exposing any remaining strongholds of idolatry in the heart. What makes the test into a temptation is when I have an idolatrous desire in which I don't respond with maturation, growth or perseverance I fall into sin which brings death. That sin comes because your desire married the temptation and those parents produce sin which produces the death of the testimony of our witness or a marriage or a child or all of those things take place.

When wisdom from above is set aside for wisdom from below because the test took hold of us and we faltered but in Christ even that can become the opportunity for growth and the assurance of forgiveness. So if I need this wisdom from above so that I can destroy the strongholds of idolatry left in my heart so that I can keep growing in grace, how can I get it? He tells you first of all you can get through prayer and that leads us to Gospel wisdom maxim number two.

Gospel wisdom maxim number two is the Gospel wisdom essential for the Christian life comes from above through persistent believing prayer and a prioritized receiving of God's Word with preparation and purpose. If any of you lacks wisdom let him ask. Don't be double-minded. You need to be single-minded. Now you want to become a hearer of the Word who is prepared. Be quick to learn. Be slow to speak. Be slow to anger. As you're coming to hear God's Word set aside rampant wickedness in your life. Receive the Word with meekness, a teachable heart, examining the Scriptures to see if things are so. You prioritize and prepare for the hearing of the Word. Your purpose is you want to be a doer of the Word.

You don't want to be a hearer who deceives themselves. Two times James uses the word deception. Don't let worldly wisdom deceive you and don't deceive yourself by being a hearer only. A hearer only is someone who deceives themselves because they come to the Word of Truth and James calls it a mirror. It is like looking into a mirror where you look at yourself and then when you walk away from the mirror you forget what you saw and then you leave the Word that you heard. Here is the key. Take the mirror with you. Persevere in looking at the mirror. How do you do that? You can take it with you technologically, through your iPad, iPod, iPhone, etc. Take it with you incarnationally. Take it with you through obedience.

I love the way James takes the Bible preached and calls it a mirror. How many of you looked at a mirror before you left your house today? I guarantee that every one of you did it. James calls the Bible preached and heard a mirror. You don't look in the mirror to go see what you're going to do today. You looked at the mirror to find out who you were. My natural face is I'm a helpless, hopeless sinner but in Christ I'm not only forgiven, righteous and strengthened by His Holy Spirit but I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. So I want to take the mirror with me.

The man who used to disciple me used to call it 'know-be-do.' That is not a character in Star Wars. 'Know-be-do' is look in the mirror and *know* who you are apart from Christ, *know* who you are in Christ, *be* who you are in Christ, and now you're ready to *do* for Christ. When you do for Christ you'll be blessed in your doing.

So what does that look like? Let me give you the answer to my question earlier on and then I will try and support it. James would say if you have been born of the Word of Truth, it's implanted within in, you've become a hearer of that Word coupled with believing prayer and you are taking the mirror with you in doing the Word the result for the Christian is religion. Religion is a neutral term. It merely means a sacred confession of what you believe is true and devotion to doing what you believe is true. It is a sacred consecrated commitment of a confession to what you believe is true and a heart to do that truth for the transcendence of the glory of God.

I know what we're trying to say when we say Christianity is not a religion. What we really need to do is to add something. Christianity is not a man-made religion. It is a God-given, secured, directed and centered religion. It is not a religion that declares God made in man's image and a regimen whereby I think I can earn my salvation before God. That's a man-made religion. I want a God-given religion. A God-given religion takes God who declares who I am made in His image, how I can be right with Him, through Him and my religion is the result of my relationship with Him but it is not the avenue of obtaining that relationship with Him. That's ultimately what we're trying to say so I think we're right-hearted but just wrong-headed.

