

“Pure and Undeified Religion”

May 20, 2012

Text: James 1:26-27

**In 1523, the organist at the People’s Church in Zurich,
Switzerland, wept as he watched the church organ
being broken up and removed.**

It was being done in response to criticism by Ulrich Zwingli,
a pastor at the Grossmunster church in Zurich, and a leader
of the Swiss Reformation.

Zwingli himself enjoyed music, played the violin/harp/flute,
and was well known for amusing children in his
congregation by playing his lute for them.

But he associated music in the church w/ priestly chanting,
monastic choirs, vestments, and images of the saints,
all of which he felt diverted people’s attention away
from the Lord and from true spiritual worship.

So he eliminated music from worship in his church, stating
that God had not commanded musical worship.

**Although Zwingli had overreacted, his goal to rid the church
of man-made additions/traditions, was a good and
commendable one.**

Left unchecked, this tendency ultimately leads to religion that
pleases man, but displeases God, and can become deeply
marred/stained w/ the ugliness of human sin/depravity.

- * That's why Mormonism originally condoned/promoted polygamy, from the time of Brigham Young's taking "spiritual wives."
- * That's why "worship" in the pagan temple at Corinth came to involve over 1000 priestess-prostitutes, during the time of the Roman Empire.
- * That's also why it's still happening today in Southern India and in Nepal.

There, young village girls called "devadasis" are forced to serve in Hindu temples as spirit-guides, dancers & prostitutes.

In each of these cases man has gratified his depraved nature, then covered it with a cloak of "religion."

This sort of impurity/defilement is always dressed up with a nice storyline and high-sounding ideals;

But it's really just naked human depravity, being conveniently packaged as religion, & diplomatically victimizing/violating the most helpless w/i the society.

Zwingli knew that even seemingly harmless additions to the pure/undefiled religion revealed in God's Word, have a degrading effect on it.

Let man get his hands on religion, and he'll leave his dirty fingerprints all over it, every time.

Zwingli wanted his people to worship the Lord in spirit/truth, w/o human invention/tradition diverting their attention away from God, or subverting it w/ man's pride/depravity.

In today's text, James will divide all religion into that which is worthless, & that which is pure/undefiled, revealing the telltale signs of each...

He will tell us that worthless religion cannot improve people's lives, but pure/undefiled religion always does.

In contrast to its worthless cousin, pure/undefiled religion transforms people themselves, a/w/a their-relationships.

*** Worthless Religion**

[James 1:26]=> *"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** [useless, futile, and foolish]."*

The 1st characteristic of worthless religion is that it has no effect on a person's speech, since it doesn't cause him to bridle his tongue.

This is a man who *"thinks himself... religious"* in a formal sense.

If you were to ask him why, he might answer that he attends synagogue regularly, or has gone on a religious mission/pilgrimage, or has served as an altar boy.

I.e., he'd define himself as "religious" because of something he does and has done, not because of an

essential change in his own nature, that has affected his character and his whole life—even his habits of speech.

Paul had viewed himself as religious before his conversion, on the road to Damascus.

But his old religion had no beneficial effect on his heart, so it made the words he spoke no more gracious/loving (far from it!).

In fact, because of his religious zeal as a Pharisee, he was *“breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord”* (Acts 9:1).

Religious ceremony such as that engaged in by Paul the Pharisee can play a key role in a “religious person’s” whole life.

If you ask him why he expects to go to heaven when he dies, his answer will ultimately boil down to this=> “Because I’ve done religious deeds!”

He’d be just like the people who will someday stand before X and says=>

*“Lord, Lord, did we not **prophecy** in Your name, and in Your name **cast out demons**, and in Your name **perform many miracles**?”* (Look what we’ve done!).

But the next verse says Jesus will answer them=> *“I never **knew** you; DEPART FROM ME”* (Mt 7:22-23).

The claim to be religious is invalidated in our text, if a man’s religion doesn’t enable him to bridle his tongue;

I.e., if he doesn’t rein it in, and control it.

If he were a born-again doer of the Word, he could/would,
because regeneration would cause him to think/speak more
graciously.

