

James 1:26-27

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] I was looking through an old football program in the course of this past week, and one of the features in the program was an interview with one of the players. One of those one-word answers, trivia interviews, favorite TV program, car you drive, best player you've played against.

You know the kind of thing, I imagine. And two of the questions in this short kind of trivia interview were perhaps a little bit more searching, and they were along the lines of what you most hate and what you most love. I can't remember exactly how the questions were framed.

I wonder how would you answer those questions? What do you most hate and what do you most love? I wonder how God would answer those two questions. If we were able to pose that question to God, what do you most hate? You might even think that's an inappropriate question to pose to God.

I think we'll find that it's not as inappropriate as it might seem. What do you most hate? Or the other question, what do you most love? And maybe narrowing down the scope of the questions that we pose, but particularly the manner in which God would respond, we can narrow it down in this way, and wonder how God would answer those questions with reference to those like us who claim to be Christians. So, if we could just explain that a little bit more and reframe the questions along these lines. What do you most hate to see in Christians? I wonder how God would answer that question. Or we could ask Him, what do you most love to see in Christians, in your people, in those who claim to be followers of your Son Jesus? What do you most hate to see, and what do you most love to see? I think we can know the answer to that question. I think the verses that we're going to be giving thought to this morning, our text, God gives us answers to those questions, not exhaustive answers.

We're not going to find out everything that God is displeased with, or God hates, if we use that language. We're certainly not going to discover everything that God loves. So, not an exhaustive answer to the questions, but a true answer to these searching questions. So, that's what we're going to do, or that's the manner in which we're going to deal with these two verses this morning, identify answers to these two questions that we pose to God and receive an answer through God's Word, and in this case, the text that we're looking at this morning. But before we do that, we have a prior task that I think is important so that we can focus on the heart of the matter, and the prior task is to explain what James means when he speaks of religion or the religious. Notice there in verse 26, if anyone considers himself religious, and yet. And then in verse 27, religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, and so on. So, the use of these two words, same word in two forms, religion or religious. I think the reason why it's helpful just to think a little bit about this as a prior task is that many of us, I think, view the word religion with some suspicion. I remember a bumper sticker on a car, a common one in Peru where we used to live many years ago, and it was, Jesus is not religion, he's life. Yeah, it sounds wonderful. He's not religion. He's life. The idea being that religion, well, we're not too comfortable with religion, or the idea of being religious. Let me just give you a wee test, and you can answer this question just mentally. Are you religious? How would you answer that question? Or maybe if somebody else, somebody at work, you know, was a bit suspicious about you, said, are you religious? How would you answer that question? Would you give an unqualified yes, yes, I'm religious? Or would you feel that you needed to qualify, well, yes, but, and then kind of explain what you mean or what you understand by the word religious? I imagine some, maybe some of you might even respond, I'm not religious. I'm a Christian. I'm a follower of Jesus. I'm not religious.

[5 : 05] Maybe concerned that the word religious carries negative connotations, which, of course, in some cases it does. But turning to what James says and the words that James uses, the Greek word that James uses here in these verses is innocent enough. It refers to the outward acts of

worship associated with those who identify as followers of a given deity, whoever that deity might be. And given that meaning of the word, I think I can fairly comfortably say that all of us here are religious. Clearly, I can't speak for everybody. But the very fact that you're here marks you out as religious in the sense of the word that James employs. You are participating freely, I presume, in an act of worship, in an outward expression of a faith that you profess or at any rate have some interest in. In fact, here in these two verses, James is very specifically, when he speaks of those who claim to be religious, he's very specifically referring to those who identify as worshipers of the God and Father of Jesus Christ, the God of the Bible, those who identify as followers of this man named Jesus. He's speaking about those who claim to be Christians, not followers of any other religion, but specifically those who claim to be

Christians. Again, that would be, I imagine, most of us. So, having clarified that use of or clarified the meaning of the word that's employed in these two verses, let's move on to the heart of the matter, which is these two questions that we're going to be posing, posing to God with the wonderful reality that we can hear him answer us through the Bible in the verses before us. So, first question that we're posing to God is this, what do you most hate to see in Christians or in those who claim to be Christians? Well, we find the answer in verse 26, if anyone considers himself religious, if anyone considers himself a Christian and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself, and his religion is worthless. What does God most hate to see in Christians? Well, if we had to summarize it in a word, I think the word would be hypocrisy. That's what James is speaking about here.

