

True and false religion

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev David Robertson

[0 : 00] Can we turn to the letter of James? James chapter 1 and we'll read verses 26 and 27.

James chapter 1 verse 26. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Anyone considers himself religious? This is the only time in the Bible that this word is used. Religion.

People speak about it. They say that so-and-so has gone religious. Or someone might say that religion has been the cause of a lot of trouble within the world.

[1 : 13] And because of that, there is a reluctance amongst some Christians, including myself, to say that I am religious.

Because when people think of religion, they think of rites and rituals. As someone has said, they think of bells and smells. They think of all the different religious rituals that people have.

They think of the Ayatollah hominis and all his followers. They think of the cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. They think of the fighting between Protestants and Catholics.

They think of Buddhists and Confucius and all the hundreds and thousands of different religions that there are in the world.

And some will say, well, you take your pick. Choose which one you want. You can choose Christianity if you like. But as for me, I am not really a religious sort of person.

[2 : 16] There are people who are religious and there are other people who are not. And I am not religious. Now that is the common understanding of the word religion. And that is why, in most instances, I would say that I am not a religious person.

But in the biblical sense of the word, as it is used here, I would hope that every Christian would be able to say that they were religion. Now what I want us to do is to look at the difference between false religion and true religion.

and how it is expressed. And we'll then as well see the differences in the meaning of the word.

False religion, first of all.

Verse 26 tells us that if anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

His religion is false. False religion. The first characteristic of false religion is this. It is unreal.

[3 : 25] It is not based on reality. And when people condemn religion in that way, they are quite right. Of course it is. A lot of religion is nonsense.

It is unreal. Who really believes, along with the Mormons, that each of us is going to inherit a planet of our own and be a mini-god on it?

Who really believes, along with different Hindu religions, that the world was carried on the shoulders of four elephants? Who really believes, that the cow is more sacred than other animals, and people should starve rather than touch beef?

Who really believes, there are so many ridiculous teachings that are taught in the name of religion. They are unreal.

Someone deceives themselves. Now, never minding what we would call the non-Christian religions. Let's talk about Christianity. How many people think that they are religious?

[4 : 36] If anyone considers himself religious, because they have an outward form of religion, they may come into this church, and see the building.

It is a religious building. There is a man who is supposed to be a minister, or a priest, or whatever. Someone called me this week a vicar, or whatever. And he is a religious person.

They like to set apart the religious part of their life. There is a religious book. It is never opened at home, but it is there. And people say, well, I am religious, because I am a free church. Well, I hardly ever go. Or when I do go, I do not bother listening. But I am still religious. Or they may go next door, and they may be in the Catholic chapel, and as they walk in, they may go through all the various rituals, much more of the bells and smells there.

They may go through all that, and they may say, I am a very religious person. I go to Mass as often as I can. Or they may go up the road, to the Church of Scotland, and they may go in there, and have a different form of ritual, instead of the psalms, hymns, different style perhaps.

[5 : 52] And people can sit there, and dress in their Sunday best, and they'll say, we are religious people. And if you go around Barora, you will discover that the majority of people will say, yes, I am Catholic, Church of Scotland, Free Church, or whatever.

And they will claim to be religious. But, says James, it is possible to consider yourself religious, and yet be deceived.

Deceive ourselves. Paul, writes to Timothy this way. He says, in the last days, there are going to come people, who profess, to be Christian.

But, and then he lists a whole load of things. And the important thing that he says is this, in 2 Timothy 3. He says, they have a form of godliness, but they deny its power.

Their religion is empty and worthless. It's like, in the Old Testament, I told about the prophet Elisha, how, he had a kind of context, between himself, and the priest, of a god called Baal.

[7 : 07] And Elisha said, let's find out who is the true god. And so they built two altars. The priest went first of all, 400 of them. And Elisha said, now, call down, your god, fire.

The god who answers by fire, he is god. So these 400 priests, they went dancing around, this altar. And they prayed, and they sang, to their god.

They went through all, the religious rituals. Elisha mocked him. Surely he is deaf. He can't be hearing you. You better shout louder. And in all their religious rituals, they cut themselves.

They were fanatical. They blend. They dance. They beat themselves. And nothing happened. The altar was there. The meat was on the altar.

Nothing happened. And Elisha mocked him even more. And then it came to his turn. And he set up his altar. And he poured water, gallons and gallons of water on it.

