

I never start my messages like this, but since Brother Tim cannot be here, I'm going to start off with a joke, one that sounds like how he would tell it.

A priest, a Baptist Preacher and a Jewish Rabbi were at the bar debating over which of their religions was best. The priest suggested a competition. He said that the best way to figure out whose religion was best was to see who could convert an atheist to his own religion. "No that's too easy," said the Rabbi. Suddenly, a bear walked by and the Baptist preacher said, "the true religious man would be able to convert this bear." So, one at a time, each religious head tried to convert the Bear to their respective religions. A few weeks later, they met up at the bar and the Baptist preacher, with a few missing fingers, said, "Maybe I shouldn't have tried to baptize the bear." The priest, who had two broken arms, said, "Maybe I shouldn't have tried to put the bear in the confessional." The priest and the pastor turn to look at the rabbi, who is in a full body cast, and the rabbi says, "You know what, looking back, maybe I shouldn't have started with a circumcision."

Now, the joke kind of has an actual intended purpose. What religion we follow matters.

"A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing." -Martin Luther

Read **James 1:26-2:13**

Signs of true, acceptable religion

- I don't have a problem saying I believe in religion. Religion is what differentiates one way from another way. It sets up parameters of belief, ones that when I say I follow the religion of Christianity, I believe in what that religion states. *God created all things. Jesus, who is God, took on human flesh. He died a sacrificial death. He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. He's coming back again and making all things new for all eternity.*
- I believe in that religion.
 - Now, believing that religion and following that religion are two different things.
 - The people who say I don't follow religion, I have a relationship, they are trying to say this...even though they do follow a religion.
 - What they're saying is, it takes more than intellectually believing a set structure of ideas. What matters is living out those ideas.
- This is what James says in this book. Real faith is one that follows. It has action.
 - But it's real faith in what? In the religion of Christianity.

(James gives us, in the passage we are studying today, some signs or marks of what is acceptable religion. What are some things you will see if someone is really and truly following this Christian religion? What will it look like if someone has "Real Faith?" You will see that there are outward marks and there are inward marks.)

Outward Marks of True Religion

- **Controlled speech (1:26)**
 - **When you speak, you tell the truth about your heart.**
 - **Matt. 12:34** - *You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*
 - **Matt. 15:18** - *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.*
 - **Luke 6:45** - *The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*
 - The way we use our words shows what's at the center of our universe
 - The way I talk or don't talk to my wife - The way I treat my kids – often shows that I am at the center of my universe
 - Gossip, Slander, Cursing, Making fun, rude, or just consumed with trivial things

- What you talk about and how you talk shows what's at the center of your universe
- Also, what we don't talk about shows what's not at the center of our universe.
 - I don't have hour long conversations about barbies. (*I will hold them for my daughter though.*)
 - I don't talk to anyone on the street about this cool new mathematical equation I came across. (*Math is dumb.*)
 - What does it show about our heart when we never speak of God? The things of God? What we're learning about God? How good and faithful God has been?
- God should be at the center of our universe.
 - The number one commandment is to love the Lord with your everything. (Matt. 22:37)
 - How you use your words is one of the greatest indicators of the state of how "real" your faith is.
- The tongue is the test of true religion.
 - Do you talk about the things of God or do you talk about others?
 - Are you quicker to cuss and complain than you are to encourage?
 - Do you talk about yourself more than you talk about what God is doing?
 - Do you talk about other things/anything more than you even think about God?
- These are good indicators of where your "real" faith lies.
- **Sacrificial care for others (1:27-2:9)**
 - The second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt. 22:39)
 - James tells us that we are to "look after" orphans and widows.
 - That word literally means to "seek out someone" or to "visit" them, and the implication is that you go to them in order to care for them.
 - **Christians should be selfless for the sake of the helpless.**
 - I find it fitting that this is the passage God led us to today and it happens to be Right to Life Sunday. What is more helpless than a preborn baby? Yet they are and have been systematically killed since roe v. wade in 1973. More than 62 million babies have been aborted since roe v. wade.
 - Christians are known for their stance against abortion, and rightly so. But, one thing that Christians are spoken out against from others is that they only care about preborn lives and not all lives, not the mother who keeps the baby, and more.
 - I love what the president of our denomination, J.D. Greear said on Twitter this week about that:

