

## Week 5: James: True Religion

### Hook



**Main Point: True religion shows itself in the way you live like Jesus.**

Have you ever made an online purchase only to be shocked when the package arrived with an item that was less than authentic? According to a 2023 survey, 7 in 10 consumers were tricked into purchasing a counterfeit product online at least once in the previous year.<sup>1</sup> Here are a few tips to avoid being sold a false bill of goods online.

- 1. Take a closer look at the seller.** Does the seller have a reputable website? Stay clear of new sellers and avoid doing business with sellers with unusual names; scammers often use alternative spellings and random words.
- 2. Identify fake reviews.** Be on the lookout for multiple reviews with similar wording, the same or similarly staged photos, and embellished comments that seem auto-generated.
- 3. Confirm shipping logistics.** Avoid sellers that propose extra-long shipping times as this might indicate a scammer's intent to remove themselves from an online platform before the package arrives, leaving little recourse for the consumer.
- 4. Compare unusually low prices to other websites.** If the price seems too good to be true, it usually is.
- 5. Only purchase from a seller who accepts payment from trusted payment methods such as PayPal or Facebook Checkout.** A seller who requests alternative methods of payment might not only provide you with a counterfeit, but they could have intent to steal personal information.<sup>2</sup>

**Transition:** Today, we will discuss what genuine faith looks like.

**RECAP:** In our first lesson, we were introduced to the book of James, covering the author, audience, genre and the supposed "conflict" between James and Paul (faith and works), which isn't a conflict at all. Then we began our verse-by-verse study of James. In the first chapter, James touched on each of the main ideas of his message, which he returns to in more detail throughout the letter. So far we've looked at:

- Wisdom – what true wisdom is and how we find it. Wisdom is the basis for everything else covered in James, which is known as the “wisdom literature of the New Testament”
- Trials and temptations in the life of a believer and how God uses all things for our good
- Faith and works – being doers of the Word, not just hearers

The topic for this lesson is another point related to faith and works – the truth that faith without works is “dead,” or not real faith. True religion isn’t just doing all the “religious stuff,” such as going to church, Bible study, prayer and other spiritual disciplines. True religion shows itself in action that is faithful to the teachings of Jesus, not in an effort to follow a religious “to-do list” but because those who really know Jesus will value the things He valued, live the way He did, and love the way He did. So, James wrote that those who know Jesus will:

- Keep a tight rein on their tongues (1:26)
- Care for the vulnerable (1:27)
- Keep themselves unstained by the world (1:27)

## **Week 5: James: True Religion**

### **Book**

**Main Point:** True religion shows itself in the way you live like Jesus.

**James 1:26; Psalm 141:1–4; and Proverbs 12:18; 13:3; and 18:21 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Those who know Jesus keep a tight rein on their tongues.

**Q: What does the imagery of “bridling” our tongues tell us about what it is like?**

**Q: Why do you think David asked God to set a guard over his mouth in Psalm 141?**

James used three things as litmus tests for telling the difference between those who are just “religious” and those who really know Jesus – controlling the tongue, caring for the vulnerable, and keeping ourselves unstained by the world. These aren’t the only characteristics of people who know Jesus, but they get at the heart of what it means to be a disciple because they are closely connected to who Jesus is and what He values – loving God and loving others. James reflected what God said throughout the Old Testament: true religion isn’t doing all the “religious stuff,” such as prayers, festivals and worship; it’s *knowing* God – having fellowship with God, which results in having the heart of God, which shows itself in the way we live. We will live the way Jesus lived and love the way He loved (Amos 5:21–24).

The first litmus test James gave is controlling our mouths. This is an important Christlike quality because Jesus said the stuff that comes out of our mouths shows what is really in our hearts (Matthew 12:33–35). Those who speak life and truth and light are full of the Holy Spirit; those who speak death and lies and darkness are full of the “father of lies,” no matter what they do or say on the outside about being “religious” (John 8:42–47).

Controlling our tongues is important because our words can really hurt or heal others. We’ve all heard the age-old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But all the research tells us that is not at all true. Words do hurt people, very much. We’ve all suffered the effects of hurtful words at some point. Researchers have found that hurtful words not only hurt us emotionally, but they can also cause lasting physical damage to the brain, especially those who experience verbal abuse as children and from peers in middle school. People who experienced verbal abuse in middle school had higher levels of anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, dissociation and drug abuse than any other category of individuals. Early childhood experiences can either nourish or stifle brain development. Speaking positive words

over children can quite literally make their brains stronger. This is why Scripture encourages us to only speak words that build each other up (Ephesians 4:29).<sup>3</sup>

We can even affect our own mood, motivation, and mental and physical health by the way we speak to ourselves. When we speak negatively about our circumstances, people or ourselves, our words become a “self-fulfilling prophecy” – we begin to feel more negatively. Neuroscientific studies have proven that negative words release stress hormones that cause anxiety, but positive words stimulate frontal lobe activity, which regulates stress and brings peace.<sup>4</sup>

Simply put, our words matter, both how we speak to other people and how we speak to ourselves. Proverbs even speaks about the power of the tongue in life-and-death terms (Proverbs 12:18; 13:3; 18:21). Yet letting a thoughtless word escape our lips is one of the easiest things to do if we are not making an intentional effort to take care with our words. The Bible warns against reckless speech because it’s one of the most common ways we hurt each other.

