

James 1:22-27

Do the Word

Main idea: Pure religion is doing the word.

There's a legend about a cruel research study in which newborn babies died because of a lack of human interaction. In the thirteenth century, Emperor Frederick II of Sicily allegedly wanted to see what language babies would grow up to speak if they were never spoken to. In the experiment, Frederick found and gave a group of orphaned babies into the care of nurses, who could feed and bathe them, but not speak to them or show them the kind of love and play that babies should receive. According to the legend, all of the babies died in infancy due to a lack of love.¹

Now, we don't know if that experiment ever actually took place. It could be just a myth. But we do know that we were created to have meaningful relationships.

I read recently that single men in their 20's break the law and go to jail two times more than married men in their 20's.² Single men also statistically earn less money,³ have more illnesses, and die at a younger age than married men.⁴ And we've known for many years that women tend to live longer than men, and I wonder if that has less to do with biology, and more to do with the fact that women tend to have more close friendships than men.⁵ So married or not, male or female, relationships keep us alive. God created us to have meaningful relationships with one another.

I've heard many preachers talk about how Christianity isn't a religion, but a relationship. And that highlights the truth that Christianity is less about what we do, and more about knowing and being known by God.⁶ It's a relationship.

And the thing that makes Christianity different from every other religion on the planet is that it doesn't depend on what we do. In every other religion, a person's eternal destiny rests on what he or she does. They need to do more good than bad, or they need to achieve a level of self-awareness, or they need to die as a martyr for their faith. It depends on what they do. But Christianity is completely different. It doesn't depend on what we do. It depends on what Jesus has done for us. Salvation isn't by works, but by grace.⁷

And yet, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't do things. As people who are saved by God's grace, we ought to want to glorify Him. We ought to want to share Him with others. We ought to want to practice our religion in such a way that shows the world how good God is.

James 1:22-27.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 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. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 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. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_deprivation_experiments

² http://russellsage.org/sites/all/files/u4/Western_Incarceration%2C%20Marriage%2C%20%26%20Family%20Life.pdf

³ <http://stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/april-2002/for-love-or-money-why-married-men-make-more>

⁴ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mens-health/marriage-and-mens-health>

⁵ <https://ourworldindata.org/why-do-women-live-longer-than-men>

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:12, Galatians 4:9

⁷ Ephesians 2:8-9

heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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. (James 1:22-27)

Father, help us to be doers of the word. Help us to practice our faith in a way that glorifies You. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Mary Lou Retton is a retired gymnast who won the American Cup three times, and also received bronze, silver, and gold medals in gymnastics at the Olympics, even after having wrist and knee injuries that kept her from training for a period of time. And she even became the first female gymnast outside of Eastern Europe to receive the individual all-around gold medal when she got perfect 10's in both the floor exercise and vault.⁸ When she was interviewed about how she became such an accomplished gymnast, she said:⁹

"Here's what it takes to be a complete gymnast. Someone should be able to sneak up and drag you out at midnight, push you out on some strange floor -- and you should be able to do your entire routine sound asleep in your pajamas. Without one mistake. That's the secret. It's got to be a natural reaction."

- Mary Lou Retton

Imagine if Mary had answered, "Well, I watched some of the best gymnasts get gold medals on TV, and I was in awe of what they could do. So then, I studied gymnastics for several years before stepping foot onto the mat. Finally, I planned and memorized my own routine. And because I had all the knowledge, I was able to get the gold."

No. That's not how it works, right? Mary had to practice. She had to practice when she felt like it, and practice when she didn't feel like it. She had to practice so much that it became second nature, so that she could do it in her sleep. And only then would she call herself a complete gymnast.

I wonder how many of us have that attitude toward being a Christian? It seems like a lot of us today are satisfied to memorize a few Bible verses, if that, and think that we're mature in our faith. And it's interesting that we're often in awe of Christians who seem to teach the Bible in great ways, but we find out later that they didn't practice what they preached.

