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Pure Religion

James 1:26-27

Introduction

Religion is defined in the dictionary as a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs; something someone believes in and follows devotedly; a point or matter of ethics or conscience. Simply put, religion can mean someone's beliefs about God or anything that someone is devoted to or they think is right. Of course, I think we all realize what is usually meant when someone says that they are "religious" or if they ask you what religion you are - they want to know your views of God, whether you are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. Even these religions are further divided into sub-religions. For example, Christians, in the loose interpretation of the word, can be Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Charismatic, Pentecostal, etc. We also realize what people basically believe when they tell us what sub-religion they are or what church they attend. But, sometimes I think we forget that we can also be religious about other things. My dad religiously attended every football or basketball game I ever played in. There are those out there who religiously watch their favorite sports teams on TV, often to the point of almost worshipping them. Some are religious about cleaning their homes, even to the point of being fanatical about it. There are a precious few who are religious about their marriage and being faithful to their wedding vows. Many parents are religious about caring for their children. I know several who were or are religious about their education, although, I don't think my children are in that category. Religiosity boils down to where one's devotion lies and the attention that that person gives to the object of their devotion. There is much in this world that people are religious about and, unfortunately, too few are devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ. There are millions who give lip service to Him, but when they go to church or do charity work, they are simply going through the motions. Their hearts aren't really into it because they haven't truly given themselves over to Christ. They are seeking some way to feel better about themselves and fill the God-sized hole in their souls. They know that for some reason, helping others, going to church, trying to live a good life, and raising their kids to respect others is the right thing to do and in their own way, they are attempting to earn God's favor. Some will even go so far as to acknowledge Jesus and know about Him, but THEY DON'T KNOW HIM. Jesus often chastised the Pharisees for their appearance of religion without the correct object of devotion. They would do all the things required by the Law because that's what they were taught, but they never did these acts for the right reasons; more often than not, they wanted the praise of men for their good deeds. They were acting in a way to give the outward appearance of being right with God. In our text this morning, James addresses this issue of religion and religious activity. He contrasts religious activity with true devotion to Christ. Let's read James 1:26-27 together. (read)

(pray)

I. James first discusses what is considered by God to be worthless religion (v. 26). The Greek term used here and in v. 27 is *threskeia* (three-sky-ya) which refers generically to religious service throughout the New Testament. In v. 26, the word is referring simply to external observances of religion. These are activities that on the surface, the exterior, appear to be religious - that the person doing these acts is committed to living a pleasing life for God, but in actuality, their heart is

devoted to something else. They desire a good reputation, someone to give them a pat on their back for their acts of kindness, to make up for something they did wrong in the past as a sort of penance, or perhaps to earn some favor with God so that their good outweighs their bad. James says that the one who considers himself religious and doesn't keep a tight rein on his tongue deceives himself and his religion is worthless. The NKJV uses the phrase "does not bridle his tongue". The picture is that of a rider controlling a horse. The bit goes into the horse's mouth over the tongue and by pulling on one rein or the other, the rider is able to make the horse go where he wants, to make him stop by pulling back, or to lead the horse by walking in front. If the rider loses hold of the reins, he loses control of the horse. Why would James use this picture as a signal for someone's religion being worthless? (discussion) The Bible has many examples of those who have an outward appearance of being "religious", but they are not truly committed to living their lives for God and doing what He says. Specifically, there are 4 signals to help us not only identify those who may be putting on a pretty face for the church crowd, but also to examine ourselves to see if what we do is really out of love and devotion to Christ.

a. The first signal of worthless religion is those that do a lot of chattering. They are always going around telling of their exploits and how selfless they are. They want people to know that they have a giving attitude. Every time you turn around they are giving account of how they helped so-and-so with such-and-such, and even though they really didn't have the time or the resources, they felt it was their "Christian" duty to help. I believe this chattering can actually be broken down into 4 different areas.

i. People that have a worthless religion are often seen boasting. As I just stated, they are always pointing to their good deeds and saying, "Look what I did." They are often the ones that will give a large sum of money to a charity or to the church and make sure that everyone knows how much they gave. They will spend a day helping those less fortunate, but make sure that everyone they know hears about how much work it was and how they felt sorry for the people they were serving. For these, it is about the attention they get and the pats on the back for their "sacrifices", not the deeds that they do for the glory of God.

ii. Another way that surface religious people chatter is through gossiping. They can't wait to call their friends and tell them about the person that they helped and how they couldn't believe what their environment was like; how run down their house was, that their car would barely run and they couldn't afford the gas to get them to their minimum wage job at the local fast food place, that they barely had any clothes and those that they had were worn and tattered. There were only a few scraps of food in the pantry and thank goodness I showed up with a bag of groceries for them. And then they want to talk about the family problems they are having. These people just seem to heap on more and more, when in reality, it probably isn't anyone else's business what the needy person's circumstances are. These people also go around talking about who they saw where and how they were doing something that maybe wasn't exactly Christian-like. They're the stirrers, the busy-bodies who seem to think they know everything about everyone and makes sure everybody else knows what they know, whether it's true or not since they didn't bother to check their facts. They show up at church, sing in the choir, teach Sunday School, and ask you how you are doing frequently asking deeply personal questions just so they can gather more dirt to spread. They seem to be sincerely interested in listening to people's problems and feign sympathy, only to turn around to the first person they see and share everything they just heard. We've all known people like this and we've learned not to say too much to them. Gossip can be devastating.