[8 : 13] And he bowed down before God. And he prayed to God, that God would hear his prayer, and would show that he was the true God. And not only did the flame come down from heaven, and fall on that altar, but also destroyed the 400 false priests, who were leading the people of Strania.

What was the difference? Was it a difference in style? Or a difference in ritual? The answer was, it was a difference in reality. These people were playing at religion.

They were inventing their own god, and inventing their own religion. Whereas the God of Elisha did exist. It was a matter of power. And false religion is always unreal.

It is always out with reality. My God, the God of the Bible, the God that we believe in, is a God of power.

A God of might. We're not playing games. We're not playing at ritual. We're not playing at being Christians. We are dealing with the living God.

[9 : 23] And if you are not aware of that, and if you do not know that God, then you are like the church in Revelation 3, verse 1, which had a reputation for being alive, but, said Christ, although you have this reputation, you are dead.

In Isaiah chapter 1, we read there about all the different religious rituals. The Sabbath festivals, the new moon festivals, the sacrifices, the blood of bulls and goats, all that, the many prayers.

But, it was unreal. The people did not know God, and the people were not really interested in coming near God. There was no reality about it.

And in our worship, we need to ask God to give us a sense of reality. That we should have a sense of awe in the presence of God.

Otherwise, people are right. It's a waste of time at being here. We're just playing at being religious. But we want it to be so real, and so alive, that when people come in, they can say what they like about us, but they can't walk out that door, and they can't say, oh well, God isn't among you.

[10 : 43] The ideal would be what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians, that the power of God would be so present in our church services, that when an unbeliever comes in, he will walk out and say, truly, God is among you.

It's real. We're not playing. And the first characteristic of false religion is that it is unreal. It's all outward ceremony.

It's all outward emotion. There is nothing in reality with it at all. And the other thing about false religion is that there is no self-control.

If anyone considers himself religious, and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, and what James is saying here is, look, your religion has to be real, but it also has to have fruit.

And he's saying, if you profess to be Christian, and yet at the same time, you allow your tongues to run away with you, and he elaborates this in chapter 3, if you allow your tongues to control and to dominate you, then of what use is your religion?

[11 : 56] You're deceiving yourself. Matthew 12, verse 24, we are told that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. And it's with the tongue that it is easiest to sin, to lie, to gossip, to flatter, to wound, to hurt.

how easy it is to find fault in others. It's something we don't have to work hard at. And what James is saying, he's not saying, if you've ever told a lie, then you can't be a Christian.

Or he's not saying that if you've had an outburst of temper and sworn, then you can't be a Christian. But what he's saying is, that our tongues express what we are.

So if someone is professing to be a Christian, yet they never speak about Christ, if they are professing to be a Christian, yet they continually gossip, flatter, lie, and hurt people, if they profess to be a Christian, that they never praise God with their tongues, then, says James, your religion is worthless because your tongue expresses what you are.

Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. And so, James is saying that in real Christianity, in real religion, there must be an element of self-control, of restraint.

[13 : 28] There is reality, and there is restraint. That's why we sang Psalm 141 in verse 3, Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord, keep watch over the door of my lips.

If anyone considers themselves themselves to be religious, if you consider yourself to be a Christian, then seek this, that you would have control over your own tongues.

Now, I don't want anyone to pick me up wrong. It is not saying, the Bible is not saying, that you have to be perfect in what you say, because James later on says, if anyone is perfect in what he says, or if anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man.

And there is none of us who are perfect. But what James is saying is that if we profess to be Christians and have no control whatsoever of our tongues, then there is something wrong.

We are deceiving ourselves, and our religion is worthless. False religion, then. It is something which is unreal. It is something which is unrestrained.

[14 : 36] And it is something which lacks results. It is worthless. He deceives himself and his religion is worthless. It is worthless, first of all, to us, to men and women, boys and girls.

Why am I not a Jehovah's Witness? Because it is not the truth of God, and because it is worthless. Why am I not a Muslim? Why am I not a Hindu?

Because all that is religion which is worthless. Of no use to man and of no use to God. Again in Isaiah 1 we read about how God regarded religion that was false.

And God said through Isaiah that he hated it. His soul hated it. There is one thing that God hates and it is false religion.

Why? Because of all things it leads people away from the truth and it leads people away from Jesus. People say you see that you should be tolerant.

[15 : 49] Now imagine that you were in a house which was burning and you're standing there and you're shouting to the occupants of that house come down these stairs and come out this door and you'll escape.

