

Both Sound *and* Sight

Bringing Faith Down to Earth—Part 6

James 1:26-27a

Introduction

There's something wrong with the cable box in my house. It's unpredictable. I wanted to watch Monday night football the other week—assuming no one called me from church and needed my help—no one did, but it didn't matter.

All I could get was sound—the television screen would never kick on . . . it just stayed dark and lifeless.

I tried everything . . . I hit the menu button that told me what channel the game was on, and the menu would even come up, but when I pushed the button to get to that channel, nothing happened.

It was really getting frustrating . . . I've got a fairly inexpensive cable plan that still gives me more channels than I want, but at the moment, it wasn't giving me what I wanted—what I really needed . . . I tried everything. I pushed a few more buttons, but all it did was push mine—you know what I mean? Do you ever talk to your television? As if it can respond to you saying, "Oh, come on!"

It must have been listening because the sound cut off—the television was on, but there was no sound nor was there any picture.

I turned it off, rebooted . . . then I got the sound back on, but nothing came on the screen to see—just sound.

I didn't want to *listen* to a football game—I have a radio for that. I wanted to *see* it.

The truth is, if I could have gotten a picture up on the screen, I wouldn't have minded watching it, even if I couldn't hear it. But I didn't want to hear something I couldn't watch.

So I finally turned it off . . . and asked God to judge it.

Then this week I'm studying James and one commentator actually began his chapter of study on the verses we're going to look at today with these words, "To get the maximum enjoyment from your television, you need two things—sound and picture." He missed a football game too!

He went on, "[Sight] without [pictures] just doesn't work. It's not enough to see the picture with no sound or to hear something but have no picture. Television was designed to deliver both sound and picture.

I thought—this is such great theology . . . this man understands my life!

Then he made the application, "The Christian life is a lot like television. It's not enough for people just to hear what we say—they need to see a picture too. Our Christianity must deliver both sound and picture [as we put our faith into action]."¹ So true!

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Book of James understands that the cable box of our heart which has received the data of God's truth has daily problems transmitting that data to the screen of our lives where people can watch an episode of godly Christianity.

Maybe you've wondered if there are some ways that your Christianity could be seen as so radically different from the everybody else, that they couldn't help but know there was something different about you.

James will answer that question in this paragraph at the end of chapter 1.

Remember, James is writing this letter to believers, and he's about to deliver three ways

Christians can live out their faith in ways remarkably different from the world.

He's going to challenge the believer in three ways: with respect to our conversation, our compassion and our character, and as usual, James does not hold back . . . and so you need to hold on.

1. Our Conversation with Others

James chapter 1 at verse 26; If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.

Twice in this verse James refers to religion. The original word is rarely found in the New Testament. It's a word that denoted in secular culture to an individual who stood in awe of the gods—who literally trembled in their presence. It came to refer to careful observance of religious exercises.ⁱⁱ

So James is referring to the first century Jewish Christians who were careful to pray and fast and attend the synagogue for worship services and give of their resources in the early church.

He is not referring to spiritual slouches—he's referring to people who chair the committees and serve as key volunteers—these are the people who show up early and leave late, but everybody in the assembly knows they've got a problem. Their tongue is unbridled. It's literally a runaway horse. Their Christianity is being overshadowed by their conversation.

Now for the second time in this chapter, James warns the believer about being deceived. In **verse 22** he wrote of the believer who looks into the word but doesn't do anything about it—James calls him an auditor who is deceived—literally that is, they are cheating themselves out of spiritual growth because they choose to audit the course rather than do the homework.

Now just a few verses later—here in **verse 26**—James refers to a believer again who is deceived—the word he uses in this verse refers to someone who is seduced into believing error.

In other words, here's the Christian who is doing all the right things and attending the services and fasting and praying and giving and yet at the same time he is being deceived into thinking that all those external acts are all that's necessary for spiritual maturity to take place . . . never mind the runaway tongue.

And the verb tense for bridling the tongue and deceiving your own heart are in the present tense, indicating that this will be a daily ongoing struggle.ⁱⁱⁱ

- Just like temptation—in verses 12-18—it's daily;
- Just like a willingness to be tutored by divine truth—verses 19-21;
- And before that—just like the daily struggle for wisdom to handle trials and choose to respond with trust.
- Now here—in relation to the tongue. This is a daily battle.

