**The Mark(s) of True Religion**



**James 1:26**

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Have you noticed how when you are going to your medical professional, especially for your annual checkup, one of the first things they do is to ask you to open your mouth and stick out your tongue? Isn’t it amazing that a doctor can look into our mouth, see our tongue, and actually think they know other things that are going on in our body? Our mouths actually reveal things about our physical health. You are probably aware of this, but when the doctor asks you to open your mouth and stick out your tongue, they are looking for your shape of your tongue, the color, the texture, the wetness, and the coating of your tongue. The coating of your tongue tells doctors if there could be a problem with your digestive system. I read about an ear, nose, and throat specialist who can tell a person what some of their habits are by looking at their tongue and their mouth –– for example, if they are a smoker or a dipper. It also gives him insight into whether a person has an autoimmune disease that they possibly did not know they had, just by looking at their mouth. It is amazing how the mouth can be an indicator of our spiritual health. As we get ready to read James chapter 1, verse 26, James is going to tell us that the tongue is also an indicator of our spiritual health. James actually believes that by looking at our tongue, listening to what others are saying, listening to what we say, it is actually a reflection of the inside of us and our relationship with God.

As we stand and read our verse this morning, turn to James chapter 1, verse 26. The title of our message this morning is going to be The Mark(s) of Religion. We are going to see the first mark of James 1:26. We are going to see marks two and three in verse 27. This morning, if you do not mind, we are going to slow down and concentrate on this first mark. It would be my nature, and probably your nature, if I preached all three of these marks together that most of us would focus on two and three and not number one, because many of us struggle with number one. Numbers two and three seem so much easier to exhibit than number one, but we are going to look at the first mark of true religion. Listen to what James writes.

**Scripture**

***“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”***

I do not know whether to say wow or whoa. Did you hear what James believes? If I think I am religious but I do not bridle my tongue, I am actually deceiving my heart and my religion is worthless.

**Listen More, Talk Less, Stay Calm**

Before we slowly examine this text in detail, can I remind us of the context even though the context has been revealed to us in the last couple of weeks? James, writing to the church, believes with all of his heart that those of us in the church who are saved are actually a first fruit of God. This means God saved us so that our life would be a testimony to others who are still in sin, a testimony of the change that can happen in their lives once they come to know Him as Lord and Savior. Our life is an example of the harvest that is still going to come in the lives of other people. He reminds us of the very foundation of us being a first fruit. That foundation is that we have been born again we have been birthed by the Word of God. It was the Word of God that converged on our soul and spirit and brought to us the new life that God has given us in Jesus Christ when He made us alive, raised us up, and seated us in the heavenlies with Him. Then he tells us the same Word that birthed us has been implanted in us and the Word in us is actually causing our sanctification. Because we are moving further and further away from the image of Adam and more and more into the image of Jesus Christ, here is what should be happening in our personal lives on a day-by-day basis: we are to be listening more, talking less, and in all situations staying calm.

How are you doing? Can I confess that I blew it this week? It was in one of those moments when I should have been listening more and I talked before I should have, and ultimately, I did not stay calm. Are you like me and you have one of those moments from time to time? Or, is it possible those moments defines you? In other words, you do not just have a moment like that once every several months, but that is who you are. James wants us to make sure that we are not just hearing God’s Word, but we are doing God’s Word. He is going to give us three marks of true religion.

1. We will bridle our tongue.
2. We will help those who are in need.
3. We will walk in this world without getting this world on us.

After telling us that, James is going to launch into the rest of his letter where he is going to expound on each of these topics.

James is the half-brother of Jesus on his mother’s side, not his father’s side. James and Jesus had the same mother, Mary, but they had different fathers. James’s father was Joseph and Jesus’s father was God. Now, I don’t want you to think because his mother was human and his father was God that He is half-man and half-God. No, He was fully God and yet became fully man. While being fully man, He retained being fully God.

**From the Mouth, the Heart is Revealed**

I have tried to think to the best of my ability why James is spending so much time in this opening letter on the tongue. How many of you would make the first mark of religion be controlling your tongue? That wouldn’t be what most of us put down, but it is important to James. Now, from what we understand, James did not come to a right relationship with God through Jesus until after the resurrection. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine growing up with Jesus as your older brother and not recognizing until after He died, was buried, and rose again, who He actually was? Can I use my sanctified imagination here for just a moment? Here is what I believe. I believe that after the fact the light bulb went off. I think he looked back at his older brother, and instead of making fun of Him for being a goody two-shoes, he now looked back at His life with full respect. He got over all the times that his mother expected him to be like his older brother –– the times when he just felt like he could never live up to who He was. Now with admiration and respect, he is thinking about being the brother of Jesus. I just do not believe that at age 30 Jesus all of a sudden started teaching right things about God. I think He mirrored that as a boy and as a teenager. I think it is possible that there were many times when Jesus tried to get James to understand if those words that James was saying were coming out of his mouth, there was something wrong on the inside.

