

All right. Let's open our Bibles this morning to James, Chapter 1 verse 26, as we continue our study through this letter that James, the half-brother to Jesus, and the first pastor really that the church had, the senior pastor in Jerusalem, wrote to his congregation; Jewish believers who for a time grew up there in Jerusalem, but when Steven was murdered, the Jewish believers had to run from the city for their lives, and things went from bad to really worse for them in many ways. And so, James writes this letter to them with one intent as a pastor: He wants them to do well, walking with the Lord in the midst of adverse circumstance, and especially what they were facing then in that first generation.

He began talking to them about what you might presume he would. He talked to them about trials. Why am I going through them? Where is God in all of this? Why does He allow this? How come He's not answering my prayers? Why are we not being delivered? And James takes the bigger picture and he says, look, once you give you life to the Lord, God begins to work in your life for good, so you can count it all joy when the trials come your way. Know that God has a plan. He doesn't just allow them to slip through. He plans ahead. He has your spiritual well-being in mind, and so let Him have His way. But while you're going through it, be sure to ask Him what you're supposed to be learning. Rather than just surviving it, pray for wisdom. Pray believing, because God responds to our faith.

James went on and he said to them and take God's perspective. Look at things through God's eyes. And be sure that you distinguish the hand of the Lord, because in the same trials that you're going through, you also have an enemy, and the enemy would like nothing more than to put you in a position where you begin to question God. And the very things that God would use for your benefit, the enemy would seek to use against you so that you begin to doubt God, or question Him, or worse; you know, give up on Him. So be good in your distinctions. And then he said this: Be sure you understand that God is good all the time. He doesn't change. And he pointed to the word of God being given to you to save you. God came looking for you. He saved you by His goodness.

Well, in verse 19, that then changed James' topic to talk about the rest of the chapter, how do we respond to God's word. And he begins by talking to us about being good hearers, and then in response, he says, and you should be then doers, because you hear and then it doesn't really do you any good unless you put it into practice.

Well, this morning we've gotten to the last two verses, and there's one more additional though that James would like to add before he changes the subject again in Chapter 2, and that is this: If you do what God says, but your heart isn't in it, that's also not good enough, because God is interested in the heart.

So, we've given you lots of words, if you've been with us, to remember Chapter 1 by. The word “count” and “know” and “let” in the first week; “ask” and “believe” in week two; then the word “perspective”; then the word “distinction”; then the words “God is unchanging and good”; then the words “hearing” and “responding” and “doing.” And then this morning we'd like to add these last two words, “have true religion.” Picked that out because that's what James uses. So, that's a lot of words. I'm not going to do that in Chapter 2. You're on your own.

But, this morning, James' conclusion to all of this is that unless your heart is converted and changed by the Lord, if you can't be taken from have to in terms of your religious ways, to want to, get to, then something's wrong. And the doing in and of itself without a heart that corresponds is really not good enough. I think it should answer an important question though, because there's a lot of people who do a lot of religious things. They give a lot of money to the poor; they make great sacrifices. They'll tell you about them, especially at this time of year. You know, movie stars show up to feed the homeless and, look at me. I do my religious duty. I'm a very religious person. Well, good for you. But if your heart isn't right with God, it really does you no good, and there's no benefit, and certainly it's not going to bring you to where the Lord wants you to be. In fact, everything you do for the Lord cannot be equated with your relationship with the Lord. They can't be a substitute. So, it's not sufficient if the heart isn't first engaged in love. And God makes that abundantly clear wherever you go in the bible; that He's interested not in what, but in why.

When the Lord wrote that letter to the Ephesian church in Chapter 2 of Revelation, it starts off with a pretty complimentary letter. I know your works, I know your labor, I know your patience, I know how you cannot bear those that are living in an evil way. I know you've tested those who say they're apostles, but they're not. I know how you won't put up with liars in your group. I know how you persevered, and you've been patient, and you've labored and without becoming weary. And you go, man, that's a pretty good church. And then the Lord goes, nevertheless, and you want to go, what do you mean "nevertheless?" What more do you want from me? And the Lord said, "nevertheless, I have this one thing against you, you've left your first love." He questions the why, not the what. What - - there's plenty of what. But the why negated the action. It made it null and void, completely so, because there was not a corresponding heart.

