**The Mark(s) of True Religion Part 2**



**James 1:27**

**Bro. Ricky Cunningham**

We are going to be reading and speaking from James chapter 1, verse 27, resuming the sermon we started about 3 weeks ago called “The Mark(s) of true Religion.” We saw the first mark of true religion is a bridled tongue, and this morning, we are going to see the second and third marks of what James considers true religion.

Christmas was awesome at our house and it is awesome because of many of you. As a pastoral family, we are amazed with how many of you shower us with gifts. We have just received the best candies, the best chocolates, the best fruits, the best gift cards. Thank you, thank you! If I could, I want to tell you about something that I got, and there is a good chance that I am probably the only one who got this for Christmas. I went to the front porch one afternoon and there was a box from Hawaii. Did anybody get anything from Hawaii? When we opened it up (of course I already knew what was in it), there were eight pineapples wrapped in that day’s newspaper, and what I knew since I got one last year was these pineapples were cut fresh two days earlier in a pineapple patch on a pineapple farm in Hawaii. They were placed in this box and I received it in Dexter, Kentucky two days later. Can I just say something? When you get fresh pineapple cut just two days earlier straight from Hawaii, it just sets a standard for all other pineapples. I’m telling you it is the sweetest pineapple I have ever eaten! It is just different when you have a pineapple that has been freshly cut from Hawaii and you are getting to eat it two days later rather than having one of those pineapples that was probably cut two weeks earlier, shipped somewhere, stored somewhere, shipped somewhere else, then finally shipped to the store close to Dexter and, several days later, you go buy that pineapple. Now, I am not bragging here, but I have to say that I probably had the best pineapple during Christmas of anyone. That pineapple (all eight of them), if I can be honest, they kind of set the standard for how I am going to judge all other pineapples that I eat this year. Is that fair?

As we transition back into James chapter 1 and we end this chapter, I want to remind you of the context. James has shared with us that we have been birthed by the Word of God. We have been brought forth by God’s will and He used the Word of God in us to save us, bring new life to us, and our new life is to be a first fruit of salvation. God wants you and me to be an example, to set the standard, for other people. When someone thinks about what it means to be a Christian, your life and my life should be the standard. He tells us that the very same Word that birthed us, brought us forth, is also the very same Word that God is using to sanctify us, to move us further away from the old image of Adam and more and more into the image of Jesus Christ. Our life should express a fresh relationship with God daily. Therefore, James has labored to make sure we understand we cannot be a hearer only of God’s Word; we must be a doer of God’s Word.

On that line of practically, what does it look like to be a doer of God’s Word? James gives us three marks of true religion. We know people say, “Hey, Bro. Ricky, Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship.” Well, James is using the word religion that way. He is talking about what you believe on the inside about God and how you practically live that out. James wants to make sure your behavior matches what you say you believe about God. So as we examine these marks of our sanctification, he is going to ask us first to look inward and check our heart out. The way you look inward and check your heart out is by listening to what your tongue is saying. Here is what he says about a Christian…if we are really practicing what we say we believe about God, we should bridle our tongue. The person who gets into those moments and cannot bridle their tongue, and choose not to bridle their tongue, according to James, what you believe about God is absolutely useless to you. Then, he is going to translate and transition into religion that is pure and undefiled before God. When he shares these last two marks, he is not going to look inward, he is going to look upward and see God our Father. Both of these marks should be in the life of a Christian because they embody the very nature of God.

Have you noticed how there are some families that have such a strong genetic disposition that you can almost see a son and know who his father is? We have that little phrase, like father, like son. There are some genetics where the son will actually look like the father. There are other genetics where the son may not look like the father, but he acts just like the father. What James believes is that you and I have the very DNA of God in us as believers in Jesus Christ. Because we have the very DNA of God inside us, a new nature that we received the moment we were born again, our life should be an example for others to see and follow.