Sometimes I hear people say, "All you Christians care about is the preborn!" Don't believe it. Since 1973, for every 1 abortion clinic in America Christians have built 3 pregnancy centers to assist women in crisis. They are buying groceries and helping them get housing and whatever else. Go into foster services and adoption agencies and there you will find the group represented most are pro-life Christians and their friends. Christians have built more hospitals around the world than any other single group—for a long time in sub-Saharan Africa there was not a single hospital that hadn't been built by a Christian mission. Our church has more than 10 ministries to mothers and families in crisis that our members are deeply involved in. So don't believe the tired trope that followers of Jesus only care about the preborn. A lot of people use that to excuse the fact that they are virtually silent about the tragedy of abortion. It's hard to say that you're pro-life from the womb to the tomb if you're apathetic when the womb is a tomb.
 - Amen to that! But he is right also in regards to apathy.
 - I saw another post this week from the pastor/author Tim Keller that resonated deeply with me. He said, "*Apathy is a bigger problem than atheism for Christianity.*"

- I would have to agree. There are answers to every objection atheism raises. There are no answers to people who claim to love Jesus and live as if He doesn't exist.
- That is what James is arguing in these passages and more that haven't read yet. It doesn't make sense to have faith and not live it.
- Isn't this what Jesus modeled – being selfless for the sake of the helpless?
 - **2 Corinthians 8:9** – *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”*
- What would it look like for you to reach out to those in need?
 - Will you adopt? Will you foster? Will you have people who aren't like you into your home? Will you abandon your comforts? Will you love people like Jesus does?

(Real Faith, or true religion, isn't just outward, though. It starts from within)

Inward Marks of True Religion

• Purity (1:27)

- Many people misconstrue this passage. Often, they see it as an either-or, but this is a both-and passage
 - You either see people wanting to help the needy or you see people wanting to be separate and pure. God is concerned with providing for the needy and for your inward and outward purity.
 - **The internal matters as much as the external.**

(This inward purity and separation from the world ties in with everything we've said up to this point, because your inward “real” self is what fuels your outward actions, and God cares about both. It starts inward.)

It starts with being captivated by the glory of Christ. (2:1)

It's like an eclipse. When you see Jesus for all that He is, all other things are eclipsed by His glory. Nothing else seems quite as shiny, quite as enticing, when it's in the shadow of the glory of Christ.

- When you are captivated by the glory of Christ, favoritism is crushed because you see Christ's supremacy over the wealthy and His sacrifice for the needy.
- When you are captivated by the glory of Christ, you recognize that the world tastes bland compared to tasting and seeing that the Lord is good.
- When you are captivated by the glory of Christ, there's no one you wouldn't go to and nothing you wouldn't sacrifice for the sake of those Jesus loves and sacrificed Himself for.

Being aware of the judgment of Christ (2:12-13).

• Our words will be judged

- In **Matthew 12:36-37** Jesus tells us, *“I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”*
- That will make you think twice before sharing openly what someone shared with you in confidence.
- It will make you think twice before posting something on social media, before gossiping, etc.

• Our actions will be judged

- *“So speak and so ACT as those who are to be judged...”*
- **2 Corinthians 5:10** – *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”*
- **Read James 2:14-26**
 - If our faith is real, it should be accompanied by action.
 - We not only will be judged for our actions, but for our inactions as well.
 - Read **Matthew 25:41-46**

- ⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”
 - I quoted Martin Luther at the beginning of this message. I want you to hear something else he said: “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”
 - The Scottish theologian John Murray said this: “Faith alone justifies but a justified person with faith alone would be a monstrosity which never exists in the kingdom of grace. Faith works itself out through love. And faith without works is dead.”
 - The Apostle Paul said in **Galatians 5:5-6** – ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision [that’s outward religion] counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

(So, we will be judged for our words, our actions, and our inactions. That’s a scary thing that should change how we live out the faith we say we have. But, that’s not the driving force behind our actions.)

It flows from **living in light of the mercy of Christ (2:12-13)**

- “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” – **John 3:17**
- God’s love propelled Him to come for us, and it has been fully demonstrated through His mercy towards us. And that should change how we act.

(King analogy – stealing an apple and king coming down from his throne to take our punishment. That affects how we act from that day forward, not just because we know the judgment we deserve, but because we know the love of the King. We’ve experienced it. The next apple I walk past, no matter how hungry I am, is going to look as enticing.)

So, here it comes full circle. **It’s the mercy of Christ, his love demonstrated, that propels us to live out that same love and mercy. That’s what real religion is. It is Christianity lived out, inwardly and towards others, propelled by love.**

When propelled by love, there’s no person that you wouldn’t go to. There’s no person you wouldn’t sacrifice for. There’s nothing that you wouldn’t do for the God who loves you and gave Himself for you, and them.

As Bob Goff says in his book *Love Does*, “That’s what love does – it pursues blindly, unflinchingly, and without end. When you go after something you love, you’ll do anything it takes to get it, even if it costs everything.”

So, here’s the question: Do you have true religion? Are you really following Jesus? Or is it just a distant belief you have that doesn’t change the way you live?