Sometimes, I think we believe that people must be saved by their vocabulary. If I hear someone say, "I am blessed," I immediately go, I wonder if they're saved. That's my word; right? Or they use the word "fellowship," or they say, "hey, bro." And you go, "hey, bro." That could be a relationship right there, right? Because they talk like Christians, they must be believers.

There's a story in Judges Chapter 12, I believe it is, where there's an account of the fight between those from Gilead and those from Ephraim, and they didn't like each other. But in the midst of the battle, those from Ephraim who had come to Gilead to fight began to lose the battle, and so they began to hide among the Gileanites than being murdered, but the problem was they were trying to hide in a country or a part of the country who had a very specific vocabulary. It was very different than normal. And those that were from Gilead had a word for flood or river. The word was "Shibboleth." The problem is these guys from Ephraim couldn't pronounce the H. So, they were grabbed and they say, "say flood," and they'd say "Sibboleth," without the H, and they would be killed. 42,000 of them got taken out by their language. So, we can't always go by what we hear in terms of language.

There are some times that Christians are thrown together with other people that don't know the Lord based solely on social outlook. If someone is pro-life, we go, they must be one of us. Well, maybe when it comes to pro-life, but not necessarily when it comes to faith in Christ. And so, we've got to be careful, you know, that we don't just make presumptions, because true religion changes you first. Not based upon what you do necessarily, but who you are and why you do what you do. You know, to just find people that don't drink or chew or go with those who do, well, good for you. Religious people.

But there's these externals. In fact, the word "religion" in these two verses is the Greek word for ceremony. It talks about externals of worship. So, look, you can carry a Bible to church. That doesn't mean you're right with God. You can show up here every week, raise your hands in the air and sing at the top of your lungs. We will walk away going, now there's a guy that is devoted to the Lord. And everything might look well on the outside, but we might be mistaken about the condition of the heart.

Every behavior, religious behavior, is only acceptable to our God if it comes from a heart of love for Him and obedience. Otherwise, those are externals that are very dangerous places of self-deception. You start to believe your own story after a while. Look, I'm in church all the time, I must be saved. I sing louder than everyone else, and better, I might say, in my pew than everyone else. I must be right with God. But to be sure that the doings proceed from a genuine heart for the Lord, then we are fine, but if not, we can be fooling ourselves. And James gives to us some representative kind of dimensions of true religion, and it always goes from a heart that must be first engaged with God to do it.

In fact, he goes in verse 26, and he will say, you know, "Here's your religion. How's it doing in your life? Has it bridled your tongue?" And I'm thinking, what a horrible choice of examples because we all have problems with our mouths.

And James will spend a lot of times beating us over the head with this later, but what he says is, if what you believe doesn't touch you, doesn't matter how good you're at it, it's not going to be one that is sustained by a relationship with God. And it'll take you out in the long run. It's to be a belief that should change you. If it's powerful enough to change you, then it's powerful enough to be, you know, preached to others. If God's love is in you, then God's love can come out of you. He'll say, and if you can keep yourself spotted from the world and all - - if you're in the world, but you're not of it. Because true religion is what we want, and from God's perspective, what God's looking for isn't what you can do for Him, but why you do it. It's always the same: Why? Why do you do it? Because even in the Bible, if you do it poorly, but you do it with a sincerity of trying to be obedient to the Lord, even if you fail, God takes notice. But if you do all the right things with a heart that's far removed from God, it goes by the wayside. It's vain, it's empty, or as it says here in verse 26, it's useless.

So, here's the comparison. Verse 26 says this: "If anyone among you," writing to the church now, "thinks he is religious, but he doesn't bridle his tongue, he's deceiving his own heart, and this man's religion is useless." I want you to know where James started here and take a notice, he asks what your estimation of religious life is. This isn't asking you about other people's opinion of you. This is self-opinion. This is self-evaluation. He asked you to give your opinion about your religious activities. From the standpoint of being fooled, he says, if that religious belief doesn't change you, for example, enable you to bridle your tongue, you've got a religion that does no good for no one. It's absolutely useless, even though you have the ceremony of religion all around you.

If you say to somebody, do you know the Lord, and they said, you should see all I've done for the Lord, it's really not the answer. I don't think that you're looking for. Because any more than the person who thinks listening to the Bible is enough if they just listen well, so is the person who thinks he can do a lot for the Lord but doesn't have a heart for God, fooling himself and ending up in a useless place. If any thinks he is religious. That's what he said, if anyone think he is. If I say to somebody, are you a Christian? And they say this: I've been singing in the choir for 10 years. I want to go, great. Now are you saved? Of if you say, how long have you known the Lord, and they'll say, all of my life, then I worry,

because those aren't answers that you would get from someone who has come to know the Lord. They have answers for those questions. I was right here and then I met Jesus. I met His grace, and then I got saved.

