

**Men to Men Ministry**

**Lesson Seven in the Letter of James**

**What is pure religion?**

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**26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless**

**27 This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep one self unstained by the world.**

## Introduction

Wow this is only two verses and it includes a definition of both speech and worship and then seems to tie them together. That starts with taking a test which is a moral decision.

**DO YOU THINK YOU ARE RELIGIOUS?**

**WHAT RELIGION IS IN YOUR LIFE?**

The word James uses here is THRES'KOS. This word is very seldom used in the Bible. It is found in three places:

ACTS 26:5

**“since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.”**

Colossians 2:18

**“{Take care that} no one keeps defrauding you of your prize by delighting in humility and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on {visions} he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,**

James 1:26

**“If anyone thinks himself to be religious, yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his {own} heart, this person's religion is worthless.”**

James 1:27

**“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of {our} God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, {and} to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

So, we ask again who defines religion? Who defines worship? The New American Standard Bible seems to translate the same Greek word two ways both worship and

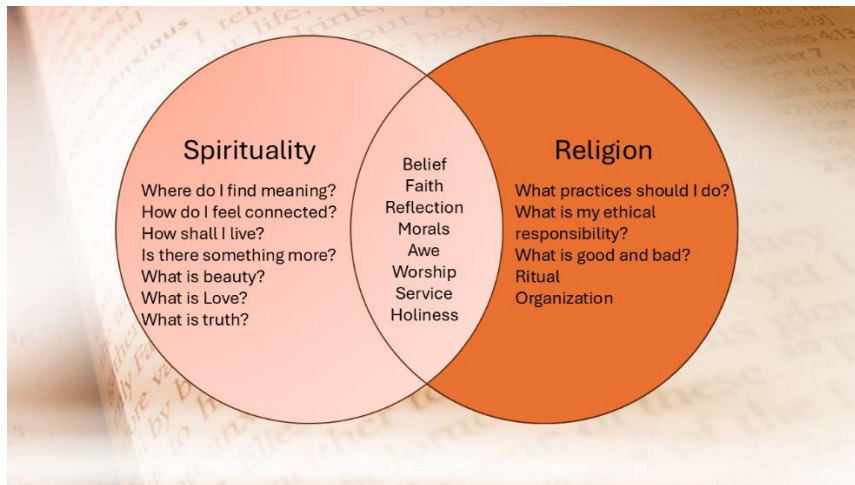
religion. Translation of the Bible is often hindered because in English meanings change to fill the gap between concept and culture. The concept may never change but the understanding of the current culture is in constant change. There are three lexicons which are most often used to understand the meanings of the Greek texts: Strong, Thayer, and Mounce. Each offers their own understandings of the Greek Language. For the word THRES'KOS they provide the following:

**Strong:** ceremonial observance: - religion, worshipping.

**Thayer:** religious worship esp. external, that which consists of ceremonies  
religious discipline, religion

**Mounce:** religion, worship

But again, these understandings are based only on the word's meaning in their time. As I look a little deeper, the word origin is associated with the idea of becoming prostrate, to tremble, to bow, to cry out, to kiss the hand, all directed to some other. I would therefore understand that first religion includes worship or spirituality – praise, awe, and prayer. Secondly religion is about actions, practices, ethics, responsibility, and defining what is good and evil. Religion usually includes defined rituals, practices and structure. Religion is about actions and attitudes. The third overlapping part is where spirituality finds its answers in religion.



James was addressing here an issue in the church. Remember the audience here are all the Chosen People of Abraham who were dispersed throughout the known world who had found a new belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah. They still had the same spiritual and religious needs, but the intersection had to change. This change was from being a Jewish Christian to a Christian Jew. As with any change there were many proponents and supporters for each group as to where God had ordained for **Religion**.

## Jews and Gentile Religion

**RELIGION** for the first century church was sharply divided between those who held to the Jewish religion as the cornerstone of belief in God and those who held to the spiritual revelation of God for all an universal Religion. Further, between each of these religious poles there was deviation between the extremes.

## Jewish Christians

**First division or Group** may well be titled “**Jewish Christians**”. This division wanted all believers to be Jews FIRST. God’s design was for the Jewish religion to be the one true religion and all else was not. This division was divided into three subdivisions, each sliding into the next.

**First subdivision:** An absolute requirement of the Law - God’s had only one mission, and that mission was to create and keep the promised and chosen people.