You may have heard the recent news about Ravi Zacharias. Ravi Zacharias was a well-known and respected Bible teacher until he passed away in May of 2020. Four months after his death, women who worked at the day-spas that he owned came forward accusing him of sexual harassment. Initially, these accusations were dismissed, but then sexually explicit pictures of these and more than 200 other women were found on his phone.

Now, on the one hand, we would rightly say about this whole situation that Ravi Zacharias didn't practice what he preached. His legacy will be a warning to all preachers to not indulge in secret sin. But on the other hand, who among us is without sin? We all have the temptation to study and grow in knowledge, condemning others, without realizing that we're just as much at fault as anyone else. We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.¹⁰

So James writes in verse 22:

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Lou_Retton

⁹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/p/practice.htm>

¹⁰ Romans 3:23

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22)

It's very easy to hear the word and not do it. We come to church all the time to hear the word. And hearing the word is a good thing! The gospel message is the most important message that we could hear and believe!

It's important that we hear and believe that salvation is by grace through faith.¹¹ It's important that we hear and believe that Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life, and that He is the only way to the Father in heaven.¹² And it's important that we hear and believe that Jesus is coming back again, so that this broken world will be destroyed, and that there will be a new heaven and a new earth because Jesus is making all things new.¹³

Hearing the word is important, and good. But if your Christianity is merely about coming and hearing the word, the Bible says you deceive yourself. You deceive yourself into thinking that you're doing all that God wants you to do here on this earth.

The illustration that James gives of a person who hears the word but doesn't do it is of a person who looks in the mirror, but then forgets what he looks like. Verse 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. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. (James 1:23-24)

Now, I don't encourage any of us to be so vain about our appearance that we stare at ourselves in the mirror for long periods of time. But it's not a bad idea to look presentable when you go out.

So if I glance at a mirror in the morning, and see that I need to fix my hair, and even tell myself that I need to fix my hair, but then walk away from the mirror and don't ever fix my hair, then what was even the point of looking in the mirror?

In the same way, the goal of reading the Bible is not merely to gain knowledge. The goal of reading the Bible is that we would have changed lives. Look at verse 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. (James 1:25)

We often think of the law as constraining and limiting us. But James calls it the perfect law. The law of liberty. Rightly understood and applied, the laws in the Bible give us freedom to live and thrive in the way that God wants for us.

The law is like a mirror to our lives. It shows us that we're sinners, and that we don't measure up to God's standard. And yet, it also shows us how we ought to live. And if we want to glorify God, then we should not only hear the word, but persevere in doing what it says. And the Bible says that if we do that, we'll be blessed.

Now, that doesn't mean that everything will always go the way we want it to, but rather that even when things aren't going the way we want them to, we can still have joy, hope, and peace. We'll be blessed as we serve God, doing what His word tells us to do.

¹¹ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹² John 14:6

¹³ Revelation 21:1-4

So what does the word tell us to do? Verse 26.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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. (James 1:26-27)

James gives us two examples of worthless religion, and two examples of pure religion. Worthless religion includes 1) not bridling your tongue, and 2) deceiving your heart. On the other hand, pure religion includes 1) visiting orphans and widows in their distress, and 2) keeping yourself unstained from the world. I don't think these are exhaustive lists of everything pure religion includes, but they are indicative of the lives of those who glorify God.

So let's look at each of these. First, worthless religion includes not bridling your tongue. James will talk about this more later in the letter, but he mentions it here to remind us that a huge characteristic of worthless religion is having a tongue that's a loose canon. We talked about this last week. We ought to be quick to hear and slow to speak. We ought to be careful with our words. If we allow ourselves to just say what we're thinking all the time, not being careful about what we say for the sake of sharing the gospel and winning our lost friends to Jesus, then we've deceived ourselves into thinking we're doing God's work, when in reality we could be doing our enemy's work.

Put it this way. Our witness depends not just on sharing the Bible, but sharing the Bible in the right ways. God calls us not just to speak the truth, but to speak the truth in love. Because even the devil knows how to share Bible verses. The devil tried to tempt Jesus by sharing Bible verses. So just because you know something is true, that does not mean you ought to condemn your neighbor with that truth. Instead, seek to love your neighbor as yourself. And that often means holding your tongue for the sake of your witness, even when you're convinced that you're right, so that you can share the love of Jesus with them when they most need it.