He goes on to say that if you decide you're not going to accept the bridle; so to speak, your maturity will be shortchanged.

I remember being at a home years ago where some friends of mine had some horses, and we were going to ride them. Problem was, they were out in the pasture and as we walked out there toward them they saw us coming with bridles in our hands and had absolutely no desire to be ridden that afternoon. We tried everything . . . not one of them let us get near enough to slip a bridle over their heads and into their mouths.

You want to grow up? Are you running from the bridle? Or are you daily surrendering to the Spirit's control—and confessing when you do not, and surrendering again and again and again. This is daily!

James ends by saying of the one who won't bridle his galloping tongue —***this man's religion is worthless***. He doesn't say that this man's religion doesn't exist—or that he really isn't a Christian. He's not only a Christian, he's a devoted, active, busy Christian, but his religion is worthless. The word for worthless—or vain—is the Greek word, *mataios* (ματαιος) which means—non-productive.^{iv}

Which fits again the context of James' call to spiritual maturity; external religious activity does not automatically produce internal spiritual maturity.

You can come to every service—you can never miss a prayer meeting or a morning's devotion and give every time the offering plate shows up—and never grow an inch—which can be measured instead by the quality of your conversation.

Once while John Wesley was preaching—he was the founder of evangelical Methodism in the 1700’s, he noticed a lady in the audience who was known for her critical attitude and unkind spirit was sitting on the front row and all through the sermon she sat there and stared at Wesley’s new bowtie. When the meeting was over, she came right up to him and said, “Mr. Wesley, the strings on your bow tie are much too long. It’s offensive to me!” He asked if any of the ladies present happened to have a pair of scissors with them, and one of them did. When the scissors were handed to him, he gave them to her and asked her to trim the streamers to her liking. After she clipped them off near the collar, he said, “Are you sure they are all right now?” “Yes,” she said, “that’s much better now.” Wesley said, “Then let me have those scissors for a moment. I must tell you, Madam, your tongue is offensive to me—it’s too long! Let me take some of it off.” She got the point.

If you want to measure the depth of your spiritual maturity, measure the length of your tongue.

Now at this point, I could just lay into all sorts of uses of the tongue and all the different ways the tongue can destroy and deceive and discourage and we can all crawl out of here and go cry in our soup, but James never tells us how the unbridled tongue is at work or what it says. He leaves it blank.

Later on at chapter 3, James will deal with our tongue in detail, so don’t worry, it’s coming, and he won’t leave any blanks. It will be very convicting to all of us—because all of us have the same problem—the bridle keeps slipping off.

James has something more in mind with the tongue here in this context.

First, there’s something else we can miss here in this paragraph if we aren’t careful. It’s possible to come to the conclusion of reading *verse 26* that religious activity doesn’t matter to God. That’s not what James said.

In fact, James is about to introduce us to religious activity that is considered to be pure and undefiled—visiting orphans and widows in their distress, right?

I think a better understanding *verse 26* is when you view it as a contrast to *verse 27*.

In other words, religious activity that serves you is wasted. Religious activity that promotes yourself—religion that runs its mouth about yourself—that honors yourself—that brags on

yourself—that focuses on your own rights and your own needs—James says, that kind of religious activity—accompanied by that kind of unbridled speech is a waste of time.

On the other hand—*verse 27*—religious activity that God views as productive and mature is when you use your tongue and your hands and your minds and your feet to defend the rights of someone else; to honor someone else; to promote the good of somebody else.

2. Our Concern for Others

Who might that be, James?

Notice *verse 27*. ***Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father . . .*** make note of this—not necessarily in the sight of man. Mankind might not care about orphans or widows and purity of character, but God does.

27. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Keep in mind, James is not telling people that if they want to get into heaven they have to visit orphans and widows and lead a clean life.

He’s not talking to people who need to *be* saved, but to people who already *are*.

James is saying that we need to measure our maturity in light of these things; in other words, if you’re growing in Christ, your Christianity will radically impact not only your conversation with others but your compassion toward others.