- a. Judaizers – Circumcision was a requirement for salvation.
- b. Ethnic responsibility to continue the favor of the People. The providence of God for a special people.
- c. Gentile (proselyte) requirement of keeping the total law. Jews had an exclusivity to the Law and the covenant of Moses. If a Gentile would be converted, they were responsible to the covenant of Abraham (Faith).
- d. Both works and faith are required for salvation.
- e. Messianic Jew “To the Jew first then to the gentile”

**Those who would be the greatest supporters of this view would be the Pharisees and the Apostle Simon the Zealot. This subdivision was all about rigid, unchanging, and static beliefs.**

**Second subdivision:** God had a provision for the Gentile within Judiasm– God had one mission for the Jews which included Gentiles if they conformed to certain prescribed actions. Gentile belief comes only from Jewish roots.

- a. Circumcision for the Gentile converts
- b. Keeping the Ten Commandments
- c. The Talmud was not required but encouraged.
- d. Exception to the Law on some points. The Law of Moses could be mediated by a understanding of ethnic, cultural, and geographical conditions. The acceptance of Gentiles were an extension of the Covenant. Their understanding was separate but equal.

**Those who would be a supporter of this second group would be Simon Peter, and to some extent Matthew. This group while less strict than the previous made some concessions for Gentile culture.**

**Third subdivision:** God had two missions Jewish believers and Gentile Believers

- a. This religion was the “The Superior way” in that it was God’s original plan for the world was for the chosen to provide a birthing place true understanding of God and would be the source of Christianity
- b. Circumcision was seen as an outward sign of an inward change and not a explicit requirement.
- c. Additional ritual beyond Christian Baptism. It was assumed that even though the Gentile was not an ethnic Jew they should try to fit in.

**Those who would be a supporter of this second group would be Barnabas, James, and Matthew.**

## Christian Jews

The second of two major divisions or groups may well be titled “Christian Jews”. This division wanted all believers to be Christians FIRST but would encourage Jewish ethics and morals. God’s design was for the whole world. This division was divided into three subdivisions.

**First subdivision:** God had two missions which were implemented over time. First to the Jew, and when God’s revelation was complete for the chosen, God’s second mission was then added on.

- a. God was the ultimate example of Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion.
- b. Acknowledged the two missions of God
- c. Home Rule Israel and Judea was the home of Jews. When in Jerusalem you conformed to Jewish religion.
- d. Greatest error of Judaism was the exclusion of Gentiles
- e. Rituals and customs by conditions. Jewish customs not mandated but encouraged.

**Those who would support this subdivision of Christian Jews would be Silas, Barsabbas, somewhat by Mark and Luke and Paul.**

**Second subdivision:** There is now and always been only one mission for God. The inclusion of all nations.

- a. Jews were called to be holy and change all nations
- b. Circumcision not important at all.

**Those who would strongly support this subdivision of Christian Jews would be Mark, Luke, and Paul.**

**Third subdivision of the Christian Jew major group:** Any attachment to Judaism is unnecessary. Ethnicity no longer matters.

- a. Grace only
- b. Rejection of the Law
- c. No need to keep all the customs and special days
- d. Jews were no longer special, one of many peoples.

**Those who would support this subdivision of Christian Jews would be John, Silas and Titus.**

## What is Religion

There seems to be a link between religion and worship in the time of James. The act of worship for the Jew had become an outward expression of ritual and liturgy. RELIGION was a thing to do. RELIGION had become a number of scripted acts which were prescribed, well defined, perfectly orchestrated, very specific and well measured. James was a Jew by lineage, learning, leaning, and life. He was well taught and lived in conformity with the Religion of the Jews. To the majority of the Jews, the Law was the full expression of God. James was well acquainted with the external trappings of worship/religion, they had seemed to have merged and could not be easily disengaged. The spirit was energized by the great trappings of Jerusalem. There were grand displays of vestments and sounds of great trumpets and Rams horns. There was perfection of the display at the temple in Jerusalem. It was a picture of awe-inspiring religion. But after his conversion, James realized it was all show and no go. Worship with all its trappings had become a substitute for service, and an excuse for personal lack of holiness. The People had become a people of the perfect outside but inside it had become a home of dead men's bones.

There is nothing inherently wrong with seeking the best in worship. I believe we must dress as best we can to the meeting of the king. But all this splendid worship is empty and idle unless it sends a man out to love God by loving fellow man and walking more purely than our outward walk.

**There is certainly no requirement to be religious to believe in God. For that matter, there is no requirement to believe in God to be religious.**

## Advantages of Religion

Religion can offer several advantages to one's spiritual life, providing a structured and communal approach to spirituality. Here are some key benefits:

1. **Community and Support:** Religion often involves a community of like-minded individuals who can offer support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. This can be particularly comforting during challenging times.

