

# Voices: Other qualities of pure, undefiled religion

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James 1:27 is a favorite verse of ours to point us to what a true “religious” life looks like—what a life that pleases God looks like. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.”



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This verse rightly has been used to spur the church on to care for the least of these around us. This call from James sums up nicely many of the commands and much of the ministry of Jesus. True religion, a life that pleases God, cares for those in great need.

We rightly have made this a litmus test for our own spiritual lives. Are we caring for the poor, for the widow, for the orphan? But that is not all James has to say about pure religion. He has two other requirements for a faith that is undefiled before God the Father that we conveniently ignore much of the time in talking about this passage.

## **Bridled tongue**

The first is found in verse 26. James tells us “if anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” A heart pure before God is a heart that bridles their tongue. Jesus tells us our words show our hearts (Luke 6:45) and, therefore, a tongue without self-control shows a heart in need of transformation.

James commands us in verse 19 of chapter 1 to be slow to speak and quick to listen. The overflow of a heart changed by Jesus is a humility marked by judicious words. We don’t have to say everything we think or feel.

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Social media has lied to us. The world doesn’t have to know what we are thinking every single moment of every single day. We don’t have to comment on everything going on around the world. We don’t have to be outraged at everything we are told to be outraged about.

We can be—we must be—slow to speak. We must bridle our tongues and try to speak the truth in love. We should speak words that build up the body of Christ, encourage, challenge and point others to the glory and grace of God. Our words matter, and being able to not have to say something about everything matters.

When we are slow to speak, we show a trust in God. We trust his righteousness and his redemption. All things will be redeemed and restored. This means we don’t have to fight every fight. This, of course, calls for discernment; sometimes we can and should keep quiet.

## **Holy heart**

The second requirement James gives at the end of verse 27 is “to keep

oneself unstained from the world.” A love for widows and orphans goes hand-in-hand with holiness. James doesn’t separate the two, and we shouldn’t either.

Pure religion—religion that pleases God—is marked not only by care for the least of these, but also by a heart pursuing holiness in all things. Pure religion obeys the commands of God, lives by the design of God and seeks the will of God.

Are we calling others to live of holiness alongside calling for caring for the widows and orphans? Depending on the tradition we grew up in or the personality and gifts we have been given, we tend to emphasize one or the other. Healthy religion finds a balance between these two and emphasizes both in our own lives and in the life of the church.

### **Spiritual danger**

There is spiritual danger in emphasizing care for the poor without holiness or holiness without care for the poor. A heart pursuing holiness, trying to keep oneself unstained from the world, will pursue justice and care for the widow and orphan. Keeping oneself unstained from the world means seeking to avoid the greed and vainglory of the world, seeking justice over our own power and seeking the good of others while pointing them to Jesus.

We can’t have the pure religion of James 1:27 without the bridled tongue of James 1:26 and without the second part of verse 27 calling us to keep ourselves unstained from the world.

True holiness is marked by humility with our words, care for the widow and orphan, and purity in seeking the glory of God and not the glory of the world.

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