James' point, is that true religion in essence has nothing to do with the externals of behavior, because it is the heart that God is addressing, and once your heart is right, every religious outward practice will be acceptable to the Lord as well. God's only interested in motive, in intent, and to not have that going on is useless. You go through all of the motions, and you're lacking the heart. So, if you try to argue holiness or devotion or commitment without a corresponding lifestyle, it's an empty argument.

If you think you're righteous this morning because you pray, or because you give, or because you serve, and don't realize that the only reason you're righteous is because Jesus died for you, then you've missed the boat. You're doing for God doesn't enhance your status with God at all. There's no benefit there in terms of relationship. That's a given. It's free, it's grace, it's mercy. What you do for the Lord is a result of either, A, trying to work your way into someplace you can't work your way into, or B, your realization of how much God loves you and a pure heart response of wanting to love Him back. I love Him because He first loved me. I understand how His mercy works and His grace. I want to give Him everything. I don't want to hold anything back from Him. And my work and my service and my giving and my religious activity have to be an outgrowth and a response from a life that has been delivered by God. But I don't do it to maintain my relationship with God. My relationship with Him is one of faith.

When Jesus was talking to the disciples there in Luke 17 and He tried to drive home that point, He said, "Which one of you has a servant who would plow or tend his sheep, who comes in from the field, do you say to him, 'hey, sit down. Let me get you something to eat?' He said, "No, you say to him, 'Hey, get me something to eat. Gird yourself.' And when he has prepared and you have eaten and drunk, then you would say to him afterwards, 'sit down and drink.' Do you thank the servant for doing what you've commanded him." And Jesus said, "I don't think so." And then he said, "In like manner, when you've done everything that's been commanded of you, say of yourself, 'I'm an unprofitable servant. I've just done what's my duty to do.' The bottom line is, those are things that are obligatory to someone who knows the Lord, but they aren't my relationship, and they don't define my walk with Him. God's interested in why you do what you do, and that's it.

If you serve the Lord out of a great sense of love and responsibility, then you'll never have to bring it up and no one will have to encourage you to continue on with it, because love doesn't know any limits. When you love God as God loves you, nobody has to tell you to go to church. You'll be there. Nobody has to tell you to get your Bible out; you'll read it. Nobody has to tell you obey what the Lord says, because you'll obey it. You love Him, He loves you. There's a why. But there's lots of people that don't love the Lord, but they're trying to substitute what. I've given so much, I've spent so much time, I've done these things. Oh, how can God not love me? Well, He loved you before you did any of that stuff, but he only receives it when you do it out of love for Him.

Jesus spoke about that Pharisee that showed up in Luke 18 in that church, or at the temple, and He began - - Jesus said two men went up to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector, and He says the Pharisee stood and then He says this: Prayed with himself. I always liked those words. In other words, God isn't listening, but the guy really liked to pray and hear himself talk. He began by saying, "Lord, I'm so thankful I'm not like other men. I'm not an extortioner, I'm not unjust, I'm not an adulterer. I'm

certainly not like that tax collector over there. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of everything I possess. And the Lord said He prayed with himself. He made a whole list of things he did for God. Didn't speak about his heart, just his behavior. He said, standing in the back of the room was a tax collector who was so ashamed of himself that he didn't dare look up. Looked at the ground. Beat himself in the chest in a cry of anguish and grief. Didn't so much as raise his eyes to Heaven, and all he could get out of his mouth was, "God, be merciful to me. I'm a sinner." And the Lord said, that man went home justified – just as if I'd never sinned. He found the mercy of God, the grace of God. His relationship was based on what God had done, and why he now finds himself crying out.

God will not accept behavior without a heart. And James' caution is that we have an enemy out there who, if he can't get you to sin, maybe he can convince you of some false sense of righteousness because of everything you've done for God, like look what I do for Him; what more does He want? He wants you.

You know, there's a certain time in your kid's life when they just want to make you happy. It lasts about three days, I think, or four days. But you enjoy them. "Oh I made this for you, dad. Made that drawing for you. Look it, this is you and me." Oh, you like that. Like I said it doesn't last very long, but boy, do you love it. But if you let your outward ways of worship or service have you thinking that somehow you belong to the Lord, it's like the little boy who wants to weigh and outweigh his friends, who gets on the scale and sucks in a great big gulp of air. You know it doesn't really put any weight on him. He is what he is, and you weigh what you weigh.

