

Kanye West, a musician, is one of the most prominent pop culture personalities of our time. His music tops the chart. He has a premium fashion line, a controversial public persona, and blunt political opinions. All this, and his marriage to Kim Kardashian, keep him constantly in the news.

Last week, West finally released his anticipated album, *Jesus Is King*. The album is full of gospel music, and the lyrics are overtly Christian. As with most of what he does, the reaction to this album has been huge and polarizing. There are those who see Kanye's faith as a sham. One writer wrote, "His narcissism, his self-loathing, and his politics have been on full display long enough for me to know that I don't need to attend Sunday service or subject myself to a 'Jesus Is King' listening session."

On the other hand, there are those who see this as a sincere expression of his faith. Someone wrote, "For too long, a lot of the church have been quiet, tired, unforgiving, preachy, and self-righteous, but here I see a man whose life has been turned upside down by his faith and who wants to share that with the world. And for that, I'm with him all the way."

The bigger question in all of this is how do we know if anyone's faith is genuine? We might even ask, "How do I know if my own faith is genuine?" It's interesting, in the last couple of verses of the text for this message, James talks about religion. In his day, religion wasn't a bad word. It didn't have a negative connotation. It basically meant the outward acts of worshipping God. By coming to church and participating in worship, you're practicing your religion. But James says there are two kinds of religion. In verse 26, he talks about "religion that is worthless." But then, in verse 27, he talks about religion that is "pure and faultless." Again, how do we know the difference? How do we know if Kanye West's religion, your religion, or my religion is worthless or pure and faultless?

James' answer is crystal clear: We know whether our religion is worthless or faultless not by our profession but by our practice. From start to finish, James is all about how our faith plays out in everyday life. His is a boots-on-the-ground faith. And in this passage, he gets very specific and practical about what that looks like in our lives. Does it mean we go to church more? Listen to only Christian music? Pass out tracts on the street-corner? James doesn't say any of those things.

At the heart of James' answer is our relationship with God's word. Last week we ended with 1:18 where James was talking about God's goodness and generosity, and said, "He chose to give

us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created." It's the living and active word of truth that gives us new life in Christ. The result is we become the "first-fruits of all he created." In the Old Testament, the idea of first-fruits was you dedicated to God the first-fruits of your harvest as a way of saying thank you to him for his provision. It didn't belong to you, but Him. Now we are the first-fruits. Because he gave us new life through his word, our lives are not our own. We belong to him. Why? Because he gave us new life through his word. But he goes on in verses 19-27 and says more about this word and how it impacts our lives.

**My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. 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. James 1:19-27**

### **Pure religion receives the implanted word with humility**

First, he says, pure religion receives the implanted word with humility. Notice how he says in verse 21 to "humbly accept the word planted in you." Again, this living and active word was planted in our hearts when we came to Christ. Remember how Jesus told the parable of the sower and how he said the seed is the word and soil is our hearts. His word has been planted in us, and now we must "humbly accept (receive) it."

Sometimes we think we know better than God. We look at God's word and say, "I like that. I don't like that." But instead, we should let the word examine us and tell us, "I like that. I don't like that." To humbly accept His word means to be teachable; it's

the opposite of self-assertiveness, an "I know what's best for me" attitude. James says that when we humbly accept his word, the ongoing work of salvation continues.

But again, what does that look like? Well, one of the things it means is what he says in verse 19, "...be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." When he says, "quick to listen," he primarily means listen to God's word. Back then, people didn't have Bibles as we have. Instead, when they came to worship, someone read God's word out loud. Listening was important. It still is. Of course, this carries over to how well we listen to others. Many of us listen poorly. Paul Tournier, a Swiss psychiatrist, once said, "Listen to the conversations of our world, between nations as well as between couples. They are, for the most part, dialogues of the deaf." Of the billions of words spoken every second in this world, only a fraction are heard. Our busy, media-saturated lives rarely leave margin to stop and listen to what others are really saying, and to what God is saying.

