

ARE CHRISTIANS RELIGIOUS?

JAMES 1 v 26-27

Do any of you think you are religious? If you do not control your tongue, your religion is worthless. And you deceive yourself. What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.

Two of my least favourite words in the English dictionary are the words 'religion' and 'religious'. I try very hard not to use them. You might think this rather strange coming from an ordained minister of the church. A title that is sometimes used to describe my job is 'Minister of Religion'. When people see my clerical collar, they think of me as a 'religious person'. The perception is that I officially represent religion in the community. One reason for my strong dislike of the words, 'religion' and 'religious', is that both words have been completely misunderstood and therefore are used incorrectly. In Australia, far more than in Ireland and the United Kingdom, where I used to live, people have a habit of making a distinction between various categories of Christians within the broad base of Christianity. They talk about the Presbyterian religion, the Anglican religion or the Catholic religion as if each is an independent religion. Another reason for my dislike of the words, 'religion' and 'religious' is that both words convey to me something that is cold, aloof and mechanical. Religion is something people practice out of a sense of dogged duty. Religious people are very committed to a particular set of beliefs and rituals.

I much prefer to talk about Christianity or faith. Both these words come across as warm, inviting and embracing. I regard myself as a Christian minister. I don't preach religion; I preach Christianity. I don't want to be considered as religious. I want to be considered as Christian. I am uncomfortable having to write the title 'Minister of Religion' on a passport application form or on a Notice of Intended Marriage document. You can imagine my disappointment and frustration when I discovered that both the words 'religion' and 'religious' that I don't like, appear in the bible. I have been so critical of these words throughout my ministry, and used them so infrequently, that I find it difficult to come to terms with their inclusion in the bible. The words appear in James 1 v 26 & 27. There are times when I wish James had not used these words. If only he had used the words 'Christian' and 'Christianity' it would have made my life a lot easier. I could then say that the words 'religion' and 'religious', don't appear in the bible. However, I have to eat humble pie and accept that both words are biblical, even if they appear very little in the bible.

The word 'religion' captures well the meaning of the Greek noun 'threskeia' and the rare Greek adjective 'threskos'. The term is not specifically Christian and is used widely in Greek religion to denote the reverencing and worshipping of a god or gods. It often connotes outward acts of worship. James suggests that the true test of a person's religious profession is not the outward ritual of worship, which many people go through unthinkingly and with little heart commitment. For James the real litmus test of a person's

religion is obedience, as we discovered in our last study. Without it the practice of religion is vain. In other words, it is empty, useless and profitless.

It is important to note that James is not attempting here to summarise all that true worship of God should involve. John Calvin said; **“James does not define generally what religion is, but reminds us that religion without the things he mentions is nothing”**. Religious ritual, if done from a reverent heart and in a worshipful spirit, is not wrong. But God’s word cannot be ‘done’ unless it is first ‘heard’. James is concerned about an over-emphasis on the ‘hearing’ to the neglect of the ‘doing’. He selects three areas of life that are to reveal evidence of our reverent listening to the word.

Firstly, control of the tongue; v 26. James develops this topic in more depth later on in his letter and we will return to it in a later study. Suffice to say at this point that if people fail to control their tongues, they deceive their hearts about the reality of their religion. They are mere ‘hearers’ of the word, and by failing to put what they hear into practice, they show that their religion is vain.

Secondly, social concern; v 27a. Care for orphans and widows is commanded in the Old Testament as a way of imitating God’s concern for them; Psalm 68 v 5a *“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows”*. The orphan and the widow are types of those who find themselves helpless in the world. Christians whose religion is pure will imitate their Father by intervening to help the helpless. There are millions of people in the Third World who are in great need. There are many in our Australian cities who are unemployed, homeless, poor and struggling to survive. There are many in our society who are inadequately represented in government or in law. These are people who, when they meet us Christians, should see abundant evidence of ‘pure religion’.

Thirdly, moral purity; v 27b. Christians must keep themselves unstained from the world. This means that they avoid thinking and acting in accordance with the value-system of the society around them. Our modern society reflects beliefs and practices that are un-Christian and also anti-Christian. We must ensure that the taint of that value-system doesn’t rub off on us.

Well, I may not like it, but I have to accept the fact that Christianity is a religion. According to James Christians are religious people. The question is, ‘Do we practice it?’