And someone else is standing beside you and they're shouting no go out that window jump out the window and you'll escape. And someone else is standing shouting no climb up onto the roof and maybe a helicopter will come.

Now would it be intolerant of you and unloving of you to say to others no if they jump out the window they're going to break their neck. They go out to the roof there's no helicopter coming. You're wrong. Come down the stairs. Of course it wouldn't be intolerant or unloving. And the same applies with true Christianity. We accept and the Bible accepts.

The Bible itself says about man-made religion that they are worthless that they are useless that they have no results whatsoever and we must never hide that.

[16 : 59] It's not said and in intolerant and in a bigoted way that we point people to Christ who is the way. Now there is one fundamental difference between biblical Christianity I'm not talking about all the different forms that there are but what the Bible teaches and all other forms of religion in every other form of religion man knowing that there is a God knowing that he has a spirit or a soul or a spiritual line seeks to reach that God sometimes he invents that God you and I could start a religion today we could get a name for it and we could start a cult if you had the right kind of personality you could do so man invents religion and that's why it's such a curse but in biblical Christianity instead of man reaching up to God God reaches down to us instead of us trying to invent

God or trying to make God or trying to discover God God speaks to us through his son Jesus God puts his hand down upon us God reveals himself to us and that is a fundamental difference so false religion it has no reality it has no restraint and it has no result whatsoever but the difference between that and true religion is to say the least incredible religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless as this to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world now somebody reading that and not reading the rest of the Bible might say well to be truly religious and to be a true

Christian I've got to go and look after orphans and widows and I I've got to avoid being polluted by the world whatever that means now that is true we always take the whole Bible and taking this in the context of the whole of James' letter and of the whole Bible it is not teaching that in order to become a Christian you've got to visit so many widows by the time you die or you've got to somehow keep yourself pure in other words it's not teaching that you become right with God by doing good what it is teaching is that when you are truly religious when you are a true Christian then these are the kind of things that you will do they're given as examples it's not meant to be an exhaustive list and indeed later on James goes on to explain them and he adds other things as well so what he's saying is false religion will show itself in this way it's unreal it lacks restraint it doesn't bring results that's how false religion shows itself but true religion will show itself for example by looking after orphans and widows by keeping yourself from being polluted by the world how do we first of all get that true religion well if true religion is God reaching down to us not us reaching up to God then we need to listen to what

God says and true religion as described in the Bible and as summed up by Jesus is this to do the work that God requires and the work that God requires is to believe in the one he has sent in other words true religion is not a law it's not a set of doctrines it's not a church true religion is ultimately a personal relationship between a person and God it's a relationship between you and Jesus to be truly religious is to have a living relationship with Jesus Christ and that is to be seen and expressed in different ways but without that first of all if you don't know the Lord and you don't love the Lord and you don't pray to the Lord and you don't know Jesus as a person then you have no true religion you can have all the outward forms but you will have no reality you will have no results at all so we obtain true religion by knowing Christ and those of us who are Christians we need to remember that over and over again we are dealing with a person we are following a person someone who was tempted in every way just as we are someone who understands us exactly we are not dealing with a force someone up there somewhere we are dealing with a person who knows us that means we can hurt and we can grieve a person that means we can love him that means we can serve him but we are

Christian followers of Jesus Christ not followers of any church not followers of any particular set of doctrine so the two are not opposed it is through the doctrines and the teachings of the Bible that we get to know Jesus this is the letter from Jesus to us which we understand about him but true religion is personal faith in Jesus Christ and it expresses itself in two ways and if we don't have these two ways then we can doubt our Christianity because salvation is by faith but it is by their fruit that you shall know them and as we will see in chapter two James says yes faith justifies faith makes us right with God but faith without works is dead if you say you've got faith and you don't show it by your works then again you deceive yourself two ways then that this is demonstrated first of all impractical helpfulness religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless as this to look after orphans and widows in their distress why these two why orphans and widows because throughout the Old

[23 : 55] Testament and the New God is concerned with the orphans and the widows Psalm 68 verse 5 a father to the fatherless a defender of widows Isaiah chapter 1 God condemned them not

just because of their false religion but because of the fact that they ignored the widows they didn't bring justice to the widows they ignored the orphans and what James is saying is this that true Christianity when a person becomes a Christian that will be expressed in practical helpfulness especially to those who are in positions of weakness widows and the orphans and he names others as well people who are facing different kinds of distress pressure of circumstances you see the husband had died there was no social security for them who was going to look after the children who was going to provide for them the husband wasn't there they had a tremendous pressure placed upon them and James tells us that God cares for the orphans and the widows and if we profess to be Christians then like father like son we have to have the image of