I think James would take us up to task on this and I can show you why in James 1:26-27. After calling us to be blessed doers in what we've heard because we've been born again then it looks like pure religion but first he warns us against false religion. After born again, hearing and doing we get to the whole issue of religion. James 1:26-27 says [26] *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* (This tells you that there must be some religion that is worthwhile.) [27] *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.*

So what is James telling us here? Three times he uses the word religion and he has already used 'don't be deceived' twice. Back in James 1 he tells us not to be deceived by worldly wisdom, don't deceive yourself by being a hearer only and then he says don't have a deceptive religion. You want a pure religion. The pure religion flows from and is not the avenue to, having been born again by the Word of Truth, having heard the Word of Truth, having embraced the Word of Truth, the religion is the consequence of that relationship that is God-given to you, but don't fall prey to deceptive religion that gives a false assurance and a false direction.

A man said to me one time, “Pastor, I think all religions lead to God.” I said “I do too but that’s not the question. The question is not do they lead to God but what does He say when you get there.” Is your religion worthless or is it the result of grace? What will God say when you stand before Him? Will He say ‘well done good and faithful servant,’ sacred living before God or will it be deceptive and rebellion against God in a false religion, ‘depart from Me I never knew you’?

How would James answer the statement Christianity is a relationship? I think James would say ‘I understand your heart and if you would just put man-made in front of that then I’ll go with you.’ Christianity is not a man-made religion but Christianity is a religion for it leads to a sacred way of life before a transcendent God. You live under the eye of God. You desire to lift Him up and praise Him, not only in assembled praise but with your life. James would say it’s impossible to be a Christian without being religious because if you’re a Christian you’re going to want to be religious in a way that honors Him.

In fact, it will show up with three things. Here is what your religion as a result of your relationship with Him is going to look like. Number one you’ll have a bridled tongue. An unbridled tongue shows a false religion, a hypocrisy, a deceitful religion, a man-made religion. He is not saying if one is a Christian then one never has a slip of the tongue. Clearly he is talking about a way of life that when you become a Christian the tongue is increasingly becoming bridled, directed and corrected. This is so important to James that he is going to make eleven references to the bridled tongue in the book of James. He gives thirteen verses to the bridled tongue in James 3:1-12.

In a God-given, God-centered, God-derived, God-produced religious life before God for His glory, a sacred life in which we are set apart for His glory living before God, there will not only be the bridled tongue but there will also be the visitation of the orphan and the widow which is personal engagement. This was very distinct. Israel stood in the midst of the ancient near east countries, so what happened when a woman became a widow? At best, she would be abandoned to the trash heap of the town but most of the time she would be put to death. She was of no use. She was of no good and there was only one person around that was supposed to provide for her. If her father is gone and her husband is dead, she’ll be dead.

What about an orphan? That is when their parents are dead. So what should we do about the orphan? James says we don’t abandon orphans in God’s covenant community. We don’t put to death widows. Paul says we put them on the list. We care for them. We are to minister to them. We are to engage in their life. That is why the Old Testament is preparing us for this. There were cities of refuge built to help the widows and orphans. There was the call to God’s people to minister to them. Do you own land? I hope you get a good harvest. Leave the corners for the widows and orphans. Give them the opportunity to work for that’s dignified. If you bind it up and stuff falls out that is God’s providence to tell you what to leave behind for the widow and the orphan.

The Bible is full of this and now we get to the New Testament to find this New Covenant people with this same direction. Most of the time we think ministries like this are for the sensitive and you ought to be sensitive and compassionate. To be in the ministry of mercy you have to be courageous and you have to stay in the battle. Don’t leave the battle in the ministry of mercy. You have to have all hands on deck with all guns firing. I don’t know what part of the ministry of mercy God has opened up for your

heart but if we're born again then we're hearers and if we're hearers and we take the mirror with us we're going to be doers. That means we're going to be blessed. How are we going to be blessed? There will be a way of life that comes from us called Christian religion in which a bridled tongue and an intentional commitment in the personal lives of the widows and orphans will be seen from the life of God's people.

They will be visited. It's an interesting phrase. It was exactly the phrase that was used when it said 'God heard the cries of His people in bondage' and Moses said 'and He visited Israel with salvation.' In their helplessness and hopelessness He came to the least, the last and the lost to deliver them and He stayed into it. This battle is not won by the weapons of the flesh but with the weapons of the Spirit of God that are bound up in the Gospel of grace and the armor of the Lord.