This is why Jesus said=> *“Every careless word that men shall
speak, they shall render account for it in the day of
judgment. / For by your **words** you shall be **justified**, and
by your words you shall be **condemned**”* (Mt 12:36-37).

Every word you/I speak gives evidence of whether we are
to be justified or condemned, and God will bring all
that evidence out at the Judgment.

Someone: I thought we are going to be judged on the basis of the
condition of our hearts—not just our words/deeds.

Our words/deeds are the indicators our hearts' condition.

2 verses earlier Jesus had said=> *“The **mouth** speaks out of
that which **fills the heart**”* (Mt 12:34).

So evil words are really just a symptom of an evil heart,
that stands condemned before the Law of God.

When a person becomes born-again, his heart is changed, so the
words he speaks from his heart take on a new character.

Old things have passed away, and new things have come
(II Cor 5:17).

But a person whose religion involves nothing more than
outward appearances/activities, w/ no inward change
of heart, will always demonstrate his lack of
transformation through the words he speaks and the
way he speaks them.

He may try to bridle/control them, but he won't be able to.

Merely outward religion doesn't bring to bear the power of

God on a person's heart, & w/o a heart-change, there
can be no change in a person's thinking/speaking.

In chapter 3, James will describe the tongue as an uncontrollable
and destructive force, like a wildfire, or a wild animal=>

*“The tongue is a **fire**, the very world of iniquity; the tongue
is set among our members as that which defiles the entire
body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on
fire by hell. / For every species of **beasts** and **birds**, of
reptiles and **creatures** of the sea, is tamed, and has been
tamed by the human race. / But no one can tame the
tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison”*
(Jms 3:6-8).

**There are many significant differences between the speech of
unregenerate people, & that of the regenerate.**

- 1) The unsaved/unruly tongue is a foul instrument that may curse,
swear, take God's holy name in vain, & tell filthy,
off-colored jokes.

By contrast, a doer of the Word will take heed to passages

like Eph 4: *“Let no unwholesome word proceed from
your mouth, but only such a word as is good for
edification according to the need of the moment, that
it may give grace to those who hear”* (4:29).

That's something a born-again believer is capable of
doing, and which he has an obligation to do.

If a person's heart has been cleansed by the blood of X,
the words/ways in which he speaks should be clean
as well.

2) An unsaved/unruly tongue lies, & shades the truth w/
deceptive innuendo.

That's why Rev 21 says of "***all liars***"=> "*Their part will
be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone,
which is the second death*" (21:8).

By contrast, doers of the Word have been indwelt &
empowered by the Spirit of truth.

So they apply these words of Paul to their own lives=>

*"Laying aside falsehood, SPEAK **TRUTH**, EACH
ONE of you, WITH HIS NEIGHBOR"* (Eph 4:25).

3) An unsaved/unruly tongue is also a hasty/hurtful tongue, that
thrives on bitter verbal-assaults, hateful gossip/rumors,
and unkind criticism of others.

But Titus 3:2 commands Xns to=> "*malign no one.*"

Because David had some very wicked/murderous enemies,
he must have been sorely tempted to lash out at them
with his tongue.

Instead, he said, "*I will guard my ways, That I may not sin
w/ my **tongue**; I will guard my mouth as w/ a muzzle,
While the wicked are in my presence*" (Ps 39:1).

David also prayed for the Lord's help, saying=>

*"Set a guard, O LORD, over my **mouth**; Keep watch
over the door of my **lips**"* (Psa 141:3).

Man-made religion may appear to be beautiful, pleasing, and impressive, but it is spiritually powerless and worthless in terms of its effect on the human tongue.

The 2nd characteristic of worthless religion is that it is all based on self-deception.

Vs 26 actually says=> *“If anyone thinks himself to be religious, not bridling his tongue but **deceiving** his own heart...”*

Self-deception is what makes false religion work.

It's the delusion that God is so foolish that He will settle for mere external religion, not demanding access to our hearts.

Man wants to keep God from touching his heart, because he loves his sin, & his heart wants to hold onto it, being
“more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick”
(Jer 17:9).

His great self-deception is that God will go along w/ that.

That He will accept shallow/meaningless religious activity in lieu of what He really wants: to purify man's heart.

