

TEST OF AUTHENTIC RELIGION

James 1:26-27

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5th August 2018



What worries students more than exams? An unexpected test suddenly thrust on them without warning. That's what I am going to do with you today. You will be tested to see how authentic your faith is. Why do that? Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian once said, 'The human race in the course of time has taken the liberty of softening and softening Christianity until at last we have contrived to make it exactly the opposite of what it is in the New Testament'. A key reason why the church is now being sidelined in our culture is because Christianity has gone soft. We don't stand up and we don't stand out. We go with the flow and are as much consumers wanting to be entertained in church as the rest of society in what it does. Martin Luther said, 'A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing is worth nothing.' David Platt in his commentary on our text says '...we want Christianity and we want church on our terms, according to our preferences, aligning with our lifestyles. We are people happy to go to church just so long as nothing in our lives needs to change. We are people glad to be Christians just so long as we can define Christianity according to what accommodates us. The only problem is that in order for the religion of Christianity to be authentic, true and actually acceptable before God, we have to let him define what it looks like'. James in our text spells out the kind of religion that is acceptable to God. He gives us three indicators of those who are authentic Christians. 1. They "...keep a tight rein of their tongue". 2. They "...visit the orphans and widows." 3. They "...keep themselves from being polluted by the world." James is not saying that is all there is to religion. Someone will argue this sounds like a social gospel. 'What about trusting in God, going to church, reading the Bible, taking the sacraments, knowing things like justification by faith alone?' James would agree with those things. But he wants to test how authentic his readers. We can go to church every Sunday and be pious. But, do we really mean it? James, as Jesus' brother, would remember the challenge Jesus gave. Quoting Isaiah (29:13) he said (Matthew 15:8) "*You hypocrites, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you. These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain.*" James three tests also remind us of the prophet Micah's three points (Micah 6:8) "*And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*"

James' three test questions are not just plucked out of the air. It's like when we set an exam for the theological students at the end of the semester. We don't ask them to recite everything that was said in the lectures. We work out several key questions that tests how well they have learned their stuff. That's what James' three points do. In verse 18 James speaks of the fact that Christians are 'born again' by the Word of God. And in verse 19-25 he shows how we grow in our faith by listening to, accepting and doing what that Word of God says. The three tests flow out of these same verses. We see a pattern where Christians are to imitate God our Father. 1. We are born again by the Word of 'the Father'. So, we also much watch our words. 2. We are born again purely by the Father's grace. We were depraved, lost to our desires and temptations. (14&15). But God cares for those who have no resources of their own, who have no hope on their own. We are saved by grace alone. So, Christians also are to care for those who have little hope, namely the orphans and widows. 3. The father has given us new birth for a reason. *"...that we might be a kind of first fruits..."* In other words, we are to demonstrate that we are God's children and be holy like he is. Or as James puts it in *"...being unpolluted by the world"*. So, with these three test questions let's do the test. Let's see how authentic our faith is.

The first test question concerns our tongue. *"Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless."* So, imagine someone who regards themselves as religious. The person is involved in church life. But to test their authenticity we will listen to what they say outside the church setting. Let's imagine they have left their mobile phone on and we can hear everything they say. We can listen to them while driving, while at work, while at home. James is saying as you listen you will hear what their spirituality is really like. You see spiritually, the tongue and heart are linked. As Jesus said (Matthew 12:34) *"Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks"*. John MacArthur said, 'The tongue is not the only indicator of true spirituality, but one of the most reliable'. So, the tongue, unhindered, gives an accurate test of what is really going on in our lives. Let's listen to ourselves. What do we go on about? Are we often talking about money, making it big, bragging about what we have? Are we then slipping into having our security in wealth rather than God? Are we always complaining, being negative? Is that an indicator of not trusting God? The way men speak to and about their wives tells a lot about their hearts. Same thing if we listen to how wives speak about their husbands. The way you speak to your children, friends, workmates, all of these are indicators of whether your faith is real. Do you gossip a lot, are your words often biting, cursing, angry? Or are your words seasoned with grace and gentle wisdom? Is there often a word of praise and thankfulness? What do our tongues tell us about our faith?

