

• *Two verses the – hinge around which the letter turns*

What do you think that a 'spiritual' person is really like? What are the marks of true spirituality? James' answer might surprise us. *'If any person thinks he or she is religious and yet does not control his tongue but deceives his heart, that religion is futile^{□1}. Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world^{□2}.*

□1 1:26

□2 1:27

Three concerns:

(i) Control of the tongue – chapter 3

These two verses are a turning point in the letter. James has three topics on his mind at this point: (i) the control of the tongue, (ii) concern for the needy and (iii) separation from the world. The previous five or more small paragraphs have been putting before us a number of principles: enduring in trials of many kinds^{□1}, praying for wisdom^{□2}, handling varied circumstances of poverty and wealth^{□3}, handling temptation^{□4}, defeating it by the word of God^{□5}. Now verses 26–27 continue this theme. They give tests of whether we have defeated temptation. But at the same time these two verses announce themes that James is about to consider in some detail. James chapter 2 develops the point concerning our approach to the underprivileged. James chapter 3 develops his teaching concerning the tongue, and much of James chapters 4–5 will take up different ways in which we should resist being stained by the world. So James 1:26–27 is the hinge around which much of the letter turns.

□1 1:2-4

□2 1:5-8

□3 1:9-12

□4 1:13-17

□5 1:18-25

(ii) Concern for the needy – chapter 2

(iii) Separation from the world – chapters 4-5

1. There is such a thing as self-deceived religion

• *We can feel good about our religion yet be stained and defiled by carelessness and worldliness*

1. There is such a thing as self-deceived religion. *'Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this...'*. How should we finish the sentence? Should we say 'Pure religion ... is to pray a lot.' Or, 'Pure religion ... is to go to many meetings.' Or, 'Pure religion ... is to pay one's tithe.' Or, 'Pure religion is to be very severe about sin.' How should we have ended James's sentence? It is possible for there to be 'religion' which is very happy with itself and yet which is stained and defiled. We generally think of 'religion' as being attendance at religious meetings, praying a lot, fasting, Bible-reading. But it is possible to be doing a lot of these things and yet not be pleasing God at all! James says we can deceive our hearts. We can feel good about our religion and yet be stained and defiled by certain items of carelessness and likeness to the world which we hardly think is sin at all.

2. True spirituality is shown in a very practical manner

• *Control of the tongue*

2. True spirituality is shown in very practical manner. James mentions three very practical and down-to-earth matters. First: **control of the tongue**. The greatest test of the Christian life is control of the tongue. James has already given some hints concerning the control of the tongue in relation to God's word^{□1}. Now he comes back to it as a matter of general principle. He will develop the point yet more in what we call chapter 3 of his letter. Control of the tongue does not mean simply keeping silent! There are people who seem to think that if we say nothing we are controlling the tongue! Not so! Imagine a footballer who thinks he can control a football because he never kicks it. Imagine a car-driver who thinks he is a skilful driver because he never goes anywhere and never has an accident. You do not control the tongue

• *Control of the tongue is talk with such skill that we do good and bring blessing*

simply by not using it! Silence may sometimes be a way of showing you cannot control your tongue. All you do is to keep silent! This is purely negative. This is not godliness. It is cowardice! Control of the tongue is talk with such skill that we do good and bring blessing. Silence may sometimes be part of it, but the positive use of what we can say is far more important than mere silence. We may leave the subject there, for James will return to it.

☞¹ see 1:19

• *Compassion towards the weak and needy*

The second mark of spirituality that James mentions is visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction, or, to put it more generally: **compassion towards the weak and the needy**. In the Bible attending to the needs of the weak and underprivileged is tremendously important. When God first saved His people by the blood of the lamb they were a mob of depressed and discouraged slaves in Egypt. God always has immense sympathy for people in any kind of bondage or weakness. The care of the fatherless was always important to God. Parts of the Mosaic law specially made provision for such people^{☞¹}. God works on their behalf^{☞²}. Their oppressors make Him angry^{☞³}.

☞¹ Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 16:11, 14; 24:17; 26:12
☞² Deuteronomy 10:18
☞³ Deuteronomy 27:19

• *God has a special concern for the fatherless and widows*

Much the same thing may be said about the widow. Their needs of provision, help in making decisions, protection from oppressors, are often overlooked, but God has a special concern for them^{☞¹}, and kindness to them was commended as one of the marks of faithfulness towards God^{☞²}. The oppression and injury of widows will, says the Bible, bring severe punishment^{☞³}. Jesus condemned some Pharisees because they 'devoured widows' houses'^{☞⁴}. The early church of Jerusalem organized daily help for widows in need; and seven men were appointed to see that the Greek-speaking widows were not overlooked in favour of those who spoke Aramaic^{☞⁵}.

☞¹ Psalm 68:5; 146:9; Proverbs 15:25
☞² Job 29:13; Isaiah 1:17
☞³ Psalm 94:6; Malachi 3:5
☞⁴ Mark 12:40
☞⁵ Acts 6:1-4

• *Keeping unstained by worldly attitudes*

The third mark of spirituality is '*... to keep oneself unstained by the world*'^{☞¹}. What does James have in mind here? Judging by the letter as a whole, he is thinking of our attitudes (discrimination, love of money, ill-treatment of other people).

☞¹ 1:27

• *Church activities are only a means to an end*

Judged by these standards how much of our church-going habits are really pleasing to God? Churchy activities are **only** a means to an end. 'Church' is the place where we first learn the gospel, then have contact with the God of the gospel, and then where we work out how we will reach the needy with that same gospel in ways that are practical and minister to the whole person. Judged by these standards we all have a lot to do!

☞¹ 1:1



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Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible* (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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