**Scripture**

***“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”***

If we sat down and began to disciple someone about faith in Christ and what that life should look like, I do not know that any of us would have chosen these marks of how to identify a true relationship with God –– a bridled tongue, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep one’s self unstained from the world. We would have surely mentioned bible study, church attendance, prayer, witnessing, and a whole lot of other things before we came to these. Now, please do not hear James say those others things are not evidences of a sanctified life. In understanding the kind of first fruit God expects us to be, James not only wants you to look inward at your heart and understand the true measure of your heart is what is coming out of your mouth, he also wants you to look up and understand there are some other things that, practically, you and I should be doing because they should reflect the very nature of God.

**Help Those in Need**

One of the things that we know about the nature of God is that God is love. In James’s day, one of the things that was a very practical aspect of God, who is loving, was this sense, this belief that God cared about the helpless –– the people who had true genuine needs and could not help themselves to the point that they literally could not sustain themselves without help from others. So to a Jewish person, but especially to a Christian who has a Jewish background who had been schooled in the Old Testament Scriptures and had this revelation of God and how God worked in the life of Jewish people, they understood that God considered Himself to be the father of the fatherless and the protector of widows. As a matter of fact, if we were to open up Israel’s hymnal (the psalms) and go to Psalm 68:4–5, here is what they would sing about many, many Sabbath days, “Sing to God, sing praises to His name; lift up a song to Him who rides through the deserts; His name is the Lord; exult before Him! Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in His holy habitation.” When the children of Israel were coming out of Egypt, one of the things that God reminded them was they had better not ever mistreat a stranger, a foreigner, a sojourner, a widow, or someone who does not have a father. God told them to remember what it was like to be in Egypt, therefore when they met someone who was a stranger or a foreigner in their land He wanted them to show that person the respect they deserved and remember where they used to be. When they met someone who did not have a father or someone who had lost their husband to death, God wanted Israel to remember what He told them…*I want you to treat them like I treat you*.

In the book of Isaiah, it opens in the first chapter with Isaiah speaking on behalf of God. He tells the nation of Israel that God is tired of them going to the temple and worshiping Him with their sacrifices, their tithes, and their offerings, and God said He wasn’t going to accept it anymore. When you get down to verse 16 and 17, God said, “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.”

What did we see Jesus doing many, many times in His ministry? He would stop and He would care for children. Have you ever noticed how many times in the gospels that it is a widow who comes to Jesus? Jesus always meets their needs. Now, you and I live in a different age. I think because of the influence of Christianity on the western world, we no longer live in a world where orphans and widows are helpless, but what does this mean? I think you and I can still agree, to a certain degree, a person who has lost a father or a husband to death may not have the same advantages as those of us who have our spouse and our father. Here is what the Bible is teaching…if we really have a relationship with God, who considers Himself father and protector from His holy habitation of Heaven and *He* is looking out for the needy, what do you think He expects His children to do? He expects them to look out for those who are needy as well.

James specifically tells us to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. This word, visit, is an interesting word. It actually comes from the root word of the word that we translate into English as “bishop.” The word, bishop, literally means to be an overseer. That description we use to talk about the leader of Christian churches, the overseer, the bishop –– this is the verb form of that word. So, when James tells us that one of the marks of a true belief in God is to visit the orphans and the widows, it isn’t talking about calling and saying hi, or checking on them to ask how they are doing. To make a visit means to take responsibility for, to oversee. Have you ever had the privilege of having someone in need come into your life and you were able to take responsibility for that need, to meet that need? That is what this is talking about. As Christians, you and I ought to have a reputation of coming along side and helping those who cannot help themselves. Why? Because it is in our DNA. Why is it in our DNA? Because it is the very nature of our God. This word, affliction, literally means they are between a rock and a hard place, they are at their lowest of lows, there are needs that they cannot meet themselves. We, you and I, Christians, the church –– we come alongside them and take responsibility for meeting that need, knowing that when we do this for the needy who cannot help themselves, we are not going to get anything back. We will get nothing in return, but this is what gives evidence of the love of God. See, this love we express here is not a love that arises because we have a need. This is not a love where helping someone who has a need meets our need. This love arises because someone else has a need and we have no strings attached to our love. We just simply love them for the sake of loving them because they have a need. If you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are going to be compassionate toward those people in our community, those people in our nation, those people around the world who are truly needy. You will not be able to turn your head. You will not be able to not reach into your billfold or your purse and help. There is no telling how many times some of us have helped and no one will ever know it because the only reason we did it was because we knew it was the right thing to do because it is what we believe to be true about our God. Amen?