Now James is not suggesting we say nothing. Like the Mark Twain who said, 'It's better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt.' James is not saying keep your mouth shut and hide the real you, suppress what's inside. He talks of "...*keeping a tight rein*" on our tongues. When riding a horse, you control the whole horse by keeping the reins tight. In other words, as we listen to ourselves, we reflect and recognize what is in us that is bringing out those words. It is telling us about our inner selves that we must deal with. It tells us we need to take hold of the reins and pull ourselves into line. The man who speaks abusively at his wife, needs to rein his tongue, and himself, and reflect what it says about his relationship with Jesus who said, 'love your wife as I love the church'. He needs to reflect on his worth as a child of God and that there is no need to pull another person down to feel better about yourself. In our day of social media where we can text, email, twitter, blog, Facebook, we need to be very careful what we say. The trolls are demonstrating people think that can say whatever they want. But the pain they often cause is as indefensible as bullying someone in your house. What are your words saying about you? If you don't care, James says it begs some questions about where you are with Jesus. Speak in a way that shows your faith is real and the core of your heart belongs to God.

James says the person who thinks themselves as being religious but does not 'bridle their tongue... deceives themselves and their religion is worthless." In other words, their worship, their pious rituals do nothing for God. It reminds us of Isaiah 58 where Judah complained to God "*Why have we fasted ... and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?*" And God replied "*Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked, to clothe them...*"

That links us to the second test "*to look after orphans and widows.*" You may wonder why James specifically mention orphans and widows. He is taking us back to the many Old Testament references, like Psalm 68:5 of God as "*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows*". In fact, the whole of God's saving work can be seen in the imagery of caring for the orphan and widow. Deuteronomy 10:14-18 "*To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause*

of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt." The 'fatherless and the widow, the foreigner' were those who were totally dependent on the care and provision of others. There were no insurance policies or pensions or refugee support in those days. So, these folks had no resources, no influence, no connections of their own. They had nothing to offer others to induce them to help. God reminds the Israelites they were 'foreigners in Egypt'. They were helpless slaves. But God redeemed them by his unconditional grace. That is what God has done for us who believe in Jesus. We have nothing that God needs. There is no way we can pay for our sinfulness. We are spiritually bankrupt, without any defense or resources to deal with our failures before God. Yet, in grace, God reaches out to us. Through Jesus' death and resurrection justice has been served for our rebellion and failure. By grace we are now God's children. And as his children he wants us to imitate him who is 'Our father...' That is why James says. *"Religion that God our father accepts...is to look after orphans and widows."* Jesus is our model in that. As Paul wrote (Ephesians 5:1) *"Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* So, the second test to see how real our religion is do we 'look after' those who have nowhere to go, who have nothing to offer us in return? We might argue that today the orphan, the widow, the unemployed, the elderly, the refugee get government support and pensions. True. But they still need what no bureaucracy can give: care, love, companionship, support, advocacy. James calls on Christians to find them, visit them and 'look after' them. It might mean hard work and sacrifice. We might get little in return. But that's not why we do it. As Jesus said (Matthew 5:46-48) *"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* There we see the point. We are to show God by our actions. A God who is generous and gracious is seen by those who live generously and graciously.

The third test flows on from there *"...to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."* In other words, *"Be perfect as your Father is perfect"*. Or as Peter wrote (1 Peter 1:15), quoting Leviticus 11, *"...just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy."* So all of life must be lived for God. Not just at church on Sunday. Not even just what you say or how you care for the poor. Everything, at home, at school, at work, at football or netball, must be holy. For that to happen, we must listen, accept and do. Listen to what God says in his word, accept it and do it. It requires us to be doing that instead of just going with the flow, and thus 'polluted by the world'. Jerry Bridges in his book 'The Pursuit of Holiness' writes 'Many Christians

have what we might call cultural holiness. They adapt the character and behaviour pattern of ...those around them. As the Christian culture around them is more or less holy so these Christians are more or less holy. But God has not called us to be like those around us. He has called us to be like himself. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God'. So, as we said at the beginning. Let's not go soft. Let's not be 'people who are happy to go to church just so long as nothing needs to change in our lives'. Stand up and stand out and conform to God's character.

So there you have it. The three tests of authentic religion. How do you reckon you did on this test? Would you give yourself a pass? Perhaps you are wondering if you have been deceiving yourself about being religious. Or perhaps you're thinking 'I really do try on those three points, but I struggle to do them well'. What do we do? We come back to the basics. Let's admit our need for God's grace, seriously, not just as a ritual. Let's participate in the Lord's Supper and be reassured of 'the complete forgiveness of all our sin'. We are children of God by grace alone, through Christ alone, through faith alone. Let the joy of God's deep love for us drive our response of thanks. It's that response that inspires us to watch our tongues, care for the poor and live for Jesus.