



Have You Got Good Religion?

Sermon Series: Practical Teachings from James
James 1:26-27

Rev. Michael D. Halley
Suffolk Christian Church

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James 1:26-27

New International Version (NIV)

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 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.

The Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God!

In the late 1970s our family was privileged to be active members of Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church in Washington, DC. “PABC”, as we affectionately called our church, was a fully-integrated congregation located down the street and across the Anacostia River from the White House¹.

One of our dear friends in that church was a talented singer named Maurice Hill. Maurice led a gospel choir he called The Altar Singers and one of their signature pieces was the old Negro spiritual, “Have You Got Good Religion”. The first stanza goes like this:

Have you got good religion,
Cert’nly, Lord!
Have you got good religion,

Cert'nly, Lord!
Have you got good religion?
Cert'nly, Lord!
Cert'nly, cert'nly, cert'nly Lord!²

James might well be asking this same question as he closes our this first chapter of his book of encouragement. How is your religion?, James could well be asking. Is your religion such that it honors God or not? James seems to be warning us that “no amount of outward religiosity can compensate for an unbridled tongue, an uncompassionate heart, and an unholy character.”³

First he mentions the tongue. Every animal has a tongue. It contains various glands used in tasting but only the human tongue has the added capacity of speech. That's a wonderful gift, isn't it, making us capable of verbal communication with other humans.

If we left it at that, communicating with others, that would be great. But somewhere along the process of our human development we discovered that the tongue could also be used for vulgar, obscene, and indecent speech. Is that how God intended us to use this wonderful little muscle in our mouth?

Consider these examples of how some use their tongue:

- Dirty jokes and off-color stories
- Racial or ethnic slurs
- Angry outbursts and harsh words
- Mean-spirited comments
- Gossip, rumors, and false accusations
- Public criticism of your spouse or children
- Yelling and screaming
- Threats and intimidating comments
- Endless criticism
- Quick, cutting comments
- Talking too much or talking without listening
- Condemning others

- Excusing your unkind words by saying, “I was only joking.”

Every one of us has been guilty of at least one of these examples of a terribly loose tongue. And today, the various social media available to us seem to suggest that if you have a thought you must immediately share it with the rest of the world, whether you have carefully thought it through or not. Frankly my dear friends, I continue to be very disheartened by the unkind, mean, judgmental, sharp, and cutting remarks I read on Facebook.

The tongue is a powerful muscle in your body. It can tear someone down. It can destroy self-esteem. It can ruin someone’s good reputation. James says we must “keep a tight reign” on this little but powerful muscle.

Here is how James concludes the matter: Your tongue can render your religion useless. Have you got good religion? Not if you have a tongue out of control.

The second thing James mentions about good religion is compassion. Look after the orphans and widows in their distress, he says. In the first century, orphans and widows were in great distress. There were no social programs in place, no safety net available. Unless there was a caring family member nearby, orphans and widows were left to fend for themselves in an otherwise hostile society.

James is suggesting that Christians don’t let things like that happen. James is saying that Christians are marked by a heart of compassion for the less fortunate. Yes, today we have many safety nets in place to care for these, but James is saying that we must roll up our own sleeves and get involved. This is what we are privileged to do during our Night Stay ministry: To care, to reach out, to do something tangible to relieve the distress of another human being.

Someone wrote,
I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. Thank you.

I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release.

I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless and you preached to me about the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely and you left me alone to go off and pray for me.

Christian, you seem so holy; so close to God. But I'm still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.⁴

James was well familiar with the teachings of the Bible of his day, what we now refer to as the Old Testament. In Exodus 22:22 James knew it says "Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless." In Isaiah 1:17 James knew it says "Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows." In Zechariah 7:10 James knew it says "Do not oppress the widow or the orphan."

Compassion is a mark of good religion. Good religion cares for those who cannot care for themselves. Yes, it includes widows and orphans, but it doesn't end there. It also includes the sick, the dying, the homeless, the disabled, immigrants, prisoners, refugees, and others the world too often overlooks.

Have you got good religion? If so, James says, we will bridle our tongue and we will be people of compassion toward others. And one more thing he mentions: we will not be polluted by the world.

Imagine if you will a little boy walking home from school. Well, as I think about it, that is a very outdated image, isn't it? Nobody today, it seems, walks to school anymore like many of us did in our childhood!

Well, imagine it anyway. This little boy comes up to a big mud puddle. What is he going to do? If he remembers what his mother told him, he will walk around it. But that would be no fun! But if he walks through it and

splashes around in it, he will incur the wrath of his mother.

You and I face these mud puddles every day, don't we? Our dilemma is in how we can engage a hurting world without slipping into the dirt that is all around us?

Now James did not say, "Keep others from being polluted by the world." We have enough to do to look after ourselves and not try to be the moral police for others. Accordingly, there are places I should not go. There are internet sites I should not visit. There are people I should not be around. There are TV shows I should not watch.

It is a good thing for Christians to be in the world. It is not so good when the world is in us Christians. Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*⁵, puts it like this: "guard against corruption from the godless world."

Have you got good religion? You do if you have these three things James suggests. Bridle your tongue. Care for the downtrodden. And don't get caught up in the filth of the world.

How do we do this? Look to Jesus. He left the glory and perfection of heaven to be born in a barn. He left the purity of heaven to rescue us from the impurity of this world. How did he do it? He walked among us. He lived among us. He talked with us. He ate with us. He laughed with us. He wept with us. He rubbed shoulders with drunkards and prostitutes. He called out the Pharisees⁶ as hypocrites. But notice this: he never became a glutton or a drunkard or a hypocrite. Jesus lifted the fallen but did not fall himself.

Have you got good religion? You will never have it without Christ. You can't do it on your own. Your every prayer to God ought to be a recognition and a confession that we are nothing without the power of God in us. We are desperate, fallen, weak, undone, sinful, and horrible without God's power upon us and within us. If you want good religion, throw yourself upon God's mercy.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus! Come into my heart. Without you I can never have good religion. Without you I can never live this way. Come in and take control of my tongue. Come in and give me a heart of compassion. Come in and make me pure from the inside out. Transform me, dear Jesus, by your power so that I might be pleasing to Almighty God my Heavenly Father. Amen.

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I wish to thank my friend, the Rev. Dr. Ray Pritchard, of Keep Believing Ministries, for his consistent ability to challenge my thinking and for being so generous in sharing his thoughts and resources to other preachers. As we preachers often say, “I get milk from a number of cows, but I churn my own butter.”

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Sunday Sermons from Suffolk Christian Church are intended for the private devotional use of members and friends of the church. Please do not print or publish. Thank you. Suggestions for sermon topics are always welcome!

1. The White House is located at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and PABC is at 3000 Pennsylvania Avenue.

2. The full text of this hymn may be found at http://www.hymnary.org/text/have_you_got_good_religion

3. Quoted from Dr. Ray Pritchard, "Three Signs Your Religion is Real", www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/three-signs-your-religion-is-real/.
4. From <http://www.eatfeedlovelive.com/2013/10/i-was-hungry-and-you-formed-humanities.html>
5. The Message (MSG), copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by Eugene H. Peterson
6. Pharisees were the largest and most influential of the various parties in New Testament times. They controlled the temple and had great influence over the people. "Pharisee" means "separated one". See "Jewish Parties in the New Testament", by Clayton Harrop, in Holman Bible Dictionary, edited by Trent C. Butler, www.studylight.org/dictionaries/hbd/view.cgi?n=3420. 1991.