Secondly, worthless religion includes deceiving your own heart.

With the dream of getting rich fast, a school teacher once lost her life savings when she invested her money in a crooked business scheme. After the business she invested in disappeared with her money, she went to the Better Business Bureau and found out that the business that stole her money had already been reported on multiple times. So they asked her, "Why on earth didn't you come to us first? Didn't you know about the Better Business Bureau?" "Oh, yes," said the school teacher. "I've always known about you. But I didn't come to you first because I was afraid you'd tell me not to do it."

As Christians, we ought to be people of the truth. And yet sometimes we're tempted to lie to ourselves in order to live how we want. We need to embrace truth even when it's hard, even when it goes against the grain, and even when it demands that we change our entire lives in order to most glorify God.

These are only two examples of worthless religion: not bridling your tongue, and deceiving your heart. But James also gives two examples of what pure religion is.

The first example of pure religion is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. I take that to mean, take care of those people who need people to take care of them. Be a friend to those who need a friend. Look not only to your own needs, but also to the needs of others, especially in meeting the needs of those who can't pay you back.

In short, people need relationships. So, look around you. And make it your service to God to love the people who need to be loved.

I think many of you know how much this concept means to me and my family. We provided a foster home for several children even after we brought Raelynn into our home. Then we adopted her. And we do these things because this is what God did for us. When we were lost in our sin, God became our Father and adopted us into His family. And there are so many kids who need to be fostered and adopted, and there are so few families who step up to do that. Listen, I'm not saying that every single person in this room ought to foster and adopt, but I do think you should at least consider it, and at the very least, as a person loved by God, you ought to go out of your way to love the people that our society casts aside as unlovable.

Secondly, James writes that pure religion includes keeping yourself unstained from the world.

George MacDonald wrote this in his book, *Ordering Your Private World*:

"Some years ago, when Gail and I bought the old abandoned New Hampshire farm we now call Peace Ledge, we found the site where we wished to build our country home strewn with rocks and boulders. It was going to take a lot of hard work to clear it all out....The first phase of the clearing process was easy. The big boulders went fast. And when they were gone, we began to see that there were a lot of smaller rocks that had to go too. But when we had cleared the site of the boulders and the rocks, we noticed all of the stones and pebbles we had not seen before. This was much harder, more tedious work. But we stuck to it, and there came the day when the soil was ready for planting grass." - George MacDonald

God calls every Christian to the process of sanctification. That's the process of getting rid of the sin in your life, and living instead for Jesus. At first, there will be some great, big, boulders of things you need to address, like sexual sin outside of biblical marriage, and greed that can cause a person to lie and cheat. And often, in the process of becoming a Christian, God immediately removes those things from our lives by His power and grace.

But after that, there are inevitably smaller things, rocks and pebbles, that we didn't even know were there. Things like pride, or laziness, or self-centeredness. God calls us to pursue a life that glorifies Him so much that we seek to remove those from our lives as well.

Keeping yourself unstained by the world is talking about being in the world but not of it. It's talking about living in such a way that we don't get sucked into the same lifestyles as unbelievers. And that's often a painful process.

So how do we keep ourselves unstained from the world? Well, of course, we want to not only hear the word, but do what it says. We want to read the Bible and live according to the Bible. But part of the Bible's message is that even though we're commanded to live a life unstained by the world, ultimately, we can't. We've all been stained by the world. We've sinned, and we continue to sin.

But there is one way that we can keep ourselves completely unstained by the world. We rest in the Word of God, who is Jesus. We don't merely hear about Jesus, the Word of God, but we do what He says. We receive Him.

You see, doing these things, caring for orphans and widows, and keeping ourselves unstained from the world, ultimately glorify God because they show God's character to the world. These are the very things that Jesus

Himself did. He cared for us when we couldn't care for ourselves. And He kept Himself unstained by the world. He was in the world, but not of it. He lived the perfect life that we fail to live, and then died for our sins.

So pure religion is not only hearing about Jesus, but embracing Him as Savior and Lord.