James did not mince words about the importance of controlling our tongues. He said if we don’t “bridle” our tongues, we may think we’re religious, but we’re deceiving ourselves. This may sound like a harsh judgment, especially because later in the letter, James said it’s impossible for any human being to tame the tongue (James 3:8). But that’s actually the point. Human beings can’t take their tongues; only God can, which is why it’s one of the ways you can tell who is just religious and who really knows Jesus. Self-control is a Fruit of the Spirit. The metaphor of the bridle, which is used to control a horse, conveys the idea of *self*-discipline over our impulses; we bridle *our own* mouths. Yet the power to do that only comes by the Holy Spirit, which is why David asked God to guard his mouth. He knew he couldn’t really do it himself.

James’s words aren’t meant to shame us for having trouble controlling our words; he admitted it’s one of the hardest things to do. But he made it very clear how important it is to carefully choose our words. None of us will ever be perfect at controlling our tongues, but those who know Jesus will care deeply about trying not to hurt others with their words. Instead of expecting others to grow a thicker skin, they will bridle their own mouths.

**Q: Why is it so difficult to control our tongues? What tips have you found helpful?**

**Q: How have you experienced positive words changing a situation or person for the better?**

## **James 1:27 and Deuteronomy 10:17–20 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** Those who know Jesus will care for the vulnerable.

**Q: What does God’s care for widows, orphans and sojourners tell us about Him?**

**Q: How does caring for the vulnerable reflect the heart of Jesus?**

In the ancient world, women and children had no rights; they were considered the property of their husbands/fathers, like cattle or sheep. So, when a man died, if his wife and children didn’t have another man step in and care for them, they were plunged into poverty. This made widows and orphans one of the most vulnerable categories of people in ancient society, what scholars refer to as the “quartet of the vulnerable” – widows, orphans, foreigners and the poor – people who could not take care of themselves because of the way that ancient economy was structured. In most nations, these four categories of people did not own anything and had no way to provide for themselves.

But in Israel, God’s law was designed in such a way that the rest of the community cared for the most vulnerable. Landowners were commanded to leave some of their crop in the fields for the poor to pick (Leviticus 23:22). When a man died, the law of Levirate marriage required his closest male relative to marry his widow so she and their children would be cared for (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). Native-born Israelites were commanded to treat strangers as if they were native-born and love them as themselves (Leviticus 19:34).

When God gave His people the law just before they entered the land, He told them that when they followed His law, they would reflect His character to the world. His law would be so different from that of the surrounding nations that people would be amazed at how wise they were and how good their God must be (Deuteronomy 4:5–8). One difference was the way they treated the poor and the vulnerable. God’s law prioritized caring for the vulnerable because God’s law reflected His character, and He is a God who cares for the vulnerable (Deuteronomy 10:17–20).

It is striking how often the Old Testament, in all three sections – law, prophets and writings – connects justice with the treatment of widows, orphans, resident aliens and the poor. It isn’t just a nice or charitable thing to do to care for the vulnerable; it’s a matter of justice. Justice means that people receive “what is due” them, so it not only means fair punishment for breaking the law but also basic, inalienable human rights being extended to all human beings.<sup>5</sup> We may have different categories than those four in our culture today, but we still have vulnerable people, and God’s people are still called to care for the vulnerable.

Caring for the vulnerable is “pure and undefiled religion” because it gets at the heart of God. These two words in Greek both have religious connotations; they don’t just mean generally pure. “Pure” refers to being ceremonially clean as required by Jewish law. “Undefiled” refers to being ritually pure, free from contamination. Using these specific words emphasizes James’s point – true religious purity isn’t about following all the religious rituals. It’s about having the heart of God – caring about the things God cares about, loving the people God loves. Those who really know God, who live in fellowship with Him, will have His heart for His people. They will defend the vulnerable, be a voice for the voiceless, and care for those who cannot care for themselves. Again, this isn’t a checklist of religious to-dos for being a good Christian. It describes the heart of those who know Jesus.

**Q: What kind of testimony does the Church spread when it takes care of vulnerable groups like orphans and widows?**

**Q: What happens if the Church fails to take care of the vulnerable?**

**James 1:27 and 1 John 2:15–17 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Those who know Jesus will remain unstained by the world.

**Q: How can the world “stain” us? What does it mean to be unstained by the world?**

**Q: What did John mean by the “things of this world”? Why can’t Christians love them?**

The word here for “unstained” is not the same as the words for “pure” and “undefiled” in the last section. It’s yet a third one, which also has religious connotations. Meaning “unblemished” or “spotless” in the New Testament and Greek culture, it typically referred to moral purity. But in the Old Testament and Hebrew context, it referred to the unblemished state required for sacrificial animals. To be offered as a substitute, a lamb or goat or bull had to be unblemished, without any physical defect or even spot (Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 22:19–21). As the human eternal sacrifice for all sins for all people for all time, Jesus was the perfect “lamb” without any blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:19).

