

Intense reflections on real religion

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

¹⁹ My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

—James 1:17-27

We live in a world and in a culture that has all but done away with “sin.” Behaviors and attitudes that God forbids are now considered acceptable, a “personal choice.” In our culture it is expected that people will simply tolerate wicked actions like adultery, fornication and homosexuality. Thieves will walk out of department stores carrying armloads of merchandise, claiming it is their right as members of an oppressed underclass to take from the oppressive establishment. It is considered perfectly good, even praiseworthy, to say the most vile and vitriolic things about people whose political viewpoint differs from their own; even fine Christian people will throw the Eighth Commandment out the window and gleefully tear down people they didn't vote for, impugning their motives pretending to read their hearts and slandering their character. Sin just isn't sin anymore!

But even in a world that has thrown goodness and morality out the window, there are still some behaviors and attitudes that are fair game for condemnation from all sides. At or near the top of the list is *hypocrisy*. Is there anything worse than a hypocrite? Someone who says one thing and then does another? It could be the person who speaks out against climate change and publicly calls for everyone to reduce their carbon footprint—then gets on a private jet to go on vacation. Or it could be the fiery preacher who condemns sexual immorality from the pulpit—then does terrible things to children or gets caught with a prostitute. When I say “hypocrite,” undoubtedly many examples come to mind. Hypocrisy is so fake, so disingenuous. It's a disgusting lie. The world sees that, and the world condemns it. Rightly so.

God hates hypocrisy too. Pretending to be one thing on the outside but being something completely else when nobody is watching might fool a lot of people, but it can't fool God. We can go through the motions. We can pretend. We can fake it. But God sees and God knows.

Am I a hypocrite? Are you? Those are hard questions to ask ourselves; they're questions we don't like to consider. Today the Apostle James instructs us to search our hearts. He instructs us to gaze intently into the perfect law of God and compare our thoughts and attitudes to God's holy will. He unmasks our secret sins, exposes our fakeness, our pretending. He calls on us to do some soul-searching and ask ourselves: Is my religion real? Or am I just going through the motions? As we study God's Word in James today it's time for some intense reflections on real religion.

Reading the Bible, searching the Scriptures, listening to God's Word—it's like looking in a mirror, isn't it? God holds up his holy standard. In his law he tells us what to do and not to do. He tells us how to live and what to avoid. Whether we're listening to a sermon or reading our daily devotion, we know that God doesn't just tell us to listen or to read. He tells us to do. He tells us to put God's Word into practice. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” Jesus himself said, “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28).

Then James goes on to give some very pointed examples of the kind of obedience God wants. It's so important that James emphasizes his point by saying, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." And he continues, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

So what do we learn when we gaze intently into the mirror of God's perfect law? We see staring back at us the reflection of a sinner who has utterly shattered God's law. I have not kept a tight rein on my tongue as God desires. We have gossiped and slandered and hurt. We have exploded with rage and wounded with our words. Instead of using our tongues to praise God, we have used our tongues to curse our neighbor. Instead of fleeing the moral filth of our society, we have allowed ourselves to be drawn into it. Maybe our tongues have become so careless and loose and our morals have drifted so far from God's word and will that we don't even notice it. We don't even think twice when we curse or swear or misuse God's holy name. It doesn't even faze us when we're confronted with immorality. But God's will doesn't change, and God's Word doesn't lie. James reminds us today that it's not okay for us to be comfortable with our sins, to say, "Oh, that's just the way I am, too bad." That's hypocrisy. That's pretend religion that God can see right through. Scripture says, "The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12,13).

Looking into the mirror of God's law exposes our sinful nature, and it reveals just how evil that terrible, unconverted Old Adam, that sinful self that lurks within us really is. Sometimes it seems like we'll readily acknowledge we have a sinful nature, but we're not willing to acknowledge how sinful it really is. It's almost like we think our sinful nature isn't really sinful or it's not all that bad. God exposes our sinful nature, but what does that mean? My wicked sinful nature is the most self-absorbed, self-indulgent, God-hating, neighbor-despising human nature there is, and so is yours. My sinful nature is inherently racist; so is yours. My sinful nature is inherently egotistical; don't tell me yours isn't. That's what an intense gaze into God's pure and absolutely holy Word reveals to us about our natural selves. We are naturally ugly and depraved, hopeless and lost. When we say we have a sinful nature that's what it means.

All this intense reflection underscores our need for Jesus. The more we examine ourselves in the mirror of God's law, the more we recognize we need a Savior! We need someone to set us free. We need someone to give us a deep cleansing, someone whose blood can wash our sins away and purify us from all unrighteousness. That's what Jesus did for us when he died for us on the cross; his blood is the atoning sacrifice that cleanses us from all sin. We need someone who can be our holy substitute in God's courtroom. That someone is Jesus, God's own Son, who steps into our place, whose holiness covers up our hypocrisy, whose obedience substitutes for our disobedience. We need someone to give us a new birth, a new identity. That someone is Jesus, who sends us his Holy Spirit, who causes us to be born again of water and Word, who gives us saving faith to cling to Jesus and trust him. That's the beauty of what God has done for us in Christ: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." God washed you and cleansed you and gave you new birth and gave you his Holy Spirit, so that you controlled by the Spirit of God, and you *are not controlled by your sinful nature!* Scripture says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Cor 5:17,18). We possess a sinful nature that is racist, but that does not mean you are a racist, because *you are not controlled by your sinful nature!* You are controlled by the Spirit of God who lives in you. We possess a sinful nature that is inherently egotistical, but I hope you are not arrogant and egotistical, because *you are not controlled by your sinful nature!* You are controlled by the Spirit of God who lives in you. Today we pause for some intense reflection in the mirror of God's law, but we don't linger in the law. We move on to reflect intently on the gospel of forgiveness, our new life in Christ, our new status as righteous children of God.

So now we gaze intently into the mirror of God's Word with a new heart and a new attitude and a new desire. As children of God in Christ we really *want* to hear God's Word and obey it. We want to keep a tight rein on our tongues, so that we speak loving words that build up, not harsh or foolish or cutting words that tear down. We want to honor God and edify our neighbor, so that as Peter says, "If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). We want to help others in their need, "to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep [ourselves] from being polluted by the world." It's a response to God's infinite kindness to us in Jesus, picking us up out of the gutter of sin when we were lost and wandering, abandoned and orphaned, and adopting us into his own family. We want to reflect the mercy we have received

and show the love we have received – generously and genuinely. God’s Spirit who lives in you and makes you alive in Jesus makes you understand that “the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.”

So what does an intense reflection reveal about you? Is your religion real? A close examination of our lives in the mirror of God’s Word reveals that we all stumble and fall, and every time we sin it’s because don’t put our religion into practice. But whether it’s hypocrisy or weakness comes down to one thing: It comes down to repentance. Repenting of our sin, we turn away from it, and we run to Jesus for forgiveness. We say, “Lord, I believe; help me overcome my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). And Jesus’ love is so great, his forgiveness is so complete, he not only forgives our weakness, but his holiness covers our hypocrisy as well.

And that brings us to the end of our intense reflections on real religion. Real religion is lived in the love of God and the mercy of Christ, repenting of our sins, reveling in his forgiveness, and reflecting his love. Amen.