2. **Rituals and Traditions:** Religious practices and rituals can provide a sense of structure and predictability, helping individuals to cope with life's uncertainties. These rituals can also create a sense of connection to something greater than oneself.

3. **Moral and Ethical Guidance:** Many religions offer teachings and guidelines on how to live a moral and ethical life. This can help individuals make decisions that align with their values and beliefs.

4. **Sense of Purpose and Meaning:** Religion can help individuals find purpose and meaning in life by connecting them to a higher power or greater good. This can be a source of inner strength and motivation.

5. **Mental Health Benefits:** Engaging in religious activities has been linked to lower rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. The sense of community, purpose, and structure provided by religion can contribute to overall mental well-being.

6. **Opportunities for Service:** Many religions emphasize the importance of helping others and engaging in acts of service. This can foster a sense of fulfillment and connection to the broader community.

I go to church, I worship, I sing, because of my relationship to God. It is not an outward conformance to accepted behavior. That would be an ETHICAL decision, i.e. rules to conformance to social norms. But I can sing sitting down. My worship is not inextricably tied to my religion but it is well associated with my spirit.

But I have a problem with my religious expectations. I will confess when I see someone in our worship services in shorts and a halter top, I cringe a little bit. But I bridle my tongue. I listen to my spirit and realize it is about me and not about anyone else.

In our scripture for tonight James was saying there some who had accepted the proposition they could be saved and worship in conformance to a standard performance. And with this standard of conduct came an expectation of conformance by everybody. There was no place for any deviance to the prescribed method of religion. They had confused religion and worship. And further these standards of religion had become more important than the inward, personal relationship with God. AND THEY TOLD EVERYONE ABOUT IT, i.e. the unbridled tongue.

The constant correction, unbridled tongue became the only evidence of his relationship to God. I am holier than you because my form of worship is better than yours. Religion had become all talk and no inner trembling.

This unrestrained talk was the source of his undoing.

James associated Faith with a responsibility to act, to do something with it. You are saved by faith. You are kept by faith. You will have the assurance of eternity by faith. But faith must be associated with action.

## Exposition on James

*All man's religion is vain if it is not coupled with the spirit.*

Religion without the spirit becomes a focus on self. You may show many evidences of piety, which may seem to be plausible and clear. It does not necessarily mean they are true. Even the pharisees were full of zeal. True religion is about our affection to others. It is about outward benevolence and self-denial. Not about saying AMEN on time with the latest mind-blowing idea. It is not about giving 10% to the church. It is not about wearing a tie or not wearing shoes. It is not slapping a smile on your face when you are in pain. If your

religion is not from the spirit of God, if they are based on the expectation of society, if they are ethical decisions only made to conform to a society they mean little.

**A single propensity can cancel all the others.**

If you cannot subdue your tongue of criticism, self worth, claims of piety all your worship is worthless. If you can't rid your self of all that filthy garbage you carry along in your life It will kill your adherence, all the trappings of religion are lost and It will kill your worship.

It was John Calvin who wrote: "The reference is no great outward sin that is examined here. What is found as fault is that faith is causing action but the wrong action." The key according to Calvin is to distinguish between two positions of true worshipers and hypocrites. One was quaking in the wonder and grace of God and keeping silent. And the other was speaking of his own piety and criticizing others.

The action that resulted from this man's religion was all words. He kept the law, he was a doer of the Law, but he could not shut up about it. His outward adherence was ruined by his inability to be slow to speak.

## Scripture for this session

**26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless**

**27 This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep one self unstained by the world.**

## Religion includes Worship

James here is methodically telling the divided church about religion. Again, I am reminded that religion comes from the root of trembling, an inner awe, a strictly external response to an inner conviction.

**First there seems to be a possibility that thres'kos Can be worthless.**

Our acts of worship, that response to the grandeur of God the trembling before the awesome God, all the praise, all the raising of hands., all the preaching, all the warm feelings of grace flowing from HIS spirit to your Spirit can become spoiled to a point of worthlessness. That every act or devotion, or ritual in the name of religion can become without any worth at all. So worthless it is like the things we were to rid ourselves of in the previous section. So putrid, so soiled, so revolting that they need to be cast away.

**Second, what defiles our thres'kos.**

The key is THINKING IT IS ENOUGH. To think, I have made it. To think I am religious. To think, I have it all through my groanings, and outward demonstrations of piety. Here James was that the key to worship and religion is more than a thought pattern. It is more than an ETHICAL decision to conform to societal norms. There is no mandate in scripture to support the idea that being religious is all that is needed.



