

# James 1:26-27

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/jas/jas-1/james-126-27/>

*Pure religion, a life focused on pleasing God, is objectively identifiable and genuinely valuable.*

James immediately offers a second objective way in which to evaluate oneself regarding progress toward effective actions consistent with a maturing faith. This is what James calls a *bridled tongue*. In the previous section, James explained that a man who looks in a mirror and leaves it without changing anything or even remembering the image he saw of himself, is like one who is a hearer and not a doer of the word. James had previously emphasized the value of listening. Learning to listen to other people prepares us to listen to God and implant His word in our hearts. The implanted word of God can set aside the wickedness of our flesh, which desires to lead us into sin and its natural consequence of death (James 1:19-21).

It makes sense, therefore, for James to observe that if a person cannot *bridle his tongue*, then he *deceives his own heart* if he thinks he is living righteously. The issue of bridling one's tongue is not only an objective measure for the person himself, but also to those who hear the unbridled tongue. This is not meant as a call for judging others, which James rebukes (see James 5:9), but an effective self-test of whether the believer is following the call to please God with his life. Having a bridled tongue, which James will return to in this letter (James 3:3), is one very practical way to live out true *religion*, a religion that is *pure and undefiled* by hypocrisy and self-seeking.

In James's use of the word, *religion* is the outward display of an inward reality. If it is *pure and undefiled*, then it is without hypocrisy and external entrapments. Religion here is not so much a set of rituals or special days, but rather the alignment of a good heart with good actions. A *bridle* is a device put in the mouth of an animal that is used to guide and control that animal. It is, by extension, a metaphor that describes a scenario where a genuinely religious person succeeds in controlling and directing the words that leave their mouth.

James describes a person who has the implanted word of God, and yet does not have speech that matches such a truth-based life. James says *this man's religion is worthless*; meaning that this *religion* is without a transcendent or useful purpose, aim, or fruit. It is religion that is self-seeking rather than God-seeking. It seeks affirmation from the sight of man rather than affirmation *in the sight of God*. It is evidence that the person is being controlled by inner lusts rather than the abiding word of God. The result of a *worthless* religion will be a loss of reward. This could range from a lack of peace in this life to deeds consumed by fire at the judgement seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

To explain even further, James displays what this kind of *pure and undefiled religion* looks like in action. Beyond controlling one's speech or anger (James 1:20), a truly religious person who is living a righteous life to be pleasing *in the sight of God*, is also one who does such things such as visiting *orphans and widows in their distress* and keeping *oneself unstained by the world*. *Orphans and widows* are often described in the scriptures as the most afflicted, who also have

the special attention of the Father (Deuteronomy 14:29; Job 31:16, 17, 21; Psalm 146:9; Isaiah 1:17, 23). Attending to the most afflicted of humanity displays a match with the heart of God. Serving *orphans and widows* pleases God, but won't return many (if any) rewards from the world. These deeds will, however be like gold and precious stones, that are refined and gain great rewards at the judgement seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Keeping oneself *unstained* by the always-staining *world* is also a display of a life focused on God's will, over and against the corrupt world. The corrupt world will be replaced by "new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells" in the future (2 Peter 3:10-13). James will later return to this theme, when he declares that "friendship with the world is hostility toward God" (James 4:3). This kind of purity is also emphasized by Peter:

"Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless..."  
(2 Peter 3:14)

James's solution in the whole of his letter is a constant appeal to reject evil in thought and practice while living a life which is pleasing in God's sight, marked by listening to God and others. James urges believers to ingest God's word and live by doing the truth.

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>26</sup> **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.** <sup>27</sup> **Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.**