

James 1:26-27

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By way of quick review, what we have studied so far in the book of James can be summed up as follows: the Christian's joy during times of trials (**verses 2-4**), a Christian's need for wisdom (**verses 5-8**), spiritual equality of Christians from various economic backgrounds (**verses 9-11**), the source of trials and temptations — the Devil, not God (**verses 12-17**), teaching on our Christian rebirth through the Word and the resulting change of actions, including how we treat people with our speech (**verses 18-21**), and the utmost importance of being doers of the Word, and not hearers only (**verses 22-25**). In short, chapter one is a great overview of true religion, which will be further described in the last two verses of the chapter.

Verse 26: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain." This is critical: it is possible for man to SEEM religious, but in actuality practice vain religion. This is not saying that RELIGION is vain, as some erroneously teach today, but it IS saying that a certain TYPE of religion is vain (hypocritical religion). If a person claims to be religious, and yet won't even control his tongue (his speech — see James 1:19-20; 3:1-12), his "religion" is nothing but deception. Not only is he deceiving others, but he's deceiving HIMSELF. He may think that he can get away with this behavior, but he will not.

Verse 27: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." This one verse defeats the popular idea of "Give me Jesus, not religion." James says that there IS such a thing as pure religion. And what is it? The kind of religion that is not hollow or surface-level or fake, but religion that is backed up with action. James gives two examples: 1) visitation, and 2) avoidance of sin.

We often think of Christian visitation in terms of hospital visits. This is certainly Biblical, and needed, (see James 5:14a), but the two types of visitation mentioned here include orphans and widows. Perhaps two of the most vulnerable elements of society are orphans and widows. This was certainly the case in ancient times, and is still very much the case today in most places. The Greek word translated as "visit" is "episkeptomai," and means "to look upon in order to help or to benefit" (Thayer). Thus, Christian visitation should be about helping people more so than making social calls. Certainly, there is a social element to it, but we need to make sure that we first and foremost give attentive care to those in need.

The second part of true religion mentioned by James is keeping oneself unspotted from the world. A Christian may feign religion simply by showing up to worship services and Bible classes a few times a week, but if he is living like the world the rest of the week, his "Christianity" is vain. The true Christian's life is a continual transformation that started when he became a Christian, and continues throughout his life as he seeks to become more and more like Christ. "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2). A Christian can not live like the world and expect that God will accept his religion.