**Keep Ourselves Unstained from the World**

Thirdly, if we are really in a right relationship with God, we will keep ourselves unstained from the world. Now, I want to show you this in the Greek language if I could. In English, word order is really important and reading smoothly is really important, but sometimes in the Greek language, it did not have to read smoothly to them. The word order was very important. In the Greek, the word order here is ‘unstained himself keep from the world.’ What James is saying is that a mark of a person who is truly religious, who is truly right with his God, who is truly behaving what he believes, that person will be unstained himself. It is the picture of who you and I really are –– right with God, recognizing we are robed in the righteousness of Christ. God has given us a suit of salvation that was free to us, but it cost Him greatly. That suit of salvation has not just covered our sinfulness, we have been forgiven, we have been cleansed, we have been made right, and we have been given a new robe that reveals our identity of who we are in Christ. It is why the Bible calls us saints.

I have spent my whole ministry here, but being raised in the little church I was raised in, I was always taught and I always heard, I was nothing but a sinner saved by grace. It was really easy to live down to that expectation that you are just an old sinner saved by grace. When you blew it, you just knew you were an old sinner. Amen? Yet, you don’t find that expression in Scripture. Yes, we know that believers still commit acts of sin. We know believers can be sinful. We know believers have an unredeemed flesh that has a mind of its own, but the Bible wants us to live up to our identity, and the term that the Bible uses for us are saints of God. That very word, saint, means to be holy. It means to be separated. It means to be set apart. Here is what you have to see yourself as –– an unstained person in Christ. Therefore, we live our life trying to remain unstained, unspotted, as we live in this world that is sinful. God is the one who made us right with Him. God is the one who clothed us with salvation, yet you have a responsibility, and I have a responsibility.

See, while I am in this world, there are people I have to be with, and James tells me to be with the orphans and the widows, the needy, but he also wants us to understand we live in a world that is hostile to God. He will talk about this in the fourth chapter. He will tell us that the world would like to try to make us their friend and James does not want us to be friends with the world. James knows the world can put its mark on us. James knows the world can influence us. James knows the world will try to bring us around to its way of thinking, so he is trying to tell us do not be stained by the world. Remain unstained. While we are in and with people, we have to be *in* but not *of* the world. When he is using the word, world, here, he is using it to convey a world system that is anti-God and anti-Christ –– it is the Greek word, “kosmos,” where we get our word cosmetics from which literally means to order, to arrange, to systematize. Guys, you have to believe this. Behind what we see here in America, even in Marshall and Calloway counties and the surrounding areas, there is a system behind what you see and that system is not godly. That system is anti-God and anti-Christ. James is saying don’t let it leave its mark on you. Don’t let it stain you. It breaks my heart to see more and more churches, more and more Christians, drifting into the path of worldliness and compromising with the world. James says the true mark of you being in a right relationship with God is that you would keep yourself unstained. We will refer to this more in this series because the rest of this letter is going to unpack the truth of what is spoken of in these last two verses, verses 26 and 27. But it is so important that you and I, as Christians, have such a relationship with God that we are so into His Word that we actually know what stains are and what sins are. Does that make sense?