So, I think as James penned these words in his letter, the words Jesus spoke in Matthew 12:33-37 had to be impressed upon his mind –– when Jesus talked about their being different kinds of trees; a good tree and a bad tree, and you could basically tell the good tree from the bad tree by its fruit. Jesus also talked about how to have the abundance of our treasure and how it reveals whether the treasure is good or that treasure is bad. We understand that He is talking about the heart, when He says the abundance of the heart speaks through the mouth. Through the mouth, the abundance of the heart is revealed. This means if you want to know what kind of heart a person has, just listen to them talk. Some of us need to quit making excuses for people because our words express what is on the inside. Then, Jesus goes on to say something startling. After telling us that our mouth ultimately reveals what is in our heart, Jesus says that you will give an account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word. You know those words you speak without thinking? You know those words you say that you try to take back? You know those words you say that you did not really mean…the ones you did not think before you spoke? You are going to give an account for those. Jesus says your words will either justify you or they will condemn you on the day of judgement. Whoa! Are you hearing this, church? James believed that to look into a man’s heart, all you had to do was open your ears and listen to what he was saying. In Luke chapter 6, Jesus basically says the same thing, except Luke records it in a different context. He is basically saying you can know if you are a good tree or a bad tree by examining the fruit, and the fruit of you being right with God is the words that come out of your mouth.

Now, let’s look at the text, James 1:26. I want to make sure you hear this. I do not say this because I have the wisdom to say this; I say this because of James. James actually believed that it is possible for someone to be in the church and think they were religious, but actually be deceiving their own heart. Their religion was actually worthless to them because James measured whether your religion was useful or not by the words that came out of your mouth. It breaks my heart as a pastor to know that possibly one of us, or many of us, are not who we think we are. I hear your argument, “Bro. Ricky, I am not into that religion stuff. In my opinion, Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship with Jesus Christ, and I am not into religion, I am into a relationship with Jesus.” That is what James is talking about here. James is not using religion in a negative way of saying that we earn a right relationship with God by doing external things. James is using the word, religious, as an adjective to describe a person who is in a right relationship with Christ. He is using these terms in a positive way.

Religion would be the set of beliefs that you believe in about God. It would be the belief you have about what God wants you to do in response to Him. It is what we call worship of Him. That is your religion. Now, if you have a religion, if you have a set of beliefs, if you have a way in which you believe God wants you to worship Him, as I do, then we should be religious. Being religious means we are devoted to practicing the beliefs that we have about God. We are devoted to practicing the worship we believe that God is worthy of. So, how do you describe a person who has a belief system? How do you describe a person who has a right relationship with God? You describe that person as being religious, meaning they practice what they believe. Here is what you and I know, we are religious. We attend church. I mean, look at you! You are sitting through a thirty-five minute message. You have worshiped for twenty minutes with a face mask on. You are devoted! We read our Bibles, we pray, we give, we fast, we witness, and we go on mission trips. We practice what we believe is true. We live a lifestyle in deed that backs up how God wants us to truly worship Him!

**Bridle Your Tongue**

But none of those things made James’s list as marks of a true religion, of a true relationship with Christ, because I think James knew we could do each one of those things externally with no heart change. Here is what James knows, and he will tell us this in chapter 3 where he expounds and expands this message –– he is going to say that no human being can tame the tongue. How many of you have tried to bite your tongue and it just does not work? Apart from a right relationship with God, we cannot bridle our tongue. But James says the fruit of being in a right relationship with God, the fruit of a life that is devoted to the spiritual disciplines that we need to be devoted to, the fruit of that life is us controlling our tongue.

