

## Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

Careless Words Create a Worthless Religion

James 1:26

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*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless (James 1:26).*

Have you ever had it happen that before you really knew someone, you just had a sense that they're a Christian?

A few years ago, I remember watching the news and I heard a few things that a local leader in law enforcement said. It was both what he said and how he said it that made me say, "I think he might be a believer." So, I reached out, we met over lunch, and eventually, we talked about his life story. Sure enough, he was a follower of Jesus. I tried to encourage him by sharing how I had sensed that he had a relationship with Jesus.

I'm sure you've had the same experience. A new employee joins the team, and you suspect by how she conducts herself that you might share a common relationship with Christ. Or maybe you've been standing in line or eating at a restaurant; you're not eavesdropping—never! But you can't help but overhear someone talking, and you can clearly tell—they're a Christian.

Maybe you've had the opposite happen. Perhaps there is someone at work you are getting to know, and when you learn that he's a Christian—you are shocked. You're polite enough to withhold your internal shock. But it's hard to believe. And it probably creates a lot of tension. Now what? How do you work through the disconnection between this coworker's faith and how he talks? How do you talk to others about Christianity in light of this situation?

Perhaps you are not yet a Christian and a big part of the reason is because of what I've just described. You are not compelled to become a follower of Jesus based on what you hear coming out of the mouths of some Christians that you know. It doesn't seem right that what they believe doesn't affect how they talk.

Well, you'd be right.

Our text today, James 1:26, makes a point that is both intuitive and important: our words matter.

Last week, we learned that James links doing the Word with hearing the Word. The problem is that self-deception can set in as we become more and more familiar with the teaching of the Bible, but fail to put

it into practice. James aims to help Christians who are facing hardship to remember that you don't get a pass on obedience because life is hard. Suffering tends to show us the gaps.

James isn't seeking to shame or guilt you into obedience. But he does want to remind us about the importance of what Christians do.

This week's message takes that concept from a general category, or a broad principle, to a specific issue that every one of us needs to consider. James now turns to the issue of our words.

James makes the critical connection between our words and our spiritual life; missing this can lead to a frightening conclusion. Careless words create a worthless religion.

Let's look at this connection, explore the warning related to the conclusion, and then make some applications.

### **Critical Connection**

James draws a straight line between Christian beliefs and our speech. He identifies a critical connection between our words and our worship.

Verse 26 begins with a scenario for us to consider. It says, "If a man thinks he is religious..." James has in mind someone's self-assessment of their spiritual life. The NIV renders the word "think" as to "consider." So, the idea here is more than someone who thinks about religious things or who views their spiritual life with a level of caution ("I think I'm growing"). James has in mind the person who draws a definitive conclusion. It's the person who says, "Oh, for sure I'm a Christian."

But, as we'll see in a moment, there's a problem.

Secondly, note that James chooses the word "religious." Think of all the other words he could have used: righteous, godly, spiritual, or mature. Yet he selects a word that is both more formal and relates to a system. That's one of the reasons that our modern era doesn't like the term "religious." Our society tends to prefer "spiritual." You may have heard someone say, "I'm spiritual, not religious."

To be religious is to live according to the tenets or rules or laws of a particular belief-system or religion. It's connected to both worship and obedience. The Greek word was used widely to refer to reverencing and worshipping a god, and it connoted acts of worship.<sup>1</sup> The idea here is both affection and action. Whatever the heart loves, it worships. Whatever we worship, we obey.

When James talks about being religious, he envisions a person thinking that they are like that. You could think of the word "pious" as another close word. So, when a person says, "I'm a Christian, but I'm not

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, [\*James: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 116.

religious,” they’re saying that they believe certain truths, but they don’t obey or follow the church’s teaching. They know that being religious and obedience go hand-in-hand.

That’s true! And note the problem here. The issue is not that the person rejects being religious, but rather he claims to be religious while neglecting a crucial element of obedience: how he talks. James calls this out.