God is interested in the why. And James goes out of his way to pick, I think, the most convicting kind of measure stick available. He says, how's your mouth doing? Because if the Lord is in your heart and you - - He's the reason you're serving, then you're going to see a change in these areas where, you know, change wouldn't come unless the Lord did a work.

I like the book of James in the sense that James deals very little with external behavior. He talks to you constantly about what's going on in your head and in your heart; you know, things you don't really want people to know about, things you don't want to admit that you're dealing with. And James goes after those. So, he takes this illustration and he says that a man's religion must first touch the man and change him. If his faith in God doesn't bridle his tongue, then he's deceiving himself, and his outward ways of worship, his religion, his ceremony is useless. It has no impact on his own life. Doesn't change his sin. It's not true religion, because a true relationship with God changes you. It changes you first.

Jesus said, "Out of the good treasure of a man's heart, a man will speak. But out of the depths of your heart also comes evil speaking." It is really just about the heart. And James wisely tests outward religious behavior by asking about the heart.

I remember when I got saved as a 19-year-old, that my speech changed remarkably. There were certain words I could use as adverbs and verbs and adjectives - - same word. Maybe you're familiar with it. Nonetheless, it didn't all go away at once, but it certainly began to change. And I began to be self-conscious of how I would speak or what I would say, because I was interested in pleasing - - I just wanted the Lord to be happy with me. He had done so much for me. I read in Ephesians Chapter 4 verse 25 about letting your speech be tempered and all, and speaking truth to your neighbor, and letting no corrupt communication come out of your mouth except that which, you know, ministers to the

hearer, and you go, man, that's what I want. I want to be that guy. Not so that I could have a relationship with the Lord, but that I could please the Lord that I have a relationship with. It's the old cause and effect. And James calls that out.

Look, if you're in church every week and singing along and raising your hands and putting your check in the tithe box, and then you walk out the door and you lie about things and you slander your neighbor and you speak a bunch of filth, you might conclude everything is well with you, and we might as well, looking at you, but everything is not well with you. God wants to change you.

John Wesley told a story years ago of having a critical woman in his services that really was like - - just really a pain in his backside. And every time he would preach, she'd have something negative to say. And one day, he saw her sitting in the second or third row and he just - - she looked pained. And he had worn a new tie that his wife had bought him. And he said to her afterwards, "Did you enjoy the message?" and she said, "How could I pay attention with that god-awful tie you have on." And Wesley said, "I'm so sorry. I don't want to distract you from what the Lord is saying. Here's a pair of scissors, cut it off." And she did, right up under his neck, as close as she could get to the knot. As she turned to leave, he said, "Excuse me just one minute. There's something that has kept me from hearing the Lord clearly: your tongue. So, if you could just stick it out, I'd like to adjust it for you."

True religion comes out of a life that's been changed. "If any man is in Christ, he's a new creation; old things have passed away; everything's become new. Everything belongs to the Lord, who has reconciled us to Himself through His Son Jesus Christ. He's given us a ministry of reconciliation so that God is in you."

There's no amount of religion that can hide the problem of an unredeemed heart. If your heart isn't right with God, all the religion in the world, all the ceremony, and all the outward behavior, won't cover it, can't substitute it. In fact, you deceive yourself. That's what James says. The word "deceive" is the word for cheat. In other words, you cheat yourself out of the true joy of serving the Lord by putting on an outward show, and then thinking all is well. To pretend without a heart is to miss the joy of fellowship and the assurance of God's mercy, and to see God at work. And we start to believe what we do rather than who we are.

James is not a guy to beat around the bush though. He just says your religion is useless. The word is the word for empty. Because no amount of singing and praying and serving and giving can replace the relationship of being His child; and once you're His child, everything you do is acceptable when it's motivated from that relationship.

The one that is caught in externals is quickly disillusioned. If you came in this morning to worship, true worship would mean that you see the Lord and Him only. Close your eyes, see Him on the throne. He's the one I came to worship. You probably aren't distracted by the voice of someone behind you who doesn't sing quite as well as you do. You might not analyze the style of prayer or brood over how long the song might have been, or I don't like that tempo, because worship is God driven. It doesn't really matter; loud, soft, long, short. He's the one I've come to worship. But be the external guy, and you got all those problems. You're concerned about length and time and loudness and depth and tempo, and I don't like that song, I like that one.