James is going to switch metaphors here, and he is the only one in the New Testament that will use this metaphor. He is going to go to the world of the folks who love horses. I am going to struggle here just a moment, because to be honest I don’t like horses. You didn’t hear me say I don’t love horses, you heard me say I do not even LIKE horses, but I married a horse girl. She LOVES horses. I took very seriously that thing about loving your wife like Christ loved the church when we got married –– I was a motorcycle guy, but I sold my motorcycle and bought her a horse. Then eventually, she realized how miserable I was so we sold that horse and we got a three-wheeler, two of them actually. I was so happy, but she was miserable. So, again I sacrificially sold those three wheelers and got two horses. Praise the Lord that she is a submissive wife. We eventually sold those horses and we got four wheelers (now we have MULE’s; not live ones, mechanical ones). Get this picture…When we had that one horse, many times I saw Celisa go out into that field and call that horse, throw the bridle on it, and slip up on that horse without even a saddle. I have never ridden a horse without a saddle. Whenever I would ride that horse, I would have the bridle on with the bit in its mouth and my hands on the reins. Even though we rode that same horse, I could not control that horse like she could. I will never forget when me, Celisa, and another couple from the church went to Wranglers one weekend. Now, back 38 years ago a lot of people just went to Wranglers to drink, but it is set up as a horse riding camp and it was the best place to camp for horse riding. Anyway, we set up our camp and we only had one horse a piece, we were poor back in those days. So, Celisa and the other wife rode through the trails and me and the man sat at the campsite and talked. They came back after a few hours, but they came back too soon (in my opinion) because it was now going to be our turn to ride. We let the horses rest just a little bit and then it came time for me and him to ride, so I got up on our horse that Celisa had just ridden. Now, when Celisa rode our horse, she did not just pull it this way or pull it that way, she could just lay the reins on its neck on one side and it would go this way, or lay the reins on the other side of its neck and it would go that way. I got on that same horse and tried to do the very same thing, and that horse took me through every campsite in Wranglers! We turned tents over, we turned pods over, and I just knew everybody was thinking, “Bro. Ricky has come to Wranglers, and he is drunk!” No, I was not drunk, but I was totally out of control and that horse knew I was out of control. I was out of control, so the horse was out of control. I did get better, but I do not like horses.

James draws an analogy from the equine world to say that our relationship with God should cause us to bridle our tongue. Now, I am going to go in a direction that you may not expect me to go here. I think many of us have missed the truth of this passage. What limited knowledge I have of riding a horse, and it is limited, you do not just put a bridle on a horse to stop the horse. Get this picture…I put a bridle on a horse, I saddle him up, and then we just stand there. We never move, I hold on tight to the reins! Wow, isn’t this fun? I have bridled this horse so I have this horse under control, right? In other words, you have learned to keep your mouth shut, but you have to bite your tongue off to do it! You have to walk out of the room to do it. You have to wait three days to be brought up again. Are you kidding me? That is not what this is talking about! James has already told us that he didn’t tell us to hush; he told us to listen more, talk less, and stay calm. Now he is getting down to the details because he is getting ready to launch into many discussions, but especially a deep one in James chapter 3, about the power of the tongue.

**The Purpose of Bridling**

Can I tell you why we put a bridle on a horse? It is to control its direction and to control its speed, and then stop it when it needs to be stopped. The test of your relationship with Christ is not you being quiet when everybody else is talking. That can be just as damaging to the Kingdom sometimes as a person who talks. When you bridle your tongue, you know how to take the conversation in this direction and then you know when to take it in another direction. There are just some times your tongue is going in the wrong direction because your heart is in the wrong direction. I want to be clear here, as believers we still have an unredeemed flesh, so there are times that our tongue is going to reveal our unredeemed flesh too. There are just some times you get into a conversation with someone and you don’t need to keep going down the direction the conversation is going down because if you do, you are going to sin because they are already sinning by just bringing it up. You have the direction when the conversation is going this way to pull it that way if you are in a right relationship with God. I want to be honest with you, there are some times when you have the bridle on the horse and you let go of the reins completely and let him go as fast as he wants to go. You do that because you need to get out of some of the conversations you find yourself in and you need to get out of them fast. Then there are other conversations you are in and you just need to pull the reins back a little bit, take your time, slow down and spend time with this person in a deep conversation.

There have been two times this week when I was asked the question, “Bro. Ricky, how long have you been at Hardin?” I always look forward to the first Sunday of the next May and my classic answer is always this, “Hey, if Hardin lets me stay until next May, I will have been here 38 years as pastor.” Well, I am going to something I didn’t say 38 years ago when I preached through the book of James. See, 38 years ago when we talked about the tongue, the tongue was normally limited to a face-to-face conversation. Or, you could go over to the wall and pick up the phone and call somebody –– but man, you were limited with that cord –– you couldn’t go anywhere, so you got off the phone as quickly as you could. That is not the case today. If James were writing this to the church in 2020, he would make sure we understand this isn’t just talking about verbally talking to someone; it is also talking about texting and posting. Do you hear me, church? What you post is your way of talking to the world you know…and you think they are your friends. Your posts reveal your heart or your unredeemed flesh. You feel so confident that you can just text this because you are not with the person…no, no, no, no, no! That is an expression of your tongue! James wants us to control our face-to-face talks, he wants us to control our texts, and he really wants us to control our posts because if we do not bridle our tongue. Here is what James is trying to tell us –– it does not matter if you are a member of Hardin Baptist Church. It does not matter if you are praying. It does not matter that you are singing songs. It does not matter that you are sacrificing by wearing a mask. It does not matter that you are giving to the church. It does not matter that you go on mission trips. The true mark of true religion is controlling your tongue! Yes, there will be times you pull the reins and stop and you do not keep on with the conversation. Our tongue lets others know whether or not we are really in a right relationship with God. Wouldn’t it be sad for us to think we are religious, but really did not have a right relationship with God? James is saying if you want to see your heart, you need to stop and listen to what you are saying.