Verse 26 says, “...if he thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart...”

It would seem that James is thinking of the person who claims to be religiously-obedient but has a glaring gap as it relates to the tongue. James will go on to say that this person deceives his heart and that his religion is worthless (more on this in the next point).

Why does James call out speaking? He could have talked about sexual ethics or other more notable sin issues. Well, one reason is because it’s a pervasive issue. We talk a lot. A lot. Sometimes, if someone isn’t talking, we assume that something’s wrong.

Another reason is that our words are powerful—more so than what we even realize at times. That’s why James says, “...bridle his tongue.” He’s connecting it to the image of a horse; a powerful but potentially deadly animal if you lose control of it. Now James will pick up this image of a bridle and the theme of the tongue in chapter three where he’ll show us the following:

- Lots of words (teachers) creates greater judgment (3:1)
- Controlling the tongue is an indicator of self-control more generally (3:2)
- Bits with horses, rudders with ships, and a small fire that grows into a forest fire are other illustrations of his point (3:3-6)

Our words have significant power in them.

But there’s another reason. James 3:9-10 is particularly applicable here regarding religion:

*With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so (James 3:9–10).*

What we say reveals our spiritual, heart-based inconsistency. Our words are telling. They give people a window into our thoughts and our feelings. They make it clear who we are because, after all, we only say a small portion of everything we think. Jesus famously said it this way:

*The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).*

Jesus tells us the same thing as James but in a different way. And it’s this: there’s a direct connection between our words and our hearts. What we say reveals who we really are.

So, I thought I'd do a little experiment. One of the real challenges in our present age is not only what we say but how we say it and where we say it. Enter social media. So, I thought I'd hook up my phone for a minute to our screens, and I've randomly chosen some church members to see what they say and how they say it. Okay. . . ready.

I'm not going to do that. But if your heart suddenly had a bit of a panic attack, you've already gotten the point. Every area of life needs consideration of this, but this area, especially right now.

Kevin DeYoung published a great piece this week entitled "When You Say Nothing at All." In it, he suggests asking ourselves a few questions:

- Am I making it harder for all sorts of people to hear what I have to say about more important matters?
- Is my online persona making it harder for my in-person friends to want to be around me?
- Am I speaking on matters upon which I do not have special knowledge and for which no one needs my opinion?
- Am I animated more by what I am reading in Scripture or by what I am seeing on the news and on social media?<sup>2</sup>

He says, "Brothers and sisters, it's OK to have an unarticulated thought. It's OK to go about our lives in quiet worship and obedience. It's OK to do your homework, read your Bible, raise your kids, and make your private thoughts prayers instead of posts."

Some of you aren't on social media, so you are feeling good right now. But I'm sure you know that the application of this goes well beyond our online communication. It relates to the words you use, the way you say things, the emails you write, and the tone of your voice. Impatience, constant criticism, slander, gossip, angry words, careless words, defensive words, or abusive words do not fit with what it means to be a Christian.

The question is not *if there's a connection* between your words and what you believe; the question is this: *what is the connection* between our words and our beliefs?

Actions matter. Words matter. Faith and works are connected. Real religion and our words are connected as well.

### **Frightening Conclusion**

The second thing we see in this text is the frightening conclusion that James draws between a failure to bridle our tongues and our religion. James says that this kind of person deceives his own heart and his religion is worthless.

Once again, James uses some pretty strong and cautionary words here. Let me encourage you to both receive them and then to be motivated to seek God for his grace. Being a Christian requires a somber

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/when-you-say-nothing-at-all/>

assessment of who you – “God is holy, I am not.” It’s embracing humility (seeing yourself in light of who God is) so that you can receive grace.

I’m not walking through this text to threaten you into obedience. It’s designed to be a bit of a wake-up call. Embrace it. Receive it. And be sure that, by God’s grace, this isn’t you.