Intuitively, we all know that a God so mighty He created the whole world, & so holy that He gave His Son to die for sin, could never be treated like such a fool.

Man may focus on external religious rites/ceremonies, but God could never be so shallow/simple-minded.

He told the prophet Samuel=> *“**God** sees not as **man** sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the **heart**”* (I Sam 16:7)

Religion that doesn't transform the heart is powerless, and therefore worthless.

No matter how many sacraments a person undergoes, or how often he goes to church, or how many candles he burns, or even how many prayers he prays;

If it hasn't made him speak differently, it hasn't changed his heart; & if it hasn't changed his heart, it's useless.

Apart from the power of the H.S. transforming our hearts as we believe in Jesus X alone, a religious person is self-deceived, and he is on the broad road that leads to destruction.

And someday Jesus will tell him, "I never knew you."

Q: Why would anyone settle for worthless religion that's going to send him to hell, when Jesus offers real salvation to those who will look to Him alone by faith?

If you ask the person himself that, he might say "It's beautiful" (he is so impressed w/ all the ornate sights/sounds/smells of his religious ceremonies, he figures even God must be impressed with them too).

"I just like it," or "I'm used to it, because grew up w/ it."

But in reality the answer goes deeper than that.

* Jesus said it's because he loves his sin (Jn 3:19)=>

"This is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil."

* It's also because the god of this world (Satan) has

blinded the minds of the unbelieving (II Cor 4:4).

*** Pure and Undeified Religion**

This kind of religion does have the divine power to change man, the way he relates to other people, and the way he relates to the sinful world around him.

[Verse 27]=> *“This is pure and undeified religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”*

The standard by which we should measure religion is not how man views it, but how it appears *“in the sight of God.”*

If our religion is pure/undeified as He sees it, it's not worthless, but rather, exactly what He knows religion should be.

The 1st characteristic of acceptable religion is that it produces human compassion (another indication that it has changed the heart).

A true worshiper of God, who has been redeemed/regenerated by H.S., is involved in helping the helpless (such as orphans and widows).

“Visit” is from the word *episkopos*, which refers to an overseer.

In the context of this verse, it means that those whose religion is pure/undeified exercise oversight on behalf of orphans/widows, in order to provide them w/ help.

This special meaning of *“visit”* is also seen in Lk 1, where it applies to God Himself=> *“Blessed be the Lord God*

*of Israel, For He has **visited** us and accomplished redemption for His people” (Lk 1:68).*

He has “*visited*” His people for the purpose of redeeming them.

In our own text, the word occurs in the pres. tense (to continuously visit), indicating that a real Xn’s compassionate caretaking of orphans/widows, is an ongoing activity.

If our religion is inward/genuine, rather than outward/superficial, it makes us partakers of God’s own compassionate nature. He’s very concerned for the helpless (e.g. foreigners, orphans, and widows)

Psa 68:5 says He is=> “*A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows.*”

As His children, Xns are to share this same kind of compassionate concern.

If there’s no such compassion in a person’s heart, his is a worthless religion.

So I Jn 3:17 asks=> “*Whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?*”

Ans: It doesn’t, because he isn’t a partaker of God’s nature.

In ancient times, “orphans and widows” were 2 of society’s most vulnerable groups of people.

Their lives were extremely difficult because they had no financial support system, or protection against life's hardships, and there were few jobs (and no formal welfare program) to help them.

So they were often totally destitute.

They were also targets of unscrupulous people who sought to exploit their vulnerability/misfortune.

So God stepped in, setting up provisions in His Law whereby orphans/widows might have food to eat.

In Deut 14:28-29, He declared that at the end of every third year Jewish farmers were to bring a tithe of all their produce, and deposit it in the nearest town, to provide the poor (esp. orphans/widows) with something to eat.

In Deut 27:19, the Lord pronounced a curse against anyone who distorted justice to exploit orphans/widows, & He required that all the people say "Amen" in agreement.

But simply contributing to orphans/widows' needs isn't enough. God wants believers to get personally involved in their lives to help them.

So, pure/undefiled religion calls for us to "*visit*" them as we provide help.