You would be surprised sometimes the people who come to my farm, will walk with me in the field, and they are not dressed to be in the field, so before you know it they have what’s in the field all over them. Do you know what I am talking about? They just step right into the middle of it. It splatters. It is on their shoes. It is on their pants leg and they just kind of say, “EW!” There are some people who live in this world that do not know what a cow pile is. Now, I am not talking about a physical cow pile; I am talking about Christians who live in this world and cannot ascertain what is manure, what is grease, what is oil. Once you get it on you, you cannot just brush it off! I am telling you, just watch as you try to brush it off and notice how it brushes in at the same time you are trying to brush it off. On the farm, there are several times a year where Celisa will throw away my best jeans that are broken in just right. She throws them away and will say, “You are not going anywhere in those jeans with all those stains on them.” She is talking about manure stains on the bottom, grease stains up top. Then I have to break in a new pair of work jeans.

Some of us do not have very much influence at all as a Christian around those people who know us because of all the stains of the world that is in us. James is laboring here to tell us that we cannot let the world leave its mark on us, but we are supposed to leave our mark on the world. James is going to make a statement and that is to keep yourself unstained from the world. James was very practical. He wrote in a way that I think he just believed if we were Christians we were supposed to know how to do what he was telling us, practically, we ought to be doing because there are very few times where he actually stops to tell us how to do it. I have done searches the last couple of days just typing in some practical words like, how do you keep yourself unstained in the world? There are a whole lot of people saying a whole lot of different things, but there were not very many things said that to me, being who I am from Western Kentucky, really helped me understand how to stay unstained from the world. So, can I just be me and share a few things with you that will build on things I have told you my whole life? I do not think we can stay unstained unless we are in such a deep relationship with God through His Word that we actually understand how Holy He is. He is HOLY, HOLY, HOLY. He is a God of love and He wants us to help, share, take responsibility for, those people who are truly needy, but because He is holy, holy, holy. As we are in this world doing what He has called us to do, He wants us to not let the world put its mark on us. He wants us to influence the world, and we do that as a reflection of who He is. So here is what you have to buy into, here is what you have to be mindful of –– your life should reflect who God is in His holiness. What He said goes.

I cannot tell you how many times people come to me for advice and they accept my advice if it agrees with what they believe. If it does not agree with what they believe, many of them will reject my advice. You don’t do God that way. You come to Him through His Word and you accept what He says is true. You accept what He says is the standard of true holiness. Once you see what that true standard of holiness is, all other things are manure, grease, and oil. If you get too close to it, if you play with it, it is going to eventually get on you and you will try to brush it off. But as you try to brush it off, you will only brush it in, most likely. There is going to come a point where if you aren’t careful, once you get stained enough, you will actually start believing that is ok to do. Now you are stained. So, if we are going to accept that what James is saying is true, your relationship with God is now not pure and undefiled. You do not have the relationship with God that you really thought you had. So, we have to be mindful as we live in this world. We have to be careful as we live in this world. I know a lot of people who have been mindful, but they were not careful. They actually had the belief it could not happen to them. They actually believed they could get in certain situations, but they would never do what others had done. Next thing you know, they have done it too. So, hear me! Your relationship with God should cause you to be mindful and it should cause you to be careful.

**Living in the World without being of the World**

Can I just remind you of three principles that I think are still true? I think it is the key to how we can navigate living in this world and not be of this world. I want to give it to you very practically. You have heard me say this before. I could not think of anything more illustrative than what I have always said. I had a mother who, from time to time, would sit under my preaching, and back in the days when I wore suits just about every Sunday, there would be a couple times during the year where she would be with me on a tractor, a combine, or in a truck going with me to LBL. She would look over at me and say, “Ricky, why don’t you go up there to Corn-Austin and go get you a new suit.” I used to argue with Mom at first, but eventually I quit arguing with her and I would just go get a new suit. I would wear a brand-new suit to church and get to preach in a brand-new suit. I would call them my momma bought suit. You all could always tell when I had one, right? It was free to me, but it cost my mom and my dad.