He's speaking about hypocrisy. The opening words of the verse are important. If anyone considers himself religious, so this is somebody who claims to be a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, a worshiper of God, but look what follows, and yet. If anyone claims to be religious, and yet, or but, and that but, those words, and yet, are a red flag indicating that something is amiss. So, here is somebody, a man or a woman who says, I'm a follower of Jesus, I'm a Christian, I worship God, but there's an inconsistency, there's a hypocrisy. The life that he lives or she lives is at odds with the profession that he or she makes, and that is hypocrisy. Now, James, here in this verse, calls out one very specific instance of or example of hypocrisy, namely, failing to keep a tight rein on our tongue. Now, what does that look like? What does it look like to not keep a tight rein on your tongue?

What kind of words bolt out of our mouths when we fail to keep a tight rein on our tongues? Now, I imagine that everything I'm going to say, you could tell me. You know, this is ground that we're very familiar with. Our shared humanity means that we're very familiar with this reality of not keeping a tight rein on our tongues. But let me just give you some example. Humor me by listening to what you already know. What kind of words come out of our mouths when we don't keep a tight rein on our tongues?

Well, unkind words, thoughtless words that hurt and alienate, harsh judgments, maybe even as we speak to those who are near and dear to us, and we speak harshly, unthinkingly, and maybe we don't even notice the wound that we are leaving with the words that we speak. Of course, dishonest words are words that we speak when we fail to keep a tight rein on our tongues. Sometimes it can be outright lying, or sometimes, and maybe more commonly for many of us, a devious use of words that is intended to mislead. You know, and afterwards somebody might say to us, well, is that true what you've said? Is that not a lie? We would protest? No, no, no, no, no, no, I wasn't lying. And yet there was a real intention that the person hearing would hear in such a way that they would come away with an impression that isn't consistent with reality. And so, the purpose was to mislead or deceive in what we imagine to be a very clever way. Proud words, vain words, gossip, slander, belittling others. All of these are the kind of words that come out of our mouths when we fail to keep a tight rein on our tongue. In the language that Paul uses when he writes to the believers in Ephesus, foolish talk and coarse joking, discouraging words. We may say words and they're true. You know, nobody can claim that we're lying, and yet they discourage, they dishearten others. Words that bring folks down rather than build them up.

[11 : 55] And no doubt we could go on. I wonder why James zooms in on this example of hypocrisy. We're saying the big problem is hypocrisy. And James gives one example of hypocrisy, saying, oh, we're Christians, and yet speaking in this careless way. Why does he zoom in on this particular example? Well, I imagine partly because it's so common. You know, it's so popular, if I can use that word. And of course, in this very lecture, he'll go on to develop his teaching on the subject in the following chapters.

But let's focus on God. That's our concern. Why does God hate a loose tongue? Well, let me suggest three reasons why God hates a loose tongue. I think the first one is that God knows the damage that a loose tongue does to those he loves. Men and women, boys and girls, lovingly created in his image and likeness, hurt, damaged, wounded by a loose tongue. And for that reason, God hates a loose tongue because of the damage that it produces. But also, and very specifically focusing in on what James tells us here, God identifies in a loose tongue the dangerous self-deceit that the owner of that tongue is the victim of. Let me explain that a little bit further. What does the verse say here? It says, if anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself.

So, the first thing that's said about this isn't all the damage that he does, though that's true, but the focus of James is that that person is under a self-deception. You know, this person genuinely makes a profession to be a Christian. There are no doubt in their mind that they are Christians. And yet, James says, if they don't control their tongue, then they're deceiving themselves. They think that they're Christians. They think they're worshiping God. They think they're living a life that is pleasing to God, but they're mistaken. They're not. They're deceiving themselves. You know, when they lie, they deceive others, but the focus here is on how they're deceiving themselves by this claim to be religious, claim to be a worshiper of God, and yet failing to keep a tight rein on their tongue.

Again, in the text, there's a third reason why God, or a reason given why God hates a loose tongue, in that God knows that the religion, to use the language or the word that James himself uses, the religion of those who possess and employ a loose tongue is worthless. Now, God wants, our worship, God wants your worship, your service to be rich and fruitful and a blessing to you and to others. And it grieves Him when our worship is devoid of these characteristics. It's not rich. It's poor. It's not fruitful. It's fruitless. It's not a blessing to others. It's devoid of these characteristics that God would have worship be characterized by. It's worthless. It's useless. It's of no volume.

[15 : 36] And so, God hates a loose tongue because it's evidence of a life whose worship to God is worthless. It's very strong language that James uses. And so, in the light of this, what I would say to you before we move on to the next question is, be careful. Be careful. You're here. Your very presence here suggests that in some way you profess to be a Christian or have some kind of affiliation to the Christian church. Well, examine yourself. Examine how you speak. Examine if you are failing to keep a tight rein on your tongue. Be careful that you're not deluding yourself as to who you are, the victim of your own self-deception. I always remember a framed picture in the kitchen of a friend in Peru. And in the frame, I say a picture. It wasn't a painting. It was words. It was an exhortation,

I suppose. And this little framed picture carried these simple but memorable words. And roughly translated is as follows, if what you're going to say is not to bless, then just shut up.