If you're quick to listen, there's a good chance you'll also be "slow to speak." That's the next thing mentioned. Again, he could be thinking of how people respond to the reading of God's word. Later in this letter, James says not many of us should become teachers because teachers often say things they shouldn't and will incur a stricter judgment. Be slow to speak. Be slow to assume what you have to say is more important than what God or even someone else has to say. The ancient rabbis said this, "Men have two ears but one tongue, that they should hear more than they speak. The ears are always open, ever ready to receive instruction, but the tongue is surrounded by a double row of teeth to hedge it in and keep it within proper bounds."

And that goes along with the third thing — be slow to become angry. He doesn't say never be angry, just be slow to anger. An angry spirit is rarely a spirit that's quick to listen and slow to speak. An angry spirit isn't a teachable spirit. While we're lashing out at someone, perhaps God wants to speak a word to us, but we can't listen because we're too busy getting even. Never is the ear more firmly closed than when anger takes over. We think we're fighting righteous battles with our anger, but he says, "human anger doesn't produce the righteousness that God desires." When was the last time you were quick to become angry? How'd that go?

And right on the heels of that, James says if we're going to humbly accept the implanted word, we have to "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent..." The idea is to remove these things like an old smelly, ratty shirt. You see, an unwillingness to listen, a loose tongue, and out of control anger is moral filth and evil. Take it off! Get rid of it!

The bottom line in all of this is if we're going to rightly receive the implanted word in our lives, we have to first do some spiritual house-cleaning. It's getting close to the time around here when it starts raining. For me, that means I have to clean out

my gutters. There's no job on earth I hate more than that. And, yes, I still get up on the roof and do it myself. Having two large oak trees overhanging my house doesn't help. I take a handheld shovel and painstakingly remove the black sludge and leaves from four-inch-wide gutters that line my roof. By the time I'm done, I look like the Creature from the Black Lagoon! But I know if I want that pure water flowing from my roof into the gutters and then out through the drains at the bottom, I must do that several times in the next few months.

It's no different when it comes to receiving the implanted word. If I want the pure water of the word to flow through me, I have to clean out the sludge. The sludge is my prideful propensity to bypass real listening and speak too soon, and my self-righteous anger to lash out and do more damage than good.

### **Pure religion obeys the implanted word with tenacity**

But James doesn't stop there. Pure religion doesn't just receive the implanted word with humility but it also obeys the word with tenacity.

**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. vv. 22-25**

Earlier, James told us to be quick to listen, but here he says it's not enough to just listen. Don't merely listen to the word; do what it says. He mentions the self-deception that takes place for those of us who listen to the word, whether it's here at church, in our small group, or in the car, but don't do it. You can actually think by listening to the word that you're doing enough. Somehow, it'll just automatically seep through your pores and make you really spiritual. But it doesn't work that way. Don't get me wrong; listening to the word is important. Most of us don't do it enough. But it can't stop there.

It's like this. Suppose you work for me. In fact, you're my executive assistant in a company that's growing rapidly. I'm the owner, and I want to expand internationally. To do this, I have to move overseas for six months and stay there until the new branch gets established. Meanwhile, I leave you in charge of things state-side. I tell you I'll email you regularly and give you direction and instructions.

I leave; you stay and months pass. I've sent hundreds of emails to you, giving advice and instruction on the business. Finally, I return. Soon after my arrival, I drive to the office, and I'm stunned! The place is a mess. I walk in, and the receptionist doesn't even greet me as she stares at her Facebook home page. When I walk

down the hall, I see my office has been turned into a TV room, and you're in there watching ESPN.

"What in the world is going on?" I ask.

"What do ya' mean...?"

"Well, look at this place! Didn't you get any of my emails?"