God stamped upon our life so if God cares about widows and orphans then we are to care about them as well and it's not just the widows and the orphans there are other people in our own society who face different problems because of pressure of circumstances there are people who are not widows and yet their husbands maybe have left them and that is a problem which God also cares about there are people who face all different kinds of social and emotional needs and God says if you're really a Christian you show it by caring for them all of us some people seem to think that it is the minister's job to visit the old and to visit the sick and that if the minister doesn't do it then they won't be satisfied with anyone else doing it that the minister has got to be some kind of ecclesiastical social worker and that's partly right it is the minister's responsibility as it is any other Christian to visit those who are in need and those who are in distress but it has not to be left to one man never it's impossible one man can't do it I could give you a list of widows in this village who would delight to see people and talk with people because they are lonely and they need someone to talk to one man can't do it all and the Lord says look you say you are Christian will demonstrate your Christianity by taking care of the widows and the orphans Galatians chapter 6 and verse 10 we are told that as we have opportunity let us do good to all people especially to those who belong to the family of believers our priority is with the Lord's people but it doesn't stop and end there we have responsibility to care for those who are out with the church to look after orphans and widows and to look after other groups of people who have social need now the

Bible never says go out and be a blanket a wet blanket for people to trump on and to use and abuse in fact the instructions that were given to the church about widows were very specific it said about the younger ones the church should not provide money for them they should go out and get married again that's what was taught to Timothy there were very clear instructions given but the principle still remained practical helpfulness for the people who are in need around us and that need still exists and if you and I are saying to the people in Brora look we believe in the Lord Jesus we've committed our life to follow him we are Christians then we need to present our religion as pure and hopeless by caring for people and then there's also this a true religion which is faith in Christ is demonstrated by practical helpfulness it's also demonstrated by this personal holiness to keep oneself from being polluted by the world what do we mean by the world we don't mean the actual physical sphere we mean the world of sinful rebellion the opposite of God's kingdom what is opposed to God verse 1st John 5 verse 19 the whole world is under the control of the evil one by the world we mean all that is opposed to God we have to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world you see some people want this kind of attitude in which they say we're Christians and we stick with Christians we have our Christian friends we have our Christian meetings we have if possible our Christian families we have our Christian books and our

[29 : 35] Christian music in fact we have a whole wee Christian world it's almost like living in a monastery but Jesus doesn't say to us that we are to withdraw from the world he says that we are not of the world we don't belong to it but we live in it we are strangers passing through it and what we have to do is get a balance between those people who want to shut themselves away at the top of a mountain and have nothing to do with the world and on the other hand those Christians who are so absorbed in the world that you can't tell the difference you can't say whether they're Christian or not because they are so worldly and to have wandered far far away from Christ we need the balance that's described in Romans chapter 12 and verse 2 do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but rather be transformed by the renewing of your mind so you and I as Christians those of us who trust the Lord we have to live with our friends may God prevent the day when Christians would despise their non-Christian friends and throw them away as if there were so much rubbish we need to live in the world with our families and our friends and our workmates the people we play with the people we go to entertainment with and so on we live with these people we

live in the world but we do not conform to the standards of those who are not

Christians we reject the standards and the promises of the world see the world promises this it says you'll have happiness and fulfilment and satisfaction the politicians they say follow our political aim and these you will get these things the advertisers they will come and they will tell you drink this and you'll be happy and fulfilled and satisfied you go and do a wee study for yourself and look at all the adverts what are they promising you you get a new car it takes your breath away and there you are you're living in contentment or maybe you try on a new kind of deodorant and suddenly everyone loves you they're all promising happiness fulfilment satisfaction and yet a few years ago for those of you who would remember that I suppose if you were an ageing hippie the Rolling Stones wrote a song which sums up the modern society with all that they had and with all that they chased after they still stood and said