By the way, notice that unique description of God in *verse 27* where James says, ***Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father . . .***

God and Father—two singular nouns separated by the word *kai* or ‘and’ is a grammatical construction whereby James is describing the first noun by the second noun. He is describing God as a Father.^{vi}

You could render it, “God who is a Father”; which is precious in this context, since James is introducing widows and orphans—those who are fatherless . . . literally those who are destitute and defenseless.

God happens to have a father’s heart—David wrote, ***“A father of the fatherless and a judge of the widows, is God in His holy habitation. (Psalm 68:5).***

James is effectively saying that if you want to pursue Christian activity that really impresses God and reveals you are growing up into His likeness you also will demonstrate fatherly care and compassion on orphans and widows.

Now, these aren't the only two classes of society that needed compassionate ministry. In the first century there were no life insurance programs or welfare programs.

If history is properly understood, the fact is irrefutable that Christianity established hospitals and founded orphanages and started rescue missions and built almshouses for the poor and opened kitchens for the hungry; it was the Christian who chartered societies for the poor and homeless, who built infirmaries for the mentally handicapped and the physically disabled and the elderly; it was the Christian who changed laws to free the slave and protect the child from cruel labor and on and on and on.

Listen, Western civilization didn't create Christianity; Christianity created Western civilization with its values and freedoms.

Three hundred years before the birth of Christ, Plato said that a poor man who was no longer able to work because of sickness should be left to die. One hundred fifty years later, the Roman philosopher Plautus argued that to feed a beggar was doing a disservice to yourself for giving it away and the beggar whose life you merely prolonged for more misery.

When the city of Alexandria was hit by a plague, the Romans fled from the contagious disease but the Christians remained, risking their lives. Julian the Apostate, the Roman Emperor who called Christians Galileans as a way to scorn them for their belief in Christ, of Galilee complained, "These impious Galileans relieve both their own poor and ours." ^{vii}

To put it simply, the nation that embraces Christianity embraces the value of human life and the nation that refuses Christianity devalues human life and the results are tragic.

Christianity introduced the stunning concept that life mattered and every single person does, too, and no matter what condition they are in and how old they are.

Medical historians admit, and I quote one of them who wrote, "Before the birth of Christ the spirit toward sickness and misfortune was not one of compassion, and the credit of ministering to

human suffering on an extended scale belongs to Christianity." ^{viii}

This wasn't unique to Rome. Travel around the world during the time of Christ. The Japanese priests, for instance, maintained that the sick and needy were odious to the gods, and prevented the wealthy from helping them."

In India—to this day—the lower needy classes are merely reincarnated people who lived in their previous life in such a sinful way so as to deserve their current suffering.

Christianity has the wonderful effect of raising the value of human life.

James is living in a pre-Christian period of time—and the church has been birthed in a culture where the value of human life was at an all time low.

Abortion and infanticide were universally acceptable. Seneca, the Roman historian who died around the same time James was writing this letter, wrote, "We drown children who at birth are weakly and physically impaired."

Infanticide—that is, the killing of children after birth, was so common that one historian blamed the population decline of Greece upon that practice. Infant girls were especially vulnerable simply because they would not be able to care for the parents or carry on the family property through inheritance. In Greece it was rare for even a wealthy family to raise more than one daughter. One inscription at Delphi recorded the results of a second century sampling of 600 families and found that only 1% of these families—6 of them—had raised more than one daughter. ^{ix}

The girls would be left out on the porches where at night they would be carried away by wild animals or brothel owners to be raised as prostitutes or slaves.

So the 1st century church began going around at night collecting and raising these children. Why? There was value to every human life because life is the creation of God . . . and God has a Father's heart.

That's the gospel—God is saying through His servant James, "Are you helping those who cannot pay you back? Because that's what I did for you! And trust Me, you will never be able to pay me back!" ^x

We do what we do, not to repay God—which we can't; we do it to imitate God—which we can.

That kind of religion is pure—why—because it demonstrates the grace of the gospel. That’s what our heavenly Father did for us—when we were sinners and could do nothing for God, He loved us and chose us for His own. Jesus Christ became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. God wants His children to act like their Father!^{xi}

Paul wrote to the Colossians, ***Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion (Colossians 3:12).***

James specifically mentions visiting orphans and widows. By the way, the word “visit” is profound. It is used of God visiting His people in order to help, strengthen and encourage them.