As we have already seen with our first two talking points, as Jesus was, so His followers will be. Jesus used His words to heal and not hurt, so His people will bridle their tongues. Jesus cared for the vulnerable, so His people will care for the vulnerable. Jesus was the spotless lamb, so His people will be “unstained by the world.” This doesn’t mean followers of Jesus will be sinless as He was. Only one human being has ever lived who was perfect and never sinned, who was truly “without blemish” and “spotless.” But

following Jesus *does mean* turning away from the things of this world and turning toward the things of God.

John told us not to love the world or the things of the world. This doesn't mean the world in general. Jesus wanted us to love people of the world and care for the earth. John's use of "the world" is specifically meant to indicate the desires of the flesh, what Paul described as things that are contrary to the Spirit – sexual immorality, impurity, fits of anger, envy, drunkenness and so on (Galatians 5:16–24). Paul didn't mince words; he said those who belong to Christ have crucified these passions and desires of the flesh. We kill them. They have no place in our lives anymore.

But this isn't about just working harder not to do bad things; it's about the change in nature that comes with knowing Jesus. When we accept Jesus and are made a new creation, we take off the old self and put on the new self. That old self is dead and gone. Those passions and desires don't fit us anymore. We are a new creation, pure and holy in Christ. This doesn't mean we'll never mess up, but it does mean our desires will be different. Instead of desiring the fleshly passions of this world, we will desire the things of God – love, joy, peace, purity and so on. It's as if you've always eaten unhealthily, but you decide to change your eating habits. After a while, you start to crave the healthy food and not even want to eat the junk food. Junk food even makes your stomach hurt. That's what it's like when we take off the old self and put on the new. We don't even want the things of this world anymore. And if we go back and try them again, they make us feel sick. Because we don't belong to the kingdom of darkness anymore, we belong to the kingdom of light (Colossians 1:13).

**Q: How have your desires changed as you have grown in your faith?**

**Q: How can you show other people that the ways of God are so much better than the ways of the world?**

## **Week 5: James: True Religion**

### **Took**

**Main Point: True religion shows itself in the way you live like Jesus.**

Caring for the vulnerable is an opportunity for you to reflect that same care that God has lavished upon you. Did you know that Prestonwood has a ministry that assists widows with small household repairs and maintenance? Contact Mark Phanco ([mphanco@prestonwood.org](mailto:mphanco@prestonwood.org)) if you are interested in learning how you can serve in this ministry.

There are also opportunities for you to serve children in need of fostering and adoption – explore the CHOSEN Ministry to learn more ([prestonwood.org/connect/care-support/chosen-ministry/](http://prestonwood.org/connect/care-support/chosen-ministry/)). Perhaps you aren't in a place to provide a home for a child, have you considered volunteering your time in the Prestonwood KIDZ Ministry? Visit the Prestonwood KIDZ volunteer page to see current ministry opportunities ([prestonwood.org/connect/care-support/chosen-ministry/](http://prestonwood.org/connect/care-support/chosen-ministry/)).

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Reflect on the ways you have changed since you started walking with Jesus. How have you grown to be more like Him? How have you grown in wisdom and understanding? How have your words changed, the way you talk to people and speak about people or situations? How have your desires changed so you want to live by His ways rather than the ways of the world? If someone looked at your life from the outside, how would that person know you are follower of Jesus? What would he or she identify about you that looks like Him?

**PRAY** for God to continue to grow you to be more like Jesus. Ask Him to soften your heart, guard your mouth, give you a heart for the vulnerable, and change your desires so you only want the things of God, not the things of this world.

**ACT:** Guard your mouth. Start every day this week by asking the Holy Spirit to guard your mouth and give you control over your tongue. Then, all day, stop and think before you speak. Think about whether what you are saying is helpful or hurtful to those around you. Try to use your words to build others up, not tear them down.



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<sup>1</sup> <https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2023/msu-survey-7-in-10-consumers-deceived-into-buying-counterfeit-products-online#:~:text=MSU%20survey:%207%20in%2010,major%20anti%2Dcounterfeiting%20legislative%20actions:>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cluballiance.aaa.com/the-extra-mile/advice/life/how-to-tell-if-marketplace-ebay-amazon-products-are-fake>

<sup>3</sup> R. Douglas Fields, "Stick and Stones: Hurtful Words Damage the Brain," *Psychology Today*, Oct 30, 2010 - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-new-brain/201010/sticks-and-stones-hurtful-words-damage-the-brain?msockid=26f197ebeb8687a0a72859feae169f4>

<sup>4</sup> Lindsey Horton, "The Neuroscience Behind Our Words," Business Relationship Management Institute, Aug 8, 2019 - <https://brm.institute/neuroscience-behind-words/>

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).