So how are you doing with the Lord? I got a new Bible. I got a new witness shirt. Look at that. It says "Jesus" right on the front. Great. How's your tongue?

By contrast, James says in verse 27, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: "To visit the widows and the orphans in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." Notice in contrast to the useless religion in verse 26 that can't change a person's life, there is a religion that is pure and undefiled before the Lord. This one pleases God. The word 'pure' means just that. It is singular in its origin. It means unmixed in motive. The word "defiled" is just a synonym to pure. It means literally stained with color, the discoloration. But because it is undefiled, it means not stained with color; or if you will, there's no add mixture in what is being done, there's no hint of the flesh, no discoloration. What you do and why you do it is just - - it purely is a heart for God. It speaks to the why rather than to the what. That's what it is speaking to.

And notice it is before God and before the Father. I like that. Because ultimately what you need to be concerned about is that God knows what you're doing. He knows why, He's watching, He's never fooled, He won't get taken in. He does not also - - also doesn't stop paying attention.

When Paul said to the Corinthians in Chapter 3, the first letter, that there was a judgment day coming for our works, he said on that day when that judgment comes, that everyone's work will become clear in that day. The day will declare it, the fire will reveal of what sort it is. Not what it is, but what sort it is; what motivated it, what drove it. Why did you pick up that guy to take him to church? Why did you give to those people that were hurting? Was it to be glorified, people thank you and, wow, you're a magnanimous guy. It's like having that donation thing run across the crawler on the T.V., there's my name! Good for you. You better take a picture, because you're not getting any reward in Heaven. That's it buddy, right there. The why will be tested in that day, and if it gets through the fire, you get a reward. If it burns up, you get no reward. Oh, you're still saved, but you're not getting a reward for that behavior. It is of no consequence even to us, or shouldn't be to you, what everybody else thinks of your motive. If you're in any kind of place, most of the time people will question your motives. The comforting thing is God knows the truth.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, I Corinthians Chapter 4 verse 1 through 4 or 5, when he was being hounded by these critics in Corinth, he said, you know, "It's a very small thing that you judge me." And then he said that, "I don't even judge myself. And in that, I'm not really," you know, justified if you will, "but I know that when the Lord comes, He's going to bring the light the hidden things of darkness. He's going to reveal the counsel of men's hearts, and then everyone's going to have the reward from Him." So, you only have to be concerned with one person: The One who knows you best, Who sees your motive. You can fool your entire row; you can fool the whole church. But your heart might very well, you know, get away with it here, but not with Him. It's before our Father who knows us and loves us. He considers our intents. He knows our frame.

And notice what he says in verse 27, "Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this," and then he gives us two representations of what a pure religion would be. There are countless others. But one is a focus on serving others rather than yourself, and the other is guarding yourself from the world in which you live. So, he adds, and he starts with visiting the orphans and the widows in their troubles. A redeemed heart begins to care for other people. An unredeemed heart cares for himself. Even when he helps others, it's for - - there is always an ulterior motive. But now, James says, here's a guy who

really loves the Lord and he's serving Him so that God is honored. He goes to visit the orphans and the widows, which, by the way, in first century were on the lowest kind of list of the culture. Everyone avoided the widows and the orphans. They didn't matter. They didn't count. They didn't add up to much. So, to serve them, you'd have to go with no recognition, with no applause, to people that couldn't pay you back. Really the only motive you could have for doing so was to please the Lord. Now, here's a pure action that defines your why. Lord, I'm doing this for you.

We have folks today that will go to several convalescent homes. It's a hard place to go minister. People are not always so attentive. Sometimes the place reeks. Folks, you know, are neglected by family. Sometimes they fall asleep during your preaching. Wait, that's just like here. Don't worry, that's the same thing. Never mind. There's really no external or intrinsic reward other than to please the Lord. And the folks that go to these various rooms and places, and God keeps opening doors to go to more, do so without applause. I doubt you know who they are unless you happen to know them personally. I don't think we've ever brought them up to go, here's our staff. But they go out of love for the Lord. They go on Sunday afternoon. They're gone for two or three hours. And God keeps track. But it has to come from the heart.