Now, I remember thinking, well, that's good advice. And maybe we need to take that advice more, all of us. The next question that we want to pose to God, and God will answer us through the text, is this.

What do you most love to see in Christians? What do you love to see in Christians? I think the answer there is in verse 27. Religion, worship, Christian service that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless, that He delights in, that He loves to receive, is this. To look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. God gives us, I suppose, a two-part answer to the question, what do you most love to see in Christians? He loves to see a compassionate heart and willing hands, and He loves to see a pure heart with clean hands. Let's think of a compassionate heart and willing hands. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress. And I think the key words in James' reference to looking after widows and orphans are the words in distress, or in their distress.

We are to be moved to compassion by the distress of others. God loves a heart that is moved to compassion. Now, widows and orphans are an example that was a very real and relevant one to James' original audience. In the society in which they lived and moved, the most needy in society often were widows and orphans. And so, James quite reasonably focuses on widows and orphans. But the bigger picture is anybody in distress ought to move a believer, a follower of Jesus, to compassion. This is what God is looking for in us. But of course, that compassionate heart must be working in partnership with willing hands. James says, God says through James, that we are to look

after orphans and widows in their distress.

[19 : 25] Not simply be moved to compassion and feel sorry for them and think, oh, how sad it is, their condition or their distress, but to look after them. Now, the Greek verb that James uses here is an intriguing one.

The Greek word is episkeptomai, and it's related to the noun episkopos that you might recognize from our English word episkopalian, or episkopos translated bishop or overseer. The idea of looking out for, the idea of taking care of another. In the older versions, I think in the authorized version, it speaks about visiting orphans and widows in their distress. But the idea is of a visit with the purpose, with the intention of providing real, concrete, practical help to them that their distress might be relieved, at least in some measure. We need a compassionate heart accompanied by helping hands. If you're not moved to compassion by the distress of others, you're unlikely to do anything much to help. But if you are moved, at least in some measure, and do nothing, well, you're just as guilty, perhaps even more guilty. So, we need open eyes to see those in distress, a sensitive heart that is moved to compassion, and willing hands that will get stuck in to help. God loves all that. He receives that worship gladly. Of course, this takes time and effort and resources. And let's be honest, many of us would rather be slouched on the couch watching the football, or Masterchef, or EastEnders, or whatever your particular poison is. But God is saying, no, the worship that I delight in is when my people see those in distress are moved in compassion and take action to help. Now, who are those in distress in

Aberdeen? The lonely, the depressed, those struggling in their relationships, the economically marginalized, but we need to look and see. What about beyond Aberdeen? In our global village, distance does not absolve us from responsibility for the poor and the oppressed, the displaced and the persecuted.

And there is so much distress that it can be overwhelming. We can't relieve it all, but we can and must do something. I'm always struck by the beautiful description that we have in Mark's gospel of Mary of Bethany when she anointed Jesus. It says of her, she did what she could. She did what she could.

And I think that applies to us in this matter. God doesn't expect us to relieve all the distress in the world, but He does ask of us and expect of us that we would do what we can. But also, a pure heart and clean hands. Keep yourself from being polluted by the world, we read there in verse 27. Now, these two elements of looking after the widow and orphans in their distress and keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world, they're often presented as being quite distinct.

[22 : 38] And sometimes you have these neat categories established, well, social action and personal piety, and these two arms of a consistent, balanced Christianity. But I wonder if when we do that, we're drawing from what James is saying a distinction that he does not intend. There's actually no and in the original. And so, what James says is religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless as this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress, keeping oneself from being polluted by the world, or something along those lines. And perhaps James sees these two elements, if we can call them two elements, as intimately connected. When we have polluted, worldly, selfish, materialistic thoughts, or a polluted mind, then we will be hard-hearted, and we will be unwilling to help those in distress.

This pollution that James speaks of has to do with our attitudes and a way of thinking. It has to do with our desires and priorities and ambitions, the very things that it is so difficult to protect from pollution, to protect our mind from worldly thinking and priorities that are opposed to God. It's very difficult to do that. You know, I was speaking to friends who were recently visiting in China, and they were saying that one day in Beijing they could hardly go out and walk because, you know, just walking through the smog, you know, whatever you did, it was almost impossible to protect yourself from the pollution. I'm sure that's true of many other major cities in the world as well, but that's the example that comes to mind. It's a bit like that in terms of our minds.