"Emails? Oh, yeah — sure, got all of them. In fact, we have a meeting every Wednesday night, where we read and talk about them. We even divided all the employees into small groups and discussed many of the things you wrote. It's fascinating stuff. You'll be happy to know a few of us have actually memorized some of your emails. There's some fascinating information in those emails!"

"Okay, you got my emails, you read them, studied them, meditated on them, discussed them, and even memorized them. But what did you do about them?"

"Do? Uh — we didn't do anything about them."

Obviously, that scenario is absurd. But isn't that like us when we read, study, discuss, and memorize God's word, and yet don't do it?

James uses his own illustration to show how absurd it really is. He describes two people, both of who have good intentions. The first man gets up in the morning and looks at his face in the mirror. Ancient mirrors weren't like our glass mirrors. They were polished metal — bronze or copper — but you could still see your face. So he looks and sees all kinds of problems. His hair is a mess. His eyes are crusty. His face needs washing and shaving. But he takes a good look at himself, walks off, and does nothing, completely forgetting what he just saw.

I remember once, several years ago, I cut myself shaving. I put a piece of Kleenex over the cut to stop the bleeding. I got dressed, hopped in my car, and stopped at Peet's to get some coffee. As I got in line, I noticed a few folks staring at me. I thought, "Man, I must be looking good this morning!" And then I realized I had this bloody piece off Kleenex stuck on my face! What a fool! But James says that's no different from the man who listens to the word and then walks off and forgets what it says to do.

The second person is different. James says this person "looks intently" into that mirror and then "continues in it." When he says, "looks intently," he uses a word that means a focused, penetrating look. That same word was used in John's Gospel when Peter bent over and looked into the empty tomb to see if Jesus was there. It's like a child who bends over to gaze at a ladybug in the grass. It's a studied look. James says instead of forgetting what he sees, he "continues in it," meaning he doesn't forget what he sees but makes the necessary changes and continues in that.

Make no mistake; the word of God is like a mirror. It will reflect back to you the hard truth about yourself. It will comfort you,

but it will also convict you, especially if you look intently at it. For example, look again at verse 26.

**Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. v. 26**

Look in the mirror. How are you doing with that?

Last week, a deep sense of conviction came over me about something hurtful I said about another person. Later, James says, "*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who've been made in God's likeness*" (James 3:9). I looked in that mirror, and I didn't like what I saw. I had to confess that, repent, and work on bridling my tongue. Otherwise, my religion is worthless.

But here's the good news: not only will God's word convict you; it will also set you free. Notice what James calls the word in verse 25, "the law that gives freedom." When he says, "the Law," he's still talking about God's word. But that's a strange little phrase. How can the law give freedom? I mean the law restricts and binds us; it doesn't free us. The law tells us what we can't do. But James says God's word (the law) sets us free. The problem is most of us have been taught that freedom means we get to do whatever we want. If I want to move to Connecticut, I'm free to do that. If I want to have to leave my wife for another woman, I'm free to do that. If I want to move in with my boyfriend, I'm free to do that. If I want to join a protest on Market Street, I'm free to do that.

But that's not how God defines freedom. God defines freedom as the freedom to be who you were created to be. Think of a fish. A fish was created with gills and fins. In other words, a fish was created to exist in water, not on land. If you lay a fish on the ground and leave it there, it will die. It can lay on the ground, but that's not freedom. A fish is really only free to be what it was created to be when it's in the water, restricted from land. That's the law that sets it free. God's word places restrictions on us, but those restrictions are put there because they're in accord with how we're created.

And that's why James says at the end of verse 25, those who do what it says will be "blessed in what they do." They're not blessed because they can do whatever they want. They're blessed because they're abiding by the law that sets them free. They're blessed because they're living in a way that's consistent with how God created them. They're swimming in the water they were created for.

