A PUBLIC RELIGION

With the cultural shift toward the privatization of religion, faith practices have become more and more inward focused. Children are told to silently accept Jesus into their heart; prayers of thanksgiving for a meal are said with a bowed head and unmoving lips; and some believers may even search for another way to answer the question, “What are you doing this weekend?” when their plans are filled with ministry and godly fellowship. Silent prayers of surrender are welcome, and even tactful conversations about spirituality are a good thing; the danger comes when small habits build up a mindset of, I don’t share this part of my life. It’s just private.

James, as a whole, is a practical book. Philosophy and abstract concepts are only touched on as a precursor for the explanation of a tangible expression in the Christian life. This life of surrender and following Jesus has consequences: real, in-your-face, pervasive consequences. If it doesn’t look as though it does, there’s something wrong on the implementation part. Living the Christian life shouldn’t just have internal consequences either. Spheres of influence should be dramatically impacted for good, constantly touched by the outpouring of a life of love for God. Such a life cannot be kept private; it naturally bears expression.
Write out James 1:19–27 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out James 1:22, 27. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
GODLY REACTIONS

Knowing the passions that often arise in human hearts, James gives a template for reaction: “Be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19). This instruction is given to “every man,” so no one is exempt from its importance. It places an emphasis on understanding, patience, and receiving rather than defending, being understood, or passionate expression. What is the underlying reason why believers should do this? “The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (v. 20). Even when fueled with the most intense feelings and desires to set things right, natural human anger does not lead to the tenor of reaction that is glorifying to God. Humans make bad judgment calls, get caught up in biases, and even take things too far. It is better to focus on listening, understanding, and patience, and then slowly react.

But true hearing isn’t wholly passive. God’s children are called to receive His Word into their lives and then to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (v. 22). The idea of deception comes up again, first about sin (in the previous week’s lesson), and now about deviating from the outworking of the Word in one’s life. Being a hearer of the Word and not a doer runs parallel to receiving all manner of life-changing paradigms, truth, and beauty and yet forgetting them, not letting them change one’s life. What good is that?

Blessing doesn’t come in knowing; blessing comes by living according to that knowing. As life is made up of days in and days out, blessings come from living according to the word in a consistent, ever-expanding way.

In addition to reactions to our own emotions and reactions to truth, believers are also called to a godly reaction to the world. Instead of side-shuffling or cowering in the sight of the suffering of others, humanity is called to visit such sufferers in their trouble. Instead of giving them a wide berth, believers should join them in community. Suffering does not sideline anyone from the gospel; it’s where the gospel is most appreciated. Finally, the last reaction that James touches on is to the wickedness of the world itself. The response of the individual members and collective church should be to remain unspotted from it.

Thus, in everything from one’s emotions to the throes of surrounding suffering, there is a godly reaction possible through “receiv[ing] with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (v. 21).
USELESS RELIGION

James doesn’t mince words when it comes to an effective religion. It’s possible to think oneself religious and yet not bridle one’s tongue, but this requires deception and bears evidence of a useless religion (James 1:26). True religion, James emphasizes, must change the most basic and pervasive parts of one’s being. It is not a top layer of “goodness” to spread over all the rest. It is a digging up and transforming of everything, even the way one talks.

Jesus Himself confirmed this line of thinking when He rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for appearing “beautiful outwardly” but being “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt. 23:27, 28). Their religion was useless because it did not change them; all it did was thinly veil their wickedness.

There is a level of self-deception required to hold a useless religion. Why would someone hold onto something that’s useless, even harmful, if they knew better? Self-deception is different from ignorance, in that ignorance is an “unknowing,” whereas self-deception is a willful and intentional “not knowing.” Taken a step further, self-deception usually holds the truth in some unacknowledged recess of the mind, but it is intentionally pushed away from the consciousness. This can be because the truth is too painful or the repercussions are unwelcome. Self-deception can be a welcome detour from acknowledging the truth when it allows the individual to close their eyes to their own weaknesses, even when they’re stark and harmful. Willful ignorance is an easier path than handing over wounds to be thoroughly healed by the hands of Jesus; at least, it’s an easier short-term path. What looks good for a moment (ignoring the bad) only intensifies the wounds, furthers the bad traits of character, and can have far-reaching negative ripple effects throughout one’s sphere of influence.

The expressions of one’s heart, the words from one’s mouth, can be an excellent litmus test of the usefulness of one’s religion. Is there a Christlike way of speaking? Is there a compassionate tone? Generous forgiveness? Understanding questions? Or instead is the path of Peter followed, with his calling down of curses to distance himself from association with Christ? (Luke 22:54–62). It’s possible to not have the motivations of Peter and yet achieve the same effect—it’s possible to appear as if one has never even known Christ, let alone spent three years with Him, just by not bridling one’s tongue.