iii. Another form of chatter is deceiving. This one can be hard to see, but this involves someone saying they will do something for someone else and then either not doing it at all or only partially. Often, these people will volunteer for things and then when the time comes, they will have some excuse as to why they can't follow through with their commitment. Sometimes, people will even stoop so low as to take credit for an act of kindness or generosity that they had little or nothing to do with. I am reminded of the doctor in the film "Fireproof" that allows the young married woman he is trying to woo to believe that he is the one that paid for her mother's special bed and wheelchair she needed because of a disabling stroke. These people will do anything to make themselves look the part of a kind, generous, thoughtful person when they are really only concerned with themselves. Instead of being selfless, they are selfish.

iv. Finally, chattering can be identified in those guilty of breaking trust. This actually goes hand-in-hand with gossip, but really is a little beyond that. It is more frequently related to counselors that discuss very personal, private conversations with others, but it can also include those that maybe will do something for someone in need, and then when that person is back on their feet, ask for some form of repayment either through actual monetary reimbursement or some return of the favor. Another way that this can be seen is in the person that will commit to help someone for a period of

time and then halfway through, pull out. The person in need became dependent upon the assistance they were receiving and expected it for a set period of time because of the promise made, but then the rug gets pulled out from under them and they are again left to deal with the situation alone. Trust is a fragile thing and once it is broken, it is very difficult to rebuild.

b. The second signal of someone practicing worthless religion is the person that does good deeds and then seeks publicity. Matthew 6:1-4 speaks very clearly concerning this subject. (read) Jesus bluntly says to do our good deeds, our acts of kindness, our monetary donations, etc. in secret. If we are truly seeking to live for God, people will never know on this earth all that we have done. Once we make our deeds public and get applauded for them, Jesus says that we have received our reward and there will be no more forthcoming. Just think of all the celebrities and politicians that get on TV to tell the world exactly what they are doing for a certain charity or regional disaster. While I'm confident that their gifts would be greatly appreciated by the recipients, they would be just as appreciated if they were received anonymously. As it is, according to the words of Christ, they have already received their reward and they should expect no more.

c. The third signal of worthless religion is vain babbling. Matthew 6:7 says, "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." The NKJV translates babbling as "vain repetitions". In many religions, there are cookie-cutter prayers that are said over and over in hopes that God will one day pay attention to what they are saying. (ex. Lyndee asking for a hamster) I have been guilty of this myself as I pray with my children while putting them to bed. I found myself basically saying the same prayer every night. When the girls were really little, it started out as "Now I lay me down to sleep...", and progressed to where we were thanking God for a good day, asking for protection through the night, praying for our family members by name, and then asking for another good day tomorrow. It became a very routine prayer. When I realized what I was doing, we began actually talking about what each of us wanted to pray for and then including those requests in our prayers. While some of the prayer remains the same, I don't feel like we are "babbling" or "vainly repeating". Similarly, I'm sure most of us have been in churches where men and women will stand up in church and basically repeat the same flowery public prayer that they learned growing up in the church. Without accusing, because I don't really know their hearts, it appears that they are trying to impress everyone with their big words and delivery including dramatic pauses and earnest fluctuations of their voice. It sounds good, but is it sincere? My favorite prayers to hear are those from new Christians who are nervous about praying in public anyway and don't really know what to say to the God of the universe. They are still in awe of their conversion and they simply talk to God like a child would talk to their father. The Bible says that we can boldly approach the throne of Grace and ask whatever we want from our Heavenly Father, according to His divine will, but I don't think we are being encouraged to come storming in demanding that God give us such-and-such - that seems rather blasphemous to me. Rather, I get the picture of when my children come to me. They approach, rather sheepishly at times, and make their request. But they know that I love them, and even if I say "no", they understand that there are valid reasons for it and they trust that I am making the right decision for them.

d. The fourth signal of worthless religion is the one that has a condescending attitude. Let's look at Romans 14:10, 13. (read) I have been guilty of looking at someone else's circumstances and being judgmental. Even if I don't voice it, sometimes condescending thoughts go through my mind. Sometimes it's as simple as wondering what they did wrong to put them in a particular situation. Maybe they would be better off if they tried a little harder. Maybe I feel that they brought it on themselves. Although that may be true, it is not my place to judge whether they deserve the circumstance they are in or not. Also, I often don't understand why people who are Christians struggle so much with temptations that don't affect me (ex. Alcohol, drugs, cheating on taxes). I tend to forget my own short-comings and pointing out another's problems is a way for me to look more "holy". It's so often true that people will go somewhere to help others and look down their nose at them. The saying "there, but for the grace of God, go I" means little or nothing to them. Paul warns us that we are all going to stand before Christ and give account for our deeds, and He will show no favoritism; we all will be judged by the same standard and I'm afraid that many will be ashamed of the number of their deeds that will be disqualified because they were done in the wrong way. If anyone had a reason to be condescending, it was Christ. The perfect Lamb of God, living here on earth with no sin, having the power to do whatever He wanted, having created the very dirt He walked on, and not once did He look down on those in need. Rather, He had compassion on them and sought to draw them to Himself by embracing them and tending to their needs. Have you ever found it as interesting as I have that Jesus spent most of His time on earth with the poor, sick, lame, blind, deaf, and sinners? Maybe He was trying to give us an example.