### **Pure religion does two things**

So, once again, pure religion obeys the implanted word with tenacity. But in verse 27, James concludes by spelling out exactly what that should look like in our lives. He spells out two things that characterize pure religion:

**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. v. 27**

First, caring for the poor and needy. He mentions “orphans and widows” because they were ones in that society who were the neediest and disenfranchised. There was not a social services department to help them. Today that might look a little different. Who are the orphans and widows around us today? How can we “look after” them? Let me just give you one way: Pick up one of our For Your Neighbor bags, fill it up, bring it back, and we’ll make sure it gets to people who really need it.

The second thing that characterizes pure religion is personal purity. James calls it “keeping oneself from being polluted by the world.” What is “the world.” David Wells described the world or worldliness as

**“...that system of values, in any given age, which has at its center our fallen human perspective, which displaces God and his truth from the world, and which makes sin look normal and righteousness seem strange. It thus gives great plausibility to what is morally wrong and, for that reason, makes what is wrong seem normal.”**

James says when we buy into the world’s way of thinking, we pollute ourselves. For example, in a recent survey, 84 percent of the general population agreed the highest goal in life is to enjoy it as much as possible. Guess what? Sixty-six percent of Christians also agreed. Sixty-nine percent of the general population agreed that any kind of sexual expression between two consenting adults is acceptable. But get this, 40 percent of Christians also agreed. Do you think we’re in danger of being polluted by the world’s thinking? This is the morality of self-fulfillment, and it’s everywhere, like the air we breathe. We’re bombarded with it in music, movies, novels, video games, commercials, and TV shows. But we’re called to keep ourselves from being polluted by it. No one can do it for us. We have to do it.

It’s these two things that really define pure religion: looking out for the needy and personal purity. It’s not one or the other; it’s both. Some people want to say it’s all about caring for the needy; it’s all about social justice. But others say it’s all about personal purity; it’s all about living a holy life and not letting the of the world pollute us. Liberal churches have often focused on social justice but ignored personal purity. At the same time, conservative churches have focused on personal purity and ignored social justice. But it’s not either-or, it’s both-and. Pure religion does both.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

Back to my original questions: How do we know the difference between religion that’s worthless and religion that’s faultless? How do we know if Kanye West’s religion or your religion or my religion is worthless or faultless? We know whether our religion is worthless or faultless not by our profession but by our practice. It all comes down to our response to the word. Pure religion receives the implanted word with humility. It also obeys the implanted word with tenacity. And that shows up in caring for the needy and personal purity.

But there’s one more thing that’s very important to understand. When you look into that mirror of God’s word, when you look into that perfect law that gives freedom, don’t just see yourself, but see Jesus. You see, there’s only one person in the history of humankind that kept the law perfectly — Jesus. Jesus is the only one who could say with complete honesty the words of Psalm 40:8, “*I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart*” (see Hebrews 10:7-9). Only Jesus could say things like, “*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me...*” (John 4:34). On one occasion, Jesus even said of the law, “*These are the very Scriptures that testify about me... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me*” (John 5:39, 45). Where did Moses write about Jesus? In the law.

So, when you look at that perfect law, see yourself, but also see Jesus. Here’s why that’s so important: Jesus fulfilled the law not only by keeping it perfectly but also by paying the price it demanded. You see, the curse of the law is if you don’t keep it perfectly, blood must be shed to pay the price. That’s why there are all those Old Testament blood sacrifices. But Jesus came along, kept the law perfectly, and fulfilled the law by paying the price for us once and for all. He took the curse of our law-breaking so that we could have the blessing of his law-keeping. And when we really get that, then the law for us isn’t a burden but something we want to keep because we love him and want to please him.

Better yet, his Spirit comes to live within us so we can be empowered to keep that law. Galatians 5:22-23 says, “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*” Do you see what I’m saying? Pure religion isn’t about profession; it’s about practice. But it’s only through Jesus we’ll ever really see the law as anything but a burden so heavy it kills us. It’s only through Jesus we’ll ever actually have the law written in our hearts so we can say with him, “*I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.*”

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