Once again, we see the warning about self-deception. We learned about this last week when we examined verse 22. In that context, we saw that hearing but not doing can create self-deception. Because you are close to the truth, you can think you believe a truth even if it doesn’t affect how you live. James says, “No way.”

But in verse 26 we see that deception is particularly focused on the heart: “He deceives his heart.” This is probably connected to both affections and worship. Sometimes a person can be passionate—both religiously and sinfully. You know this guy. He’s super vocal about how much he loves Jesus. He sings robustly. He carries a big Bible and exhorts people often about the value of the Bible. He may even be an aggressive evangelist. But he’s also a jerk with his words. He yells at his kids. He says things that are hurtful to people. He speaks in a way that doesn’t build people up.

Surely you know that some of the most “pious” people can also be the nastiest with their words. How does this happen? There are probably lots of reasons, but underneath his or her life? Underneath their religion is a selfish agenda. Instead of allowing spiritual things to shape them, they use spiritual things to make them feel better about themselves. Their worship is not oriented toward God, but toward selfish gain.

James says that the disconnect between our words and our worship shows us what’s going on in our hearts. We convince ourselves that our passion for Jesus justifies or eclipses our sinful words. James says, “No way.” The trouble is that this gets easier over time. The more you do it (talk like an unbeliever), the less it becomes abnormal. And then something strange happens: other people who talk like you find you.

That makes it worse! It perpetuates the deception. You now have friends who talk like you. And it leads to trouble. A few examples:

- *Avoid worthless, foolish talk that only leads to more godless behavior. This kind of talk spreads like cancer. . . (2 Tim. 2:16–17, NLT).*
- *If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people’s affairs (1 Pet. 4:15, NLT).*
- *Fire goes out without wood, and quarrels disappear when gossip stops (Prov. 26:20, NLT).*

The problem we have with these verses is that we usually don’t know when they apply to us. James warns us about the problem of a deceived heart.

His conclusion is equally alarming. James cuts it straight: “. . . this person’s religion is worthless.” Wow! The word means empty, foolish, vain, fruitless, or futile. The idea is that it doesn’t work. It doesn’t do anything. You open up the box of a person’s religion and there’s nothing there. It’s a show. It’s fake.

A form of this word is used to describe the tragic path of people who are not right with God:

- *Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds (Eph. 4:17).*
- *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Rom. 1:21).*

James is concerned about a religion that doesn't work with our words. In fact, James would go so far as to caution us that if our words and beliefs don't connect, something is terribly wrong. That kind of religion doesn't work for you, for your friends, for your spouse, for your church, and not for anyone taking a look at Christianity.

Sinful words create a self-deceived people whose religion doesn't work.

### **Applications**

I realize that this has been a heavy message. Our words matter. There's a lot on the line here. Let me address three emotional reactions:

- 1. Stunned** - Some of you are stunned right now because you feel the weight of conviction. If you are not a Christian, it may be that God is using this message to show you the need to come to Jesus today. Your words have opened a door to your heart and you are ready to have Christ come into your life. Do it! Now! Others of you claim to be Christians, but your words don't fit—at all. You have a choice to make. Come in repentance or resist (yet again) the gentle call of Jesus. There's hope for those who are stunned.
- 2. Scared** - Some Christians know that their faith is genuine and one of the ways that they know is because they both abhor having a worthless religion and they know their propensity for it to happen. You know your latent anger, frustration, and justifications. You receive this message with a heart that says, "Wow, that can be me." It's a gift you think that way. There's grace for those who are scared.
- 3. Seared** - There's one final group. Those in this group are the people who have become good at resisting a message like this. You've developed a callous over your heart that allows you to continue without dealing with the issue. Your heart is seared. Maybe it's because of your past. Maybe it's because of the patterns in your life. But be very concerned if you receive instruction about careless words carelessly. Don't do it again. There's grace today for those who are seared.

Christians are marked by words that fit with what they believe. Actions matter. And our words reveal who we really are.

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