There is a requirement to have faith. Our use of the word religion seems to exclude any intersection with the spiritual. Yet there is a requirement for an outward expression of my spiritual life in Jesus. I can say yes to worship. I can say that I regularly attend the assembly of believers. I can vote with my attendance to religion. The problem was that these pious, tremblers had made a decision to separate the spiritual from their religion. The very act of worship, done by the numbers led them to an internal spiritual life that became religion.

They had become the example of propriety and external piousness. They were the better of the group. I am accepted by those in the church. I can even be a righteous teacher. I am good enough by my trappings of *Thres'kos*, of my mechanical actions to meet societies expectations, to be counted as good.

### External religion can make worship worthless.

James states there is a requirement for true *thres'kos*. He provides to the dispersed chosen that one of the outward signs of this worthless religion is the inability to shut up or bridle the tongue. Quick to hear, SLOW to SPEAK. Not only do these persons think they are religious they could not stop telling to all that they were *thres'kos*. There seems to be a tendency toward telling everyone they are the better. If you want to know how great he is, JUST ASK, and he will never stop. The very act of telling others how good you are and consequently telling others how bad they are SPOILS *thres'kos*. IT MAKES it Worthless.

James as one of his main themes, addressed several issues related to speech, the tongue, and speaking because these were significant concerns in the early Christian communities. Here are a few key reasons:

**Community Conflicts:** The early church faced various internal conflicts and divisions. Misuse of speech, such as gossip, slander, and harsh words, could easily escalate these conflicts. James emphasized the importance of controlling the tongue to promote peace and unity within the community.

**Hypocrisy and Integrity:** James highlighted the hypocrisy of speaking blessings while acting contrary to those words. He urged believers to align their speech with their actions, emphasizing that true faith should be reflected in both words and deeds.

**Moral and Spiritual Guidance:** The tongue was seen as a powerful tool that could either build up or destroy. James wanted to provide moral and spiritual guidance on how to use speech constructively. He warned about the dangers of an uncontrolled tongue, comparing it to a small spark that can set a great forest on fire.

**Teaching and Leadership:** In the early church, many aspired to be teachers and leaders. James cautioned that those who teach will be judged more strictly and therefore must be especially careful with their words. This was to ensure that leaders set a good example and did not lead others astray.

### External Religion deceives

This act of worthless religion. All the talk, all the constant reminding others of how good you are was an act of personal deception. Those who could not bridle their speech were not only lying about the reality of the spiritual part of *thres'kos* to all that would hear but they were covering up an internal problem. They were deceiving themselves. All the



pomp, and external piety was a coverup of something they had figured out but simply ignored it. The grand *thres'kos* coverup. Is an act of deception. SELF deception. Lying to yourself.

This deception made any and all acts of religion useless, without any worth, ineffective, not productive, to anyone. Not to the church, not to the Body of Christ, not even to God. This deception may not tear down the church, It just has no place in worship. MIGHT AS WELL THROW THEM OUT WITH THE USED COMMUNION CUPS.

### Pure Religion - Pure *thres'kos*

**This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep one self unstained by the world.**

Now comes the contrast. What is pure religion/worship. Is it the best preacher, the best teacher, the best singers, the best special effects, the best chairs, the best sound system, the best lighting, the best in public prayer, the best in sermon illustration, the best in administration? These are all good things. But without compassion and personal holiness it is all useless. How we relate to God is not dependent upon if we feel like going to church or upon whether we have some ecstatic joyful experience. God wants good things.

**GOOD THINGS CAN NEVER BE A SUBSTITUTE FOR SERVICE AND HOLINESS.**

The best useful expression of our faith is service and holiness. Worship is a good thing but as a substitute for pure religion as a whole is a fallacy. I am not calling for a rejection of corporate worship but I think the better solution is find the meaning of worship in our church of being undefiled before God a pure religion and this attitude is strengthened by our service to others.

James uses the example of orphans and widows. He uses these as the pattern, the instance of need. Once the patriarch died, the widow and any children had no one to support them. James was using this cultural problem as an pointer to the greater need of all that are in need. Need because by the letter of the law you did not have to. Hence, we often depersonalize our response to need. Writing a check to the church is seen as all the charity you ever need to do to conform to the external expectations of our society. James include physical, spiritual, and emotional support for the most needed.

You have a responsibility to pure undefiled religion and to do more. Setting up direct deposit is good but going out of your comfort zone is pure to see them to accompany them to to help them in their reconciliation to live in their troubles to live in their in a heart of compassion to accept a life mark on our own hearts for their care.