I can't get no satisfaction I can't get any I've tried I've tried everything the song went on about driving in his car and listening to the radio and things that were promised to him but he couldn't get any satisfaction he tried all different avenues of pleasure to get satisfaction and he couldn't find it that's what the world promises but we as Christians have to reject the standards of the world reject the practices of the world reject the pressures of the world otherwise we'll become polluted by the world and it's very easy to get polluted by it now it's a dangerous life being a Christian being a biblical Christian because we can't shut ourselves away it's a very dangerous life and at the same time when we are in the world we're in danger of being polluted so we need to be on our guard to keep ourselves from that personal holiness practical religion will be shown real religion will be shown by practical helpfulness and personal holiness and can I say that the only way to live in the world and to keep from being polluted by it is this to give attention to

God's word John 17 verse 17 Jesus said sanctify them by your truth your word is truth make them holy keep them from being polluted by the world through your truth through God's truth that we are kept from being polluted Peter tells us that it's through God's very great and precious promises that we have in the Bible that we can escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires keep ourselves from being polluted pay attention to the word live godly life cling to God in prayer and then the people will surely see because of the love and the practical helpfulness of the Christians because of the fact that Christians don't shut themselves off from the world but live in it and yet refuse to go along with it because of the personal holiness people will say well the God who is answered by fire he is God because I've seen him change people's lives but without turning them into zombies they've not run away to some kind of commune they've turned religious yet we see them they're the same people they're doing the same work they're living in the same community they're going to the same shop and yet there's something different there's something happened and when people see that then they will see the God who answers by fire he is

God now let me conclude with this when you're a Christian and you're a Bible believing Christian people will sometimes say are you not a wee bit fanatical are you not going over the top a wee bit too much don't go in it too deep or you know what happens to you I like my religion in small doses come to church maybe once on a Sunday maybe once in a blue moon oh I'm religious I believe in God I believe in God and I think the Bible is a good book and I like the church and support the church I never want the church to go away but to take it that seriously to turn really religious like one of the holy ones that's a bit much well you know the Bible says a very straightforward thing and it's really what James is saying here he's saying that you don't be deceived don't be deceived because there is no place for moderation in

[36 : 33] Christianity in terms of religion in other words there's no place for being lukewarm there's no place for sitting on the fence you are either for Christ or you are against him there is no place for the person who says well I like the church and I like the Bible and I like a little bit of religion doesn't do any harm in small doses that is not an option for anybody according to the Bible indeed Jesus saved his strongest words for such people he says this writing to a church he says you're neither hot nor cold you don't love me and you don't hate me you are lukewarm and he says therefore I will spew you out of my mouth and if you were to paraphrase that into modern language what Jesus says is you neither love me or hate me you're not for me nor against me you're pretending you're trying to sit on the fence you're being religious but without the essence of religion therefore you make me sick and that is what Jesus says and those are very very strong words false religion is something which God hates pretend religion trying to be a little bit religious is something which sickens

Jesus Christ and we have to decide whether it is going to be him or nothing it's going to be all or nothing you see in presenting that picture of Jesus it may seem as though he comes across as a very harsh and a hard person but you know the only reason Jesus says that to you is because he loves you and because he doesn't want you to have past measures because he wants you to have everything he doesn't want you to have this empty meaningless ritual that people say is Christianity he wants you to have life he doesn't want the buildings and the ornate ceremonies and all the fancy religious talk he wants people to have life and to have himself and anything else is a sham and a waste of time and it's because he loves you that he says this to you why settle for something which is anything less true religion and false religion may God grant that we would be those who would say yes

I want to follow Jesus Christ I want to learn as part of that to control my tongue to visit the orphans and the widows and to keep myself from being polluted by the world I want to be a real Christian may the Lord enable us to say that and let's just remain seated and bow our heads in prayer Lord Jesus Christ you are the one who came into the world who lived a life of poverty who died the death of the wicked so that we might live and we thank you our God that it is not according to a set of rules and regulations that we live but according to our faith in you we thank you Lord

Jesus that you stand before each one of us and you call out to us come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest we thank you that you give us the right to become the children of God we thank you Lord that you say to us I am the way the truth and the life no one who comes to me will be cast out and we pray Lord that every one of us would be able to come to you and to say that we bring nothing in our hands nothing of our own goodness but we just cling to you your goodness your life and your work on the cross and we pray Lord that you would help those of us who do know you to put our religion into practice to visit the orphans and the widows to care for those who suffer to control our tongues and to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world we live in grant our

God that we would be salt and light in this world and not become absorbed by it bless us bless all your people and add to their number this day for we ask in your name amen