Jesus used the same word when He said, ***“I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited Me in; naked and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me (same word); I was in prison and you came to Me (Matthew 25:35-36)***

Nowhere is this compassion seen more clearly than when the believer serves someone who cannot serve them in return—like taking care of an orphan or a widow.

Life expectancy during the days of Christ and for centuries afterward was only about 30 years. Which meant parents often died, leaving children parentless and often penniless.

Justin Martyr was a pastor for 50 years after the Book of James was written spoke of offerings collected in the church services for orphans. Orphans were taken off the streets and reared in believers’ homes.

When Christianity was legalized in the Western world, in A.D. 313, Christians cared for many orphans in organized orphanotrophias—or early orphanages.

They didn’t simply warehouse children, but lovingly cared for them, providing an education and training in some craft or discipline.

Throughout the centuries it has been the church and the Christian home that has primarily engaged in caring for abandoned children.

By the time George Muller died, his ministry of caring for orphan girls had spread to other British cities. At the time of his death in 1898, more than 8,000 children were currently under the care of his orphanages and ministry.

In America, an American pastor founded the Children’s Aid Society where he put into practice the belief that children needed a home. To accomplish this objective, hundreds of homeless children were placed on trains, called “orphan trains” and sent to families in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey and the Midwestern states to be raised by willing farm families. Before they left on their train ride to their home they were taught The Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, some Psalms, and some parables of Jesus and other portions of the Bible.^{xii}

It was an incredible success and by the time the movement ended in the early 1920’s, around 200,000 orphans had found homes.

The Orphan Train ministry became the founding concept behind the modern day Foster Care system.

Ladies and Gentleman, the practice of compassion . . . and in this particular way, building and staffing orphanages and even personally adopting children has been the unique activity of the believer for centuries.

Why? Because the church accepted a letter from James who challenged them, that if you wanted to demonstrate the gospel in a tangible, real, way—take a child without a home and give him one. Take a child without a father and provide him with one. Take a child without hope and give him grace.

I can tell you, our own church staff and office staff have within its number adopted children, who now serve Christ with their lives.

We have numerous people in our church who serve as foster parents; families who’ve adopted children—some stateside, many more internationally.

It is a profound demonstration of the gospel—a child without a family is chosen to belong to the family of another out of love and grace put into action.

It is the sharing of life with those in spite of the fact that they will never be able to pay you back in kind, but you will be paid! James calls the visitation—the care—of orphans a pure and undefiled religion—a reflection of God who is a Father. You will be rewarded when you stand before Him.

In whatever manner you show compassion—to orphans, to widows, to prisoners, to the poor, the sick, the handicapped, the homeless . . . you have chosen to do what James and Paul and

other Biblical authors exhorted us to do—showing compassion to those in need.

I learned in my study of one payback that came unexpectedly. When believers in Holland learned that the Nazi troops were systematically raiding the orphanages and taking Jewish children out, and then sending them to their deaths in the concentration camps of Europe, brave Dutch men would impersonate SS officers at the risk of their own lives, raid the orphanages, and take the Jewish babies and children to safe houses where they would be sent to homes for care and protection. One such safe house was the ten Boom house, where Corrie ten Boom was raised and her nephew, Peter ten Boom would also play a role. When their safe house was discovered, all of them were sent to concentration camps. Peter ten Boom, a nephew would survive and go on to become an evangelist. As an older man, Peter was in Israel speaking, he had a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. Surgery was going to be needed to save his life. Just prior to surgery, the cardiologist was talking with Peter and asked him, “I see your last name is ten Boom. Are you by any chance related to the ten Booms of Holland that sheltered Jews?” Peter said “Yes, that was my family.” The doctor replied with tears in his eyes, “I am one of the babies your family saved. And now it is my turn to help save your life.” The surgery was successful.

James mentions not only caring for orphans, but for widows as well. The Old Testament had long made provision for widows by calling the farmers to sow the corners of their fields but to leave them to be reaped by the needy. In fact, if grain were to slip out of the hands of the workers threshing the fields, they were commanded to leave the sheaves on the ground for the widows who would come along and pick it up and thus survive.

One wealthy farmer chose to obey those Old Testament laws, even though he was living in a day *when everyone was doing that which was right in his own eyes. (Judges 17:6)*

This farmer obeyed and ended up being rewarded by finding his bride among the poor widows—a widow named Ruth, whom Boaz, the farmer took to be his bride.