Thirdly, James says to keep yourself unstained from the world. I don't born myself again. I'm born again by God's grace. I'm justified by God's grace. All that God has done for me has come down from God to me. Now that God is giving me wisdom to lead life for Him, He wants me to personally engage in it and your heart desire before you were converted was to assassinate God's glory and exalt your own. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God and now that you're converted you become a sworn assassin of sin and committed to the glory of God. So you want to keep yourself unstained from the world.

That is the language his cousin, John would use. Why do we want to keep ourselves unstained? You can be forgiven and will be forgiven of all of your sins as a Christian but we want to keep unstained from the world because sin brings stains and blemishes. It will rob you of a testimony, a witness, joy, relationships and that's why John says in I John 2:15-16 says [15] *Do not love the world* (he is not talking about people but that system of rebellion against God) *or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16] For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.*

Lord, I want to keep my appetites (of sex, work, power, eating, drinking, etc.) under the work of grace, whether I eat or drink or whatsoever I do. I don't want to live to do those things. I want to do those things to live for You and enjoy You so that whether you eat or drink or whatsoever you do you do all for the glory of God. I want to keep unstained. I know I have a perfect, positional record of righteousness in Jesus Christ but in my daily life I don't want to be stained. I want to hate sin and be a sworn assassin of it. I want to be careful where my eyes are, where my mind is and all those things. Whatever is good and pure let your mind dwell on these things.

The world loves to get the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life to let you know that life is all about you. Go look at the magazine stands. The titles of these magazines are "We," "Us," "People" and "Self." Look at the commercials on TV. They are all about you. In a consumer society that is all about what I own and enjoy how can we make yesterday's luxuries today's necessities so our GNP will keep growing. It is called advertising. That is what advertising wants to do. If you're in marketing just do it sanctified. That is what it is aimed to do and it works. Those idiots pay millions of dollars to put those 30 to 60 second commercials on TV but they don't work, do they? They do work. It's amazing how they are all about me. They

sell a hamburger and they say 'have it your way.' "You deserve a break today' where it's all about me. They are grabbing at the idolatry strongholds of my heart.

That world and life view that they are communicating doesn't get to us, does it? The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the boastful pride of life is where it's all about me in these ads. It does work and I'll show you with an illustration. Can you fill in the rest of this ad slogan? "Winston tastes good... like a cigarette should." Do you know what LSMFT stands for? Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco. They haven't used those for 45 years and yet some you still know them. It gets to us through the eye gate, the mind gate and the window of the soul. Where does that lead us?

So what would be the takeaway in answering our questions in the beginning about religion? True religion is the inevitable observable and growing result of a grace-secured, Christ-purchased, Holy Spirit-empowered, Bible-saturated relationship with God. I don't think you can be a Christian without being religious. I didn't say you have to be religious to be a Christian. I just think if you're a Christian you'll end up living a sacred life, confessing truth and living before the eye of God. Religion is external. Christianity begins its work internally but it won't stay in the heart and soul for it will come out in the life, in the speech, in the conduct and it will be seen, not as the avenue to heaven but the evidence of saving grace and on your way to heaven to live your life before the Lord. You are going to grow in this sacred calling.

You are in a world right now that will say to you 'here is your private religion on Sundays at Briarwood Presbyterian Church but you can't take it out on the streets from Monday through Saturday.' You will tell them, 'no, for I have the free practice of my religion and it demands to be practiced in the public square.' So we don't have a private sacred life and a public secular life. For the believer all of life is sacred. It is a religious enterprise to honor the one who has saved us. So it is a growing result, not the avenue, the consequence of a grace-secured, Christ-purchased, Holy Spirit-empowered, Bible-saturated relationship with God. So it's not religion to get the relationship. It's the relationship that produces the religion. It is to be pure, growing, observable, and inevitable.

