

**“Real Religion”
(James 1:22-27)
Pastor Peter Yi
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Introduction:

What does it mean to be religious?

We throw around that designation all the time. We say things like, “He’s pretty religious. She’s pretty religious.” And what is the criteria we use to determine if one is religious or not? Well, he doesn’t swear. He goes to church regularly. He’s really nice. He believes in God. He even prays. He reads his bible. He never gets angry. And I’m sure we can all add something to that list.

Today’s passage in James gives us a glimpse into what it means to truly be religious.

ESV James 1:22 - 27 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. ²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. 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.

The first thing to notice in this passage uses the word religion. And I bring this up because our culture, for various reasons has gotten away from using that word. There’s a lot of negative connotation loaded into that word these days. We use it almost exclusively in a negative sense. When people these days think about religion a few things pop into their heads.

1. Religion is **Organized**. There is a movement against anything that is organized. To be organized means that it is institutional, it’s authoritative, and it’s corrupt. There are several reasons for this. One is because many organizations from religions to business to government have become these things. So it’s understandable to be skeptical of things that are organized. But another reason is because the individual is king. And if the individual is king then he or she should determine how, what, when, where, who, why to worship.
2. Religion is merely **Rules**. That’s how I grew up in my church. My childhood Christianity was a list of rules and when you and I think of rules, nine times out of ten, we think of them in the negative. We don’t of rules as, “I command you, that you shall enjoy life to the fullest.” We almost always think of rules as the things we cannot do. I think that sums up the word religion for many of us.
3. Religion is **lifeless**. When we think of religion it has imbedded within it, images of lifeless adherents. Perhaps we envision thousands of people like zombies bowing in a religion ceremony. You see churches that are more empty than full. You see people with little or no expression of joy or happiness. We think religion is lifeless.

And so what have Christians done in describing Christianity? They've replaced the word 'religion' with the word, 'relationship'. It's not a bad choice. If we describe Christianity as 'the way to be rightly related to God', that's not a bad description. But there is more to it than that. There is organization to Christianity. And a high degree of being institutional. It's hard not to when you have over two billion adherents. And there are rules to Christianity. We'd be naïve to think otherwise.

So yes, Christianity is a religion. And if it wasn't so, James wouldn't have used the word. He would have said, "Relationship that is pure and defiled before God is..." But he doesn't do that. He purposefully uses the word religion. And when we look at the description or definition of religion according to James, we can continue using that word, so long as we're using in the way James's describes. So I don't think religion is a bad word

Secondly it's important to realize that in describing genuine religion, it implies that there can be and often is a fake version or counterfeit version of religion. And this is terribly important to know what that distinction is and then to make sure we're practicing the right one. There's a way to do Christianity and at the end of the day, get parts or most of it wrong. We can get wrong how we are to relate to God, to each other, and to our world. There's a way to do religion where we end up in heaven, justified and accepted by God and there's a way to do religion where God rejects it all and we end up in hell. So that's the purpose of the sermon—that each of us understands how God expects us to practice our religion.

The bible's definition of religious is multifaceted. It includes elements of what we believe. A large part of our religion is to believe truth statements about God, about humankind, about sin, about salvation, about how to rightly related to each other, and the like. What we believe is very important. How do we know that? Logically it would be impossible to have a religion without truth statements, guiding principles and the like. But more than that, it says so in our passage today. It mentions it over and over again. It says things like...

"Be doers of the word."

"Not hearers (of the word) only"

"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer (of the word)..."

"But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty."

So 'truth', which for Christians is the Scriptures, is very important. This is where we find our definition of what it means to be truly religious.

It also includes what's in our heart. What's at the core? Who am I inside? So it definitely begins there. It doesn't begin on the outside and work its way in. The bible teaches very clearly that spiritual transformation begins in the heart, at the very center of our being, but it doesn't end there. It starts on the inside, but works its way outward...always! Real religion also includes a spiritual transformation in our behavior. And what's great about the bible is that different authors give different parts of religion specific focus. And James was one of those Christians that focused on the outward expressions of religion.

The outward expression of religion, if it truly reflects what's inside, in the heart, that is the best scenario. We can believe something inwardly, but not express it outwardly. That's hypocrisy. People like this are usually self-righteous, critical, and don't lift a finger to serve God and people. People who express religion outwardly without the inward foundation, they become legalists

because their religion isn't an inward to outward expression, but rather just rules expressed outwardly, which is classic legalism, like the Pharisees.