Now, you guys know that I spend time on the farm, so I am constantly changing between work clothes and preacher clothes. I will never forget one morning when we still lived on Dexter Road. We had just sold our house and had moved to Red Bud Road. I still kept my cattle on that farm, so I went down to the farm one morning to feed and check on my cows. I had bulls and heifers on a little six-acre field. I had a barbed wire fence between them with electricity on both sides because bulls and heifers like to get together at a certain stage of their maturity. My papaw had given me a concrete waterer off of his original farm and I had it on my farm in the middle of those two fences so that the bulls and the heifers could both drink out of the same water. We had a really shallow well that did not have a lot of water pressure. So I would have to turn that water on and then I would go do what I needed to do, put out hay and check on the cows, then I would come back, turn the water off, and go about my day. This one morning, I did a rotation where I did everything on the farm I was supposed to do. I turned the water on and checked the cows; everything was good. I had a funeral at Collier Funeral Home in Benton that day so I left the farm, had my boots and jeans on, and did not think a thing about anything in that field on that day because anything in that field was going to look good on work boots and work jeans. I now go back to the house, take a quick shower, and put on one of my momma bought suits. I have my dress shoes on, I am in my truck and go past our house on Dexter Road toward Dexter, and I cross that first bridge. I will never forget this. I had a thought to hit me. Have you all ever had thoughts hit you? Here was the thought…*did I turn the water off?* I could not remember if I turned the water off or not! The problem was I didn’t own the property anymore, my cousin, Tony, owned it. We had a shallow well which meant if you let the water run for over an hour, it would suck the water out of the well. Then it would start sucking sand up into the pump and let’s just say it was not good. So, I look at my watch and I have just enough time to turn around and come back and check. I pulled into the driveway and guess what? I had not turned the water off. I quickly do the math and (this was before cellphones) nobody is home. The neighbors are not home and they are always at home. Here I am, I have to walk almost to the fence out at the road and I have to walk to that water and turn it off without getting what’s in that field on my momma bought suit and dress shoes. Why? It is because I am going to a funeral. I am not Ricky the farmer going to the field to check cows with my work clothes on; I am Ricky the preacher going to a funeral and I have a momma bought suit on. It just would not look good to do a funeral with what is in that field on me. Does everyone agree? Plus, I know Boone’s laundry does a great job laundering my suits, but I could not take a chance of getting something on that suit that might not come out; it was a momma bought suit. You guys know what I did, right? I was mindful of who I was, where I was going, and what I had on. I was Ricky the preacher going to a funeral and I had a momma bought suit on, but I have to get in this field without getting the field on me. I have to get to that water and turn it off and then I have to get back. Can I just say this? I did it! I did some high stepping, turned it off, and when I got back to the gate, I looked down and guess what? I had nothing on me! I get in my truck and I start heading to that funeral. When I got to that first bridge, I promise you, you will think I am crazy, but I sensed the Holy Spirit say to me…*that is how you live in the world and not of the world.*

**(1.)** *You remember who you are. You are a saint of God.* **(2.)** *You remember where you are going every day. You are going to Heaven and because you are going to Heaven,* **(3.)** *You remember what you are wearing. You are wearing a suit of salvation*.

I believe this with all of my heart, most of us, when we get stained, it is when we forget who we are, forget where we are really going, and forget that God has robed us in the righteousness of His Son. Therefore, we are not mindful and we are not careful. If I live conscious that I am a child of God, I am a saint of God, I have been set apart, my life is supposed to reveal his holiness –– and because I am His child, my home is ultimately Heaven and I am headed there, I want my life, my deeds, my behaviors, to reflect that I am a Heaven bound child of God, I can live in this world and not get this world on me. I can keep myself unstained, and you can too. I believe this! If we would just rise up and be who James and God wants us to be, instead of the world leaving its mark on us, we will leave our mark on the world.