It will have three marks. This is not exhaustive. In the next study of James 2 that will take us to whole other area of another mark which has to do with no personal favoritism – no isms. Here are three marks that he brings out of the blessed man. One is there is a bridled tongue and a directed life. Why would James say that if you have a real relationship and a pure religion you'll have a bridled tongue? It doesn't mean your tongue will be perfect and you want your tongue (speech) to be seasoned with grace. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29). You want this in your life because that is what is in your heart.

James will mention the bridled tongue eleven times and James draws from what Jesus said when He said "Man speaks from what fills his heart" (Luke 6:45). Our speech is reflecting what is filling our hearts and then James in James 3 is going to say the tongue is like a rudder of a ship. Your ship is your life and the rudder that directs it is what is in your heart. When you start lying how many more do you have to tell to keep it alive? You only started out with one that became thirty. When you speak the truth in love with humility and convictions you ought to see the doors that opens up for your life.

You can read the heart through the mouth and then the heart and the mouth set the direction of your life. They begin to set the course of your life.

Where will that life take you? It will take you into true religion. One place it will take you is to visit the widows and the orphans. That's not all of what ministries of mercies are but it will take you into intentional ministries of mercy personally delivered in the powerless and the marginalized which is the second mark. We move into their life to minister to them, to bring the truth of the Word of God. We visit them. In the presenting of Jesus Zachariah said in Luke 1:68, [68] "*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people...*" Notice that mercy ministries are personal.

I thank God for programs. This is not a discussion politically but this is ultimately why governments may affirm ministries of mercy but they can never really deliver them. Mercy ministries have to be delivered personally. It has to be people coming to the powerless and the marginalized, visiting them in their affliction. We are all called to this in some way. The world is writing off the orphan and the widow but we embrace them. You move into their life personally, courageously, compassionately and graciously. They don't have to merit your engagement, just their need calls you into their life. You move into their life with thoughtfulness, with sacrificial commitments. You visit them as God has visited His people in His Son, Jesus Christ. You get in their place. Christ took your place on the cross in His visitation for your redemption. We are to have vicarious engagement into lives.

Thirdly, there is a thoughtful and relentless pursuit of personal holiness. I know positionally in the Lord I'm perfect but in life I don't want blemishes on Your Name and blemishes on my joy in knowing You and loving You. I have some good news for you. Have you ever faltered in your life in personal holiness? I know the answer to this is unanimous. The Christian life is like the Clorox pen. I have five of these pens and I have them strategically placed. I am always spilling coffee on ties and shirts and inevitably after this happens I have some place I need to be. So now I have a stain, a blemish on my tie or shirt. I take out one of those Clorox pens and rub it on that stain and the blemish is gone. I know I'm perfect in Christ and I don't want to sin but I do sin. If we confess our sins He is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us (Clorox pen us) from all unrighteousness, restoring our intimacy with Him (I John 1:9). I would rather avoid the blemish to start with. I would rather take the grace that lets me say 'no' to the blemish even though I'm always grateful for the grace that erases the blemish in my life.

Do you see how this solves our dilemma? Right now there is a big discussion in the church. This side of the church says 'we believe in public ministries of justice and mercy' and the other side of the church says 'we believe in personal holiness, quiet time, get in the Bible, memorize the Scripture, share your faith etc.' Which ones belong in the Christian religion? Both of them belong and more than that they don't just belong in the religion but they belong in you. So that you have both a public ministry of intentional outreach to the powerless and the marginalized to show them the grace of God with Gospel deeds and words and all the while you are fighting the enemy within so that you're saying 'no' to sin and 'yes' to Jesus and growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

That's why James talks about the tongue. The tongue reflects the heart. What will send me to the powerless and the marginalized to do ministry? What will give me a hatred of sin in my life? It will be a heart that is filled up and reflected in my speech.