James instructs us how we are to best practice our religion. **Be a doer of the word.** That's the blanket statement for what comes not only for the rest of this chapter, but for chapter two and it's famous comments on faith and works. James describes the person who is only a hearer of the word and not a doer. What is that person like? He is self-deceived. Deceived in what? In thinking that their version of religion is accepted by God. That's why they're deceived. This is a frightening warning. If you and I get into the habit of become great listeners, but fail to become great doers, we will become self-deceived.

Think of what it means to be self-deceived. It's one thing for someone else to deceive you. That's a pretty bad thing and there can be some negative consequences as a result of that deception. But to be self-deceived...we're doing it to ourselves over and over and over again. And every time it happens we convince ourselves more and more and more until one day, we think our version of Christianity is the right version. And we begin to think that just because I have correct theology, I'm a Christian. But James chapter two says that the devil has correct theology too, but he ain't going to heaven any time soon. And because we are self-deceived, we won't even know we are deceived. People, listen carefully. If you listen to the word of God, but don't act upon it, your inaction will show that you are not a child of God and will go to hell. The bible's primary detector of the assurance of salvation is not adherence to a statement of faith. Do you know that? The bible's primary detector of the assurance of salvation is the presence of spiritual fruit, transformation, God-like qualities, in a person's life.

Let's move on. What then does God expect us to do? Our how are we to display our inward religion outwardly? There are two things that James highlights in this passage.

1. **Speech** – true religion affects what comes out of your mouth. Think of all the different vices that come from our mouth. Lying, gossip, slander, threats, cursing, discouragement, criticism, blasphemy, insincerity, flattery, and more. And so many other sins are expressed with our mouths. Anger. Hatred. Bitterness. Jealousy. Idolatry. Isn't that incredible? So many awful sins are committed with our mouths and so it's no wonder James returns over and over to this subject. He even states that a religion that doesn't transform speech is worthless (26). If you really want to bridle your tongue spend your bible reading and meditation in two books. James and Proverbs. They are the two books in each of the testaments that speak the most on this sin.
2. **Mercy** – the second description of true and genuine religion is mercy. And here's where we'll spend the remainder of our time. Let me read verse 27.

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.

When I think of orphans and widows there are some things that come to mind.

- a. They don't have someone to take care of their basic needs. Isn't that true? A child is totally dependent upon his parents, for everything. For the basics of food, shelter, clothing, security. Even for a future. Without parents it is going to be incredibly difficult to come by

these things. So orphans and widows are suffering from physical poverty, experiencing a lack of the basics.

- b. But there's more to their suffering. They are also suffering from a broken relationship. The orphan has lost her parents. The wife has lost her husband.

Now think with me through the scriptures. What are two themes or two relationships that describes God and his people.

1. **ADOPTION.** Our election as his children, as his people. From Abraham to the nation of Israel to every saint in the bible and every Christian since Christ, all of us were adopted. All of us were spiritual orphans, not having a heavenly father and God adopted us and made us his children.

Ephesians 1:3-6 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

And look again at James 1:27 How is God addressed? "religion that is pure and undefiled before God, **the Father**, is to visit orphans...."

Isn't that amazing?

2. What's the second image often used in the bible to describe the relationship between God and his people? **MARRIAGE.** Israel and God in the Old Testament. God rebuked them for being adulterous and still God remained faithful. In the New Testament, we all know what it is, Christ and his Church. Can we take a quick peek at Eph. 5

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.
Isn't that just amazing?

What God has done with each of us, in adoption and marriage, He asks us do to unto others. Take care of the destitute. The poor, the sick, the needy, the underprivileged, the voiceless, the oppressed. That is our calling. Why? Because that is what we were and God had mercy on us. And that is what reflects the heart of God. That's what true religion is.

Folks for the longest time, that wasn't a part of my religious practice. I had the tongue thing going well, but I didn't actively care for the poor. Friends, I think I'm right in assuming that the majority of us are the same. The poor and how you're to deal with them are not a part of your world view. It must be. This is what God considers to be true religion.

The church has positioned itself to do actively address this issue. One is building an orphanage in Cambodia. Second is volunteering with Toronto City Mission. Yeah, there are a lot of groups you can partner with, but having a TCM missionary in Elliott Shin as a part of our church has made the partnership pretty natural. There are so many things you can do to faithfully and obediently live out your religion. Tutor, mentor, sports, give, pray. Take a look at these two brochures on TCM when as you leave today and prayerfully consider how you might live out real religion.