You know, we can't go to a monastery and hope to hide from being polluted. We have to walk in the world. We are confronted and bombarded on every side with thoughts and values and attitudes that are contrary to God. And yet, there's this call, this charge leveled to us. Keep yourself from being polluted by the world. Because if you're polluted by the world, then you'll become that hard-hearted, unfeeling, selfish individual that won't be willing to help others.

God loves a pure heart and clean hands, a compassionate heart and willing hands. Let's finish by posing a final question related to what God loves. Why? Why does God love to see in His people

compassionate hearts and willing hands, pure hearts and clean hands? Why?

Well, in the context of our text, it's only right to make the point, and I think it's perhaps the primary point that James is concerned with, is that such hearts and hands are evidence of genuine faith, of that person not being under some kind of self-deception. It's the flip side of the one who has a loose tongue and imagines all is well, and yet all is not well, and the evidence of it is their loose tongue. Well, in the case of the believer who has a compassionate heart and who reaches out to help those in distress, that is evident that things are good, are well with their soul, thanks be to God. And so, for that reason, God loves to see this evidence of genuine, sincere faith. But I think there is another reason that God loves such hearts and hands that is hinted at in the language James employs to describe God in this text. He speaks of God as our God and Father. Now, hold that thought, [26 : 45] James is speaking of God as our God and Father. And when God looks at His people, when He looks at His children, He longs to see something of Himself. He longs to see the Father's likeness in His sons and daughters. And when He sees the Father's likeness, He is pleased. Why does God love compassion? Because He is compassionate. Why does He love to see His children help those in distress? Because He is a God who helps those in distress. Why does He delight in pure, unpolluted hearts and minds? Because He is pure and unpolluted and undefiled. This is the like father, like son principle applied to God's family. And of course, the most beautiful example of the most beautiful example of the principle is to be found in Jesus.

Let's think about the big picture of God's saving mission on behalf of sinners, such as we all are. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit fixes His eyes, fixes His sight and heart on a rebellious, sinful humanity in abject distress. And He is moved to compassion. And God in His Son, Jesus, visited our distressed and broken world in the most astonishing manner by becoming one of us. And He visited us to save us, to look after us, to look after us, and deliver us from our sin-induced distress. And as we see Jesus presented to us in the Gospels, what do we see? We see one who was ever moved to compassion by the distress of widows and orphans, the poor and the weak, the broken and the alienated, but also one who ever employed His willing hands to help. In Acts, we have the life of Jesus summarized in very simple words, maybe not seemingly very profound words, but very true words. He went about doing good.

His compassionate heart moved to compassion, drove Him to do good, to relieve distress. We see one also who, in the face of every temptation, kept Himself from being polluted by the world. And as our unpolluted and sinless representative, He loved us to the end and dealt with the root cause of our distress as He died for our sins on the cross. Why does God the Father accept as pure and faultless the worship of His Son? The worship of His people that is marked by a compassionate heart and willing hands? Because in such lives, He sees something of Himself, and He sees something of His Son, the one in whom He was and ever is well pleased.

Let's draw the threads together, and let me just ask this. What do you need to do? In the light of what we've seen this morning, what do you need to do? Well, first of all, you need to trust in Jesus. [30 : 20] Jesus lived that life of active compassion and untainted purity that you do not live and cannot live perfectly, not even close. And He lived that perfect life on your behalf. And having lived that perfect life, He died on the cross to pay the price of your sin and failure. And what you need to do is trust in Jesus and in His finished work on your behalf. But in the light of these verses, we also have to say that you need to be like Jesus. He's your brother, and you share a heavenly Father. The more we are like Jesus, the more we are like our Father. You need to speak words that are pure and kind and true, just like Jesus. You need to be moved to compassion and action on behalf of the distressed, just like Jesus. You need to keep your heart and mind from being polluted by the world, just like Jesus. And in all this, you will know the help of God's Spirit who indwells you and empowers you. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank

You for Your Word. We thank You that in Your Word we discover who You are and what You are like. And we come confessing that we, as those who profess to be Your people, as those who profess to be followers of Your Son, Jesus, we fall short. Often we do not keep a tight rein on our tongue. And for this, we ask Your forgiveness. We thank You that You are willing to forgive. And we pray that You would give us certainly the very real desire to keep a tight rein on our tongue, so that even on those occasions when we fail, there is nonetheless that intention, that desire, that trajectory towards keeping that tight rein that we are urged to be characterized by. Help us also to have hearts that are ever more like the heart of Your Son. We acknowledge that our hearts are often hard, and we pray that You would be the one who would soften our hearts, that our hearts would be

ever more sensitive and compassionate, and would be that which motivates us towards helping those who are in distress. Help us to see, help us to be moved, and help us to act. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.