Lord, take this heart You gave to me. Do not leave this and think you're not going to be religious. To all the people at Athens Paul said "I see that your religious." You are going to be religious. Three weeks ago they just had chartered the first church of the Atheists in New York. That's an amazing church for even the atheist is now acknowledging that they are religious. I believe there was nothing and nothing said to itself, 'let's have something' and then something became everything and everything ordered itself so that I could be here. Wow, that's a leap in the dark. For a more rational explanation please read Genesis 1 through 11. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all that was in them and the Holy Spirit hovered over it and brought it to fruition.

You will be religious. It will either be deceptive, man-made that will end in death, chaos and emptiness or it will be a pure religion that comes from a vibrant relationship with a God who loves you and has given Himself for you by giving His Son for you when you were helpless and hopeless. The evidence of that will start to come out with a bridled tongue, an intentional ministry and a desire to grow in grace and say 'no' to sin.

This is a perfect example of how these things work together. Evangelism, discipleship, growing personally in grace and then reaching out in ministry – in the Great Awakening in the 18th century Whitfield, Edwards and Wesley preached, people came to Christ, they began to grow in grace and hate sin and the next thing they did was start reaching out and that was the birth orphanages. That is when hospitals and orphanages came into existence and homes for people who didn't have a place. That's when they started Sunday school which was to educate kids in the community. That's why they did all of that.

What about abortion? The orphan is there because his parents are dead. The children we're trying to save, the culture and the parents have decided they want them dead. Amazingly we're in a culture that right now raises the flag against bullying. Do you realize just how schizophrenic we are? Right now they say 'we're only aborting fetuses.' When was the last time a lady came up and said to you 'hi, I'm pregnant with a fetus'? They are with child. This is a baby. We know exactly what it is. We have this schizophrenic law system where if someone kills a baby in a womb they are liable for homicide. There is this case in Texas right now where this woman has been declared dead and she is pregnant. I am not going to solve this for you but the dilemma is that we have two patients there not one and the law affirms that. How you work through that ethically takes a lot of prayer and wisdom from above but that is what the law calls for. These doctors have to work to save children unless the parents and the government structure says it's okay to kill them. It is all because of our arrogance.

There is not a bigger case of bullying that I know. Woman who are bullied, that's the only answer and then those who can't even speak at all. It is amazing how we don't want bullying in the school case but the most defenseless child of all we will declare when you're unwanted you're expendable. If we minister to orphans why would we not minister to save their lives? If we're concerned for widows why would we not be concerned for women in crisis situations of pregnancy? This is a war so get in the battle. Stay in the battle. Don't leave the battle. I don't know where your station is in the battle but there are many fronts on it – education, legal issues, adoption, and ministry to those in crisis pregnancy. Get in the battle. Don't get weary or grow weary in the battle. Praise the Lord for victories that we have seen.

Last year was one of the greatest years on a state level that has ever been here but this is a battle for life in the name of the One who gives life to reflect redeeming life that brings us to this battle out of worship to God with pure religion. We are brought to it with all of our hearts. That is the gift that God has given us in this moment and this opportunity. If God brings revival back to this country there will be a day that this country looks back to this moment and wonder how in the world? It is just like we have looked back to slavery and its idiocy. What I don't want them to say is where were the Christians? We need bridle tongues, personal holiness and engaged in the battle for the least, the last, the lost, the defenseless and those who are being callously directed to the destruction of their children by a bullying government, media and educational system.

You go there, where God has called you and meet it with the weapons of the Spirit, divinely fashioned to tear down the strongholds of disobedience to Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together. Thank You Father for the privilege to serve You and exalt Christ in worship and consider how to serve Christ as we leave here today. Lord, give us tongues that reflect a full heart of grace, give us lives that are embracing ministries of mercy and grace with both compassion and the courage to stay the fight. Then Father give us a desire to grow in the pursuit of holiness in our personal lives. May we not separate any of these. May they be united under the saving grace of Jesus Christ. May they be the result of the Christ-purchased, Holy Spirit-empowered, grace-delivered life of Christ, now lived for Christ for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen. [68] "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has visited and redeemed his people

(Luke 1:68 ESV)