In the days of the early church, Tertullian, a church leader recorded about 100 years after James wrote this letter that offerings were being taken once a month to support widows.

The first church on the planet—in Jerusalem—had its first organizational meeting

recorded in Acts chapter 6—which would be the commissioning of deacons and their first mission was to evenly and fairly distribute the resources of the church to the widows. James was a part of this meeting, no doubt, and he would become the pastor/teacher of this church.

Go around the world and you will discover that the value of a widow is greatly diminished outside of Christianity.

In India, when a woman’s husband died, she, as a good and faithful wife was expected to voluntarily mount her husband’s funeral pyre and be burned alive along with the body of her husband. If she refused, she was often put there by force, even by her sons. If she somehow eluded this religious practice, she was forced to shave her head, thus becoming unattractive to future, potential husbands; she was allowed only one meal a day and was never allowed around a pregnant woman because her glance might bring a curse.^{xiii}

India isn’t alone—Scandinavia, among the Chinese, in Finland, in New Zealand, and among the Native American Indians, the practice of suttee—widow burning—was practiced. It isn’t over either in nations that refuse the gospel.

Time magazine carried the story in 1987 of an 18 year-old widow who voluntarily mounted the pyre; then holding her husband’s head in her lap, asked for the pyre to be ignited. The article revealed that a throng of cheering women supported her act. After she was virtually cremated, thousands of women came to receive “blessings” from this dead widow, believing that she was now a goddess. They had bought into the Hindu saying, “If her husband is happy, she should be happy; if he is sad, she should be sad; and if he is dead, she should also die.”^{xiv}

The gospel delivers a different message, doesn’t it? There is a future and hope for everyone—widows included.

The death of a husband is not the death of hope—because it is not the death of God.

And because of our maturing walk with God, we are challenged to demonstrate the differences of Christianity—in our conversation . . . in our compassion . . . and finally, in our

3. Our Character Before Others

James ends *verse 27 by writing, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

What does he mean? The word translated “world” is a word that refers to the world system—the world’s way of thinking. It’s a word that most often is used in the New Testament to represent fallen mankind in general and their ungodly morals and values.^{xv} Keep yourself unstained!

You might immediately think—that’s impossible. And you’re right . . . the world rubs off on us. The verb tense is present—which again means there is regular, daily attention to the spots that get on our spiritual clothing.

That’s why you need to take your heart and mind regularly to the divine dry cleaning system . . . repentance and confession works wonders.

One author wrote, “I know a Cleaner who can take care of the worst possible stains you will ever have. God specializes in stain removal.”^{xvi} Amen?

I don’t think James is talking about just any kind of stain. I believe James is thinking specifically within the context of this paragraph. It’s easy for us to become stained with the value system of our world.

- That life doesn’t matter;
- Poor people are probably getting what they deserve;
- Orphans aren’t your concern;
- Widows aren’t your responsibility;

- You serve only those who can pay you back.

So how do we keep ourselves clean? How do we keep our religion pure? How do we keep our tongues in place?

1. We refuse to defend the slightest infraction of an unbridled tongue.
2. We refuse to ignore the needs of others who cannot pay us back.
3. We refuse to accept the value system of a world that rejects the authority of our Creator God.

In other words, we choose to demonstrate the gospel of grace—humility with our tongues; compassion with our resources; purity with our lives.

If our lives were televisions, we’d want the world to be able to watch us and hear us—both sight and sound—hearing and seeing a demonstration of the gospel that has radically impacted everything about us—our conversation . . . our compassion . . . and our character.

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ⁱ Tony Evans, The Perfect Christian (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 51

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 726

ⁱⁱⁱ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 93

^{iv} Ibid

^v R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith That Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 81

^{vi} Ibid, p. 94

^{vii} Alvin J. Schmidt, How Christianity Changed the World (Zondervan, 2001), p. 128

^{viii} Ibid, p. 131

^{ix} Ibid, p. 49

^x Evans, p. 59

^{xi} Evans, p. 57

^{xii} Ibid, 134

^{xiii} Ibid, 116

^{xiv} Ibid, p. 117

^{xv} John MacArthur, James (Moody Press, 1998), p. 92

^{xvi} Evans, p. 64