**Conversation with a Believer**

Scripture is going to tell us there are primarily two conversations we have: conversations with people who are Christians, and conversations with people who are not Christians. In Ephesians 4:29, Paul addresses the church and us talking to fellow Christians. In verse 29, after just talking about how we are a new man in Christ and how we are supposed to put off the old man and put on the new man, he says, “Let no corrupt communication come out of your mouth.” That word, corrupt, means foul, filthy, rotten. It was the picture of a corpse that was rotting and when you go by weeks later, it stinks. Listen to me! Language or conversation that just stinks and causes decay, hurt, and death in someone’s life should never come out of the mouth of a person who is in a right relationship with God! Do not ever do that! I do not ever need to do that! James said what should come out of my mouth are good words that build up, not tear down –– BUILD UP so that grace may be imparted to the hearer. In other words, when you and I are together, my words to you and your words to me, regardless of the context, whether we are at work, a ballgame, wherever we are at, should build up the other person and actually impart grace. Grace is God’s enabling power. My words to you and your words to me should cause us to be enabled with God’s power so that we are ready to do whatever God is bringing into our life at that moment, because we have a friend who is speaking and their speaking is revealing a heart that is in a right relationship with God. That is how God is using you, to impart his grace, His enabling power in other people’s lives!

**Conversation with an Unbeliever**

Then, in Colossians 4, 5, and 6, Paul talks about how we are to talk about unbelievers. He tells us first to walk in wisdom, making the best use of time. This phrase, best use of time, literally refers to opportunities. We are to be walking wisely and realize this is an opportunity to engage someone who does not know Christ. How would our posts be different if we recognized that some of those people who are listening, reading, and watching are unbelievers? Paul said when we get in that situation and we speak, we are to speak with grace seasoned with salt. Wow…Have any of you ever bitten into something that was bland and it was not good? You did not want any more of it. Maybe you spit it out. You thought it would be good if it just had some salt with it. Can I ask you this question? Can any of you eat just one potato chip? I can’t. Man, I love potato chips, salty potato chips! You eat one and you have to eat the whole bag because when you put salt on a potato it just changes the blandness of the potato. Once you bite into that salt, that salt gets a hold of you and you want more! Amen? That is the picture here. It is a picture of us in a conversation with people who do not know Christ. We are speaking with grace, seasoning our words with salt, and the next thing you know that person is wanting to hear us talk! We have got their attention and what happens now is we are now ready for that opportunity that God has given us in that person’s life.

Can I go back to the beginning of the sermon? I don’t like horses. I could never do what Celisa did on the back of a horse because I like motorcycles. I saw her grooming those horses, feeding those horses, spending time with those horses. She would take an apple and give it to the horse. I never gave a horse an apple. She would crawl on the back of that animal and wow, just lay her rein on the neck of that animal and it would do exactly what she wanted it to do. See, I never desired to be a mature rider so I struggled. Do you know why I struggle with horses? It is because I didn’t have a relationship with the horse. Celisa had a relationship with the horse. Celisa showed me a video of a girl who, in honor of her dad and her love of a horse, shocked the world with a ride that crowned her a world champion on the back of a horse with no saddle, no bridle, and no reins. With her on the back of this animal that she loved, she had complete control of the animal. He could feel her legs and her hand on his neck. She could steer this animal wherever she wanted him to go.

**Give God the Reins**

Aren’t you tired of fighting, pulling, yanking, apologizing, and confessing? I am going to ask you, if you really want to bridle your tongue, to understand it is your relationship with Christ that enables you to bridle your tongue. It is you coming to believe this truth: your speech should not reveal a heart that is about you. Your speech should reveal a heart that is about HIM. If we could grasp that, it would change our lives. I want the Holy Spirit who lives in me, I want Christ’s Word who lives in me, to have such control of me that you never see the reins because I just sense that movement from Him, and it causes me to go in the direction He wants me to go. It causes me to go at the speed He wants me to go. But then there might be a time when He just needs to stop me dead in my tracks. It is almost like me and Him are just one. Could that be you and the Holy Spirit? Wow! That can be you and that can me under the control of God’s Holy Spirit.

When that ride ended, that girl in the video got off her horse and she ran out of the arena. Do you know what that horse did? He followed her at a gallop out of that arena. I pray you and I follow the leadership of God’s Spirit as we give Him the reins of our heart which will be revealed in our speech.