The answer here is not to buckle down or to try harder. That’s the way of the Pharisees. The answer is to have a useful religion that is found in a relationship of surrender and love with Jesus Christ.
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Proverbs 15:1
Ephesians 4:26
Luke 11:28
Matthew 7:24–27
Matthew 5:16
Matthew 4:23
Luke 15 (especially verses 1, 2)

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with James 1:19–27?

Review your memorized verse from James 1:19–27.
A FALSE DICHOTOMY

While useless religion has clear characteristics, so does pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father. It encompasses visiting the most vulnerable of society and keeping oneself “unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). This verse took on flesh and walked among humanity in the life of Jesus. Jesus visited and ministered to the most vulnerable and also maintained a perfect adherence to righteous living.

The Greek word for “visited” in this verse is not a casual meeting of two parties. Throughout its usage in the New Testament, the word emphasizes a visiting for the benefit of someone, to help, minister to, or redeem them (Matt. 25:36; Luke 1:68; 7:16; Acts 15:36; Heb. 2:6). Jesus certainly visited humanity when He walked the earth, and He continues to visit the hearts of His children. Jesus visited people in their physical needs, often feeding them miraculously or healing them of illness or ailment (Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 1:32–34). He visited people in their spiritual needs, teaching them the truth of God and Himself as the Messiah (Matthew 5, 6; John 3:1–21). He even ministered to those in need of emotional healing, bypassing cultural restrictions in order to speak a word of encouragement to an aching soul (John 4, 8). Jesus met people where they were and ministered to them, even the neediest and most ignored of society (Luke 5:12, 13).

It’s interesting how the religious leaders interpreted Jesus’ proximity with the world. They labeled Him a drunkard and a glutton, and they complained about His seemingly relaxed approach to accepting sinners (Matt. 11:19; Luke 15:1, 2). Jesus lived a perfect life, which means He also kept Himself unspotted from the world in all ways (1 Peter 2:21, 22). The religious leaders’ reaction to His proximity, then, reveals more about themselves than about Jesus. They had a faulty understanding of what pure religion looked like.

Jesus’s life proves that ministering to the world and being unspotted from the world are not two dichotomous options: either help people (and get dirty) or be clean (and don’t help anyone). When viewed through this faulty paradigm, both extreme options either miss the heart or the power of the gospel. Emphasizing outward adherence has its place, but an untransformed life is useless. Emphasizing inward transformation has its place, but an unlived life is not what God asks for. Instead, communion with God leads to transformation, and this transformation leads to a life of ministry.
DOERS OF THE WORD

From the pulpits of today the words are uttered: “Believe, only believe. Have faith in Christ; you have nothing to do with the old law, only trust in Christ.” How different is this from the words of the apostle who declares that faith without works is dead. He says, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22). We must have that faith that works by love and purifies the soul. Many seek to substitute a superficial faith for uprightness of life and think through this to obtain salvation.

The Lord requires at this time just what He required of Adam in Eden—perfect obedience to the law of God. We must have righteousness without a flaw, without a blemish. God gave His Son to die for the world, but He did not die to repeal the law which was holy and just and good. The sacrifice of Christ on Calvary is an unanswerable argument showing the immutability of the law. Its penalty was felt by the Son of God in behalf of guilty man, that through His merits the sinner might obtain the virtue of His spotless character by faith in His name.

The sinner was provided with a second opportunity to keep the law of God in the strength of his divine Redeemer. The cross of Calvary forever condemns the idea that Satan has placed before the Christian world, that the death of Christ abolished not only the typical system of sacrifices and ceremonies but the unchangeable law of God, the foundation of His throne, the transcript of His character.

Through every device possible Satan has sought to make of none effect the sacrifice of the Son of God, to render His expiation useless and His mission a failure. He has claimed that the death of Christ made obedience to the law unnecessary and permitted the sinner to come into favor with a holy God without forsaking his sin. He has declared that the Old Testament standard was lowered in the gospel and that men can come to Christ, not to be saved from their sins but in their sins.

But when John beheld Jesus he told His mission. He said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). To every repentant soul the message is, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). (Ellen G. White, Faith and Works, 89, 90.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Should our religion be private? What about our spirituality? Does it matter? Why or why not?

Why does “the wrath of man” not produce the righteousness of God? Does that mean we should never get angry? Why or why not?

Why do you think James talks about bridling the tongue specifically when explaining a useless religion?

Give an example of a time you tried to deceive yourself about something.

Give an example of someone who exemplifies pure and undefiled religion.

What’s the difference between hearing and listening to truth?

Why does it require meekness to receive truth from God?

Why does “Just believe!” fall short of encompassing God’s will for us?