II. James contrasts worthless religion in verse 26 with pure religion in verse 27. Here the Greek word refers to a

believer's good works; works done as a form of worship and sacrifice for Christ because we owe Him so much. The idea is that the motives for the good deeds are pure and righteous and that nothing is expected in return. It is the polar opposite of what we just discussed. I think it is safe to say that we all want our deeds to be pleasing to God and James tells us how we can accomplish this in a couple of different ways.

a. First, we must look after the less fortunate. Specifically, James mentions orphans and widows, but the rest of the Bible expands that to include anyone who has need. Let's turn to Matthew 25:34-36, 40. (read) In this parable, Jesus includes in the list of those in need the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned. And He goes on to say that everything that we do for one of these, we are actually doing it for Him. There are a couple of different ways we can help those in need.

i. We must first address their physical needs. When someone comes to the church or to an individual seeking assistance, the first thing we must do is meet their immediate need whether it is food, clothes, paying a utility bill, whatever. Of course, wisdom is required in knowing when someone is actually in need or not, but the principal is to satisfy the person's immediate physical need.

ii. After we have dealt with the physical needs, we need to address the person's spiritual needs. The Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19-20 tells us to go out into all the world and make disciples. If we aren't willing to meet the physical needs, we will never be able to deal with the spiritual needs. We will have little or no success in making disciples if we don't first show the love of Christ in giving aid. Let's look at the example of Christ again. When someone came to Him with some physical ailment, Jesus didn't slap them in the side of the head with scripture and berate them with the consequences of their sin; that they were getting exactly what they deserved. Rather, He satisfied the physical need to get their attention and make them willing to listen, and then He got to the brass tax of their spiritual condition in a gentle and loving manner, often by simply asking them questions to help them come to the realization of their spiritual need on their own. Because He loved them enough to address their physical need, they trusted Him to deal truthfully with what they needed to hear spiritually and they knew that He was authentic in what He was saying. The same is true for us. We call ourselves Christians, which means that we are striving to be Christ-like, but all too often we dive into the spiritual without ever proving our faith to be authentic by addressing the physical.

b. The second area that James speaks of in pure religion is that we must look after ourselves. He has told us previously to avoid sin, feed on the Word, practice living the Word, and to check our progress in light of the Truth, and he is reinforcing it here by warning us not to be polluted by the world. If we are harboring sin in our lives, we will tend to become more and more selfish, not wanting to get involved in the lives of those in need because it reminds us of our sin and what we actually deserve. We need to guard ourselves from becoming infected by what the world views as "good" and ensure that we are ground in God's Word so that we know what is "truly" good. Ephesians 6:11 exhorts us to put on the full armor of God so that we can stand against the devil's schemes. We are defenseless without it. Just as a soldier in a war would never step foot on a battlefield without his protective gear and weapons, we cannot afford to step foot on the spiritual battlefield without God's armor. We must look after ourselves so that we are prepared to do the work that God calls us to do.

c. One bonus area that is spoken of in Galatians 6:7-9 is that we need to sow good seed. (read) Even when we do good deeds, if we are sowing those seeds to please ourselves or to gain the approval of men, we have already received our reward. Worse yet, if we sow seeds of sin, we will eventually come to ruin. The only truly good works are those done in the Spirit to please our Heavenly Father. It can be discouraging to continually do good and sow the Word without seeing any fruit develop, but this passage encourages us to keep pressing forward sowing good seed because in God's time, we will see the harvest of what we have planted. (ex. College roommate)

Conclusion

In the current economic situation the world finds itself, needs are going to become greater and more numerous. People are going to be looking for answers, but they aren't going to listen until the Church addresses their immediate physical needs. God is calling out to those who truly love Him to be prepared to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of those He will send our way. Are we ready? Are we paying attention to the needs right here in our own community? Are we making an effort to help meet those needs or are we hoarding because we are afraid for our own future? When I look at those 4 little mouths God has given me to feed, who seem to get hungry every 2 hours or so, who need clothes and a warm house to

live in, I must admit that it is very tempting to hold onto what I have. This passage has challenged me to really look hard at who or what I am devoted to; to really determine if I understand Who actually owns it all and that it really isn't mine to keep anyway - I am only a steward. God has given to me in order for me to give to others, not for me to selfishly store away.

(pray)