***"Pure and undefiled"* describe both the positive/negative aspects, of the essence, of true religion.**

“*Pure*” refers to that which is unmixed w/ any wrongdoing.

“*Undefiled*” means unspoiled by any trace of moral wickedness.

Taken together, they create a picture of total moral/spiritual cleanness, that is absolutely free of contamination.

The religion of the scribes in Jesus’ day was an example of impure/defiled religion, that was a mixture of good/evil.

It looked good on the outside with all its long prayers and symbols of piety, but Jesus said the scribes devoured widows’ houses (Mk 12:40).

Spirit-empowered/heart-transforming religion creates genuine sympathy in the hearts of truly religious people, for those who suffer, considering them weaker (but beloved) brothers/sisters in X.

The love of God is actively operating in their hearts/lives.

By contrast, worthless/outward religion may appear to foster sympathy, but it creates no godly compassion, because God’s *agape* love has not been poured out into the hearts of those whose religion is worthless.

A 2nd characteristic of true religion is its resistance to the sinful influence of Satan’s world-system.

James says that a person whose religion is genuine keeps his personal purity “*unstained*” by the surrounding moral pollution.

“*The world*” is the unredeemed human race & its culture, both of which are alienated from God & live in rebellion against His will.

It is a godless system of philosophies/values/ethics, that is dominated by the ruler of this world—Satan.

The personal holiness of pure/undefiled religion demands that a believer remain on alert against that system, not falling in love with the world or the things of the world (I Jn 2:15); Not even forming a friendship w/ the world (Jms 4:4).

We aren’t to be conformed to this world, but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).

When some of the world’s corruption does rub off on us, we’re to confess it, washing it off as X washed Peter’s feet.

Jesus has made it clear that, although we live in the world, our love for God is to keep us from becoming part of its evil. We are to live in such a way that, when X returns, He will find us to be “*spotless and blameless*” (II Pet 3:14).

As Paul instructed Timothy=> “*keep yourself free from sin*” (I Tim 5:22).

James isn’t talking about sinless perfection in our text.

He’s talking about a basic orientation that seeks to grow in grace/love for others, to help meet their needs, to keep the

world's moral/spiritual contamination out of our hearts, and to take the appropriate steps whenever we are defiled by the world to cleanse ourselves of its influence over us.

Our salvation isn't proven by the perfection of our lives, but rather by the general direction of our lives, and by our hatred of the sins of the world that mar our lives.

It is absolutely essential that a true Xn's religion create separation between himself, & the world around him.

He is an alien here who, like Abraham, is looking for the city w/ foundations, whose architect & builder is God (Heb 11:10). E.g., his heart belongs to another world, not this present evil world.

* He is severed from the world by virtue of his **election**, being included among those chosen by God, who can truly say, He has=>

“predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, / to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph 1:5-6).

That is a claim separating every Xn from those of the world (who can't make that claim).

* The Xn is also severed from the world by his **calling**.

When his heart recognized the voice of Jesus his Savior, he was drawn to Him as a sheep to his Shepherd. He became born again & was baptized by H.S. into the church, the Bride of X.

In fact, the word “*church*” itself is our translation of
ecclesia—lit. “those called-out” (from the world).

- * He was also separated from the world by his **redemption**
through the blood of Jesus, the Passover Lamb of God.
The blood of those 1st Passover lambs, sprinkled on the
lintels/doorposts of the Israelites’ houses Egypt,
protected them from the heavenly Destroyer.
Today, only those whose souls are sprinkled w/ X’s blood
unto redemption, are safely protected from hell for all
eternity.

- * He was/is separated from the world by his **sanctification**.
Positionally, he has been set apart by X unto Himself,
so now he’s part of X’s beloved Bride, the Church.
Practically, he is becoming more/more sanctified/separated
from the world (more alienated from it) because of
the new nature (God’s own nature), placed w/i him at
the time of his regeneration.

As this new nature becomes increasingly stronger/dominant
in his heart, he becomes crucified to the world, the
world becomes crucified to him, & he escapes its
corruption.

Our religion is one of the heart, in which the only true religious
ceremony (other than baptism/communion) is one of
self-sacrifice to God, as we “*present [our] bodies*

*a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is
[our] spiritual service [latreia—liturgy] of worship”
(Rom 12:1).*

That too separates us from the world, & increasingly so as
time passes.