Oftentimes, it is God who shows His love for the least. You know, in Psalms 68, it says that He's a father to the fatherless and a comfort to the widow. Sometimes, in order to kind of bypass all that, we want to promise God stuff we can't do to show our intent. If I had a million dollars, I'd help the children. Great, but you don't have a million dollars. I know, but if I had it, that's what I'd do.

I remember hearing a story of a missionary who said to the people that were sitting with him, "If I had 100 pigs, I'd give 50 to the work of the Lord." And the guy sitting with him said, "Well what if you just had 50 pigs?" And he goes, "Then I'd give 25 to the Lord." "What about if you had 10?" "I'd give five to the Lord." He said, "All right. Well, how about if you had two?" He said, "That's not a fair question. You know I only have two pigs." You see, now it became personal.

True religion is exhibited by a selfless love and concern for others. He that pities the poor, lends to the Lord, and the Lord will repay or give back what He has given. God keeps track.

If you go to Isaiah Chapter 1, where the Lord rebukes the nation of Israel for their religious life without a heart for God, it is really the best example of these two verses when laid together. In Chapter 1 of Isaiah verse 11, the Lord said, "What is the purpose of you coming to me with all of these sacrifices?" And then he's pretty indignant. He said, "I've had enough of them. Had it up to here with the burnt offerings and the fat. And I don't delight anymore in the blood of the goats or the lambs or the bulls. You come to me - -" you know, "You ask for me, but yet you trample around in my courts. You bring these futile sacrifices. You bring incense, which just is an abomination to me. You talk about your Sabbaths and your New Moons." In other words, you do all the religious stuff that a nation would do if they loved God, but you do it without loving Him. And you show up. And the Lord said, you know what you are? "You are nothing more than trouble to me. When you spread your hands, I'm going to hide my face; when you make long prayers, I'm not going to listen. Your hands are full of blood. Here's what I would tell you to do: Go wash yourself, make yourself clean; put away the evil from your doings before My eyes. Stop doing evil, do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor." And then He said this: "Defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." Exactly the same thing. You got to have a heart, because you can have a religion without a relationship, and it does you no good. It looks good outwardly. It goes



nowhere before the Lord. John said the same thing. I think he was in his 90s when he wrote, "If you have the world's goods and you see your brother in need and you shut up your heart, does really God's love abide in you?"

So how does your religion look in terms of helping others, serving others? I'm always amazed at how many people, they just - - they get off the hook saying, "oh, I'm busy I can barely serve myself." I don't think that's a good sign for you, especially since "Greater love has no man than he lays down his life for his friends." Or "By this, all men will know you're My disciples, by this love that you have for each other."

Finally, he says at the end of verse 27, and there's one other thing that you'll find in a pure and undefiled religion, and that is you'll find the people keeping themselves unspotted from the world. True relationship with God will lead to you pulling back from the world that is around you, the system of the world where Satan is the prince of the world, and where his kids are driven by their lusts. We're in the world, but Jesus doesn't want us to be a part of it anymore. We're here to be a light to them.

I remember reading somewhere that the proper place for a boat was in the water, but if the water gets in the boat, not good. The boat's going to sink. So, the danger of friendship with the world is it leads to love of the world and the, you know, that's not purely religion in God's eyes anymore. So, if you really love the Lord, a couple things are going to happen: You're going to be other centered, and you're going to be leery of what's out there in the world, because you've been called out, you've been called away. You belong to Him.

You know, Lot pitched his tent towards Sodom. Soon thereafter, he moved into Sodom. Sometime later, Sodom moved into Lot. Before it was finished, he lost several children to Sodom, he lost his wife, he lost a fruitfulness of his life. Compare him to Abram, who walked with God, and you'll see the difference. True religion walks right down the center of God's will, not along the edges. Paul said to the Romans in Chapter 13, "Put on the Lord Jesus. Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."

So, here's James' argument at the end: Do the word of God - - that's what he ended with last week - - but be sure that it comes from a heart that's been converted, where the word of God has first touched your life, and now can touch others through your life. It has to be you first. You have to be changed by it. It should result in a life that is lived without glory, is interested in serving others, and it keeps you from a world in which, you know, you live because you're holy devoted to the Lord.

So, are you religious, or are you in a relationship with God that is pure? And that's the answer you're going to have to give.

But James has a way of going after your innards, you know? Starting next week, it's just going to get worse. We're going to spend the next three Sunday mornings talking about prejudice, as James takes out a bigger bat. I would avoid these if I could.