**So we are positionally separate from the world, but in order
to remain truly unstained by the world, we must=>**

* ...guard ourselves from the world's spiritual lepers.

You can spot them by their ungodly speech, just as true

Xns can be identified by their gracious speech-habits.

Bad company corrupts good morals, so don't let their

worldly morals rub off on you through their

magazines/entertainment/websites/friendship.

* We must also guard ourselves from this world's
vanities/pleasures.

This includes the current worldly wisdom of the age that
advocates many non-biblical values & ways of living.

E.g. it views sex as nothing more than a recreational
activity, marriage as a trap, and the family as
anything it wants it to be (even a man and his
goldfish bowl).

It also includes vile language, immodest appearance, and
certain forms of recreation that appeal to all that is
base in human nature.

You hear it celebrated in the world's music, but it's most
powerful mode of communication is prob. its movies.

* We must guard ourselves from worldly, Satanic philosophies and false religions.

E.g. atheism, with its outspoken hatred/mockery of God.

Also, the erosion of Xn faith caused by world-inspired doubt/unbelief.

Even some “Xns” today are treating the Bible as if it’s not important to the Xn life because (they claim) we can’t understand it anyway.

Worldly philosophy has undermined their confidence in God and in His Word.

What can I say to those who aren’t just in the world, but are still of it?

I would simply read you I Jn 2:17, “*The **world** is passing away, & also its lusts but the one who does the will of God abides forever.*”

What will you do, when the world to which you belong passes away, burned up w/ intense heat? (II Pet 3:10).

May God grant you mercy, & save your soul even now thru faith in Jesus X.

“Pure and undefiled Religion”

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Text: James 1:26-27

1. Zwingli knew that even seemingly harmless additions to the pure and undefiled religion revealed in God’s Word have a [22 degrading] effect.

In today’s text James will divide all religion into that which is worthless, and that which is pure and undefiled, revealing the telltale signs of each...

*** Worthless Religion**

[James 1:26]

2. The first characteristic of worthless religion is that it has little-to-no effect on a person’s [14 speech].

Acts 9:1; Mt 7:22-23; 12:36-37, 34

3. When a person becomes born again, his heart is changed, so the words he speaks from his heart take on a [8 new] character.

Jms 3:6-8

There are many significant differences between the speech of unregenerate people and that of the regenerate...

- *4. The unsaved, unruly tongue is a foul instrument that may curse, swear, take God’s name in vain, and tell off colored [12 jokes].

Eph 4:29

- *5. An unsaved, unruly tongue lies and shades the [12 truth] with innuendo.

Rev 21:8; Eph 4:25

- *6. An unsaved, unruly tongue is also a hasty, [16 hurtful] tongue.

Titus 3:2; Psa 39:1; 141:3

7. The second characteristic of worthless religion is that it is all based on [10 self] deception.

I Sam 16:7

8. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit transforming our hearts as we believe in Jesus Christ alone, a person is self-deceived, and he is on the [12 broad] road that leads to destruction.

Jn 3:19; II Cor 4:4

*** Pure and Undeified Religion**

[Verse 27]

9. The first characteristic of acceptable religion is that it produces [12 human] compassion.

Lk 1:68; Psa 68:5; I Jn 3:17; Deut 14:28-29; 27:19

10. Simply contributing to orphans and widows' needs isn't enough; God wants believers to get personally involved in their lives—to "[12 visit]" them.

Mk 12:40

11. A second characteristic of true religion is its resistance to the sinful influence of Satan's [12 world] system.

I Jn 2:15; Jms 4:4; Rom 12:2; II Pet 3:14; I Tim 5:22

12. It is absolutely essential that a true Christian's religion create separation between himself and the [12 world] around him.

Heb 11:10; Eph 1:5-6; Rom 12:1

We are positionally separate from the world, but in order to remain truly unstained by the world, we must=>

*13. guard ourselves from the [16 world's] spiritual lepers.

*14. guard ourselves from this [16 world's] vanities and pleasures.

*15. guard ourselves from [16 worldly], Satanic philosophies.

I Jn 2:17