

**Pure and undefiled Religion!** Reading: James 1:17-27 Proper 17/B 09/1/24  
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*(This sermon begins with the telling of a personal story to the congregation about caring for the widow and orphan. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.") vs. 27*

The message of the Book of James can be summarized as follows: "Faith without works is dead!" "Actions speak louder than words." An authentic faith is not simply a belief in God but rather a relationship with God that propels us into compassionate action. Religion that is pure and undefiled is about helping those in need. This wisdom comes from above, from God, who "implants truth in each one of us." We only need to listen carefully and then act.

The Book of James was probably written sometime during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It contains teachings and moral exhortations about how to live the Christian life. It includes insights into proper attitudes, ethical instructions, and things Christians should and should not do. James challenges those who claim to believe in God but who do not act, who treat the rich and powerful with honor while ignoring the poor and marginalized, who fail to control their tongues and cause division, who allow strife to run wild within the congregation. All these things make a mockery of true religion and "is not to be."

The Book of James is one of the books of the Bible that inspires me the most. It is practical and challenging, giving me insight and encouragement on how to improve my character. It is a constant reminder of what is most important in the religious journey. It encourages me to care for those on the margins, including the orphans and widows, and nudges me to look deeper into how to better help those in need. The issue of caring for the widows is quite relevant for today as most women outlive their husbands by at least four years. For many of these widows, the death of a husband means not only personal grief, but also radical social upheaval and economic uncertainty. What kind of responsibility to these women do we have as a society? How can we help them overcome their loneliness and isolation, to advocate for better medical attention in addressing their chronic aging issues, and to enable them to remain contributing members of the community as long as possible? "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers!" (v. 22)

James speaks passionately about praying for "wisdom from above" in order to gain clarity on making a more compassionate impact in society. He warns his readers not to be deceived by the conventional wisdom of the day derived from cultural norms, a supposed wisdom which is often based on accumulating bigger, better, faster, and more as the path to happiness. But what stood out for me most in today's reading are his comments on right speech and anger. I believe this guidance comes from "wisdom from above." Let's take a closer look.

Today's reading states: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." In other words, once words are spoken, they cannot be unspoken. The damage caused by a thoughtless or hurtful statement can linger, affecting relationships and trust. Simply put, words have power. A single statement can harm, alienate, or mislead. Just think about the leaders from St. Luke's who have quietly left in past years over hurtful comments made. Think about political candidates who by their speech are causing division in our country. Recognizing the power of words is the first step toward more responsible communication. You see, apologies are not always enough. While apologies are important, they don't always undo the harm caused by hurtful words. The best way to avoid this harm is by thinking carefully before speaking.

To truly engage people in constructive conversations, we must embrace humility, curiosity, and empathy. Here are a few tips about right speech from Marilyn Turkovich:

- Listen more than you speak. In any conversation, especially challenging ones, prioritize listening over speaking. This allows you to fully understand the other person's perspective before responding.
- Practice Empathy: Try to see the world through the other person's eyes. How might they be feeling? What experiences are shaping their views?
- Ask open-ended Questions: This means encouraging dialogue by asking questions that require more than a yes and no answer and allow for deeper exploration of ideas and feelings.
- Acknowledge when you Don't Know: It's okay to admit when you don't have all the answers.

“We all have our opinions. They are usually based on assumptions, previous experiences and ideas passed onto us by others. In our fast-paced world, where information is at our fingertips and opinions are formed in an instant, we often find ourselves jumping to conclusions, convinced that we know the answer. But how often do we stop to question the wisdom behind those conclusions? How often do we challenge our own assumptions, biases, and beliefs before we speak or act? The truth is, our perceived wisdom can sometimes lead us astray. We might believe we understand a situation, a person, or an issue fully, only to discover later that we were mistaken. The consequences of these mistaken beliefs can be significant, relationships can be damaged, opportunities missed, and harm done that is difficult to undo.” (Marilyn Turkovich)

For instance, I grew up during the 1960’s at the height of the Vietnam War. I never fully understood why we were fighting this war on a foreign land, but I trusted that our government knew more than I did and was doing the right thing in this situation. As I later came to realize, three presidents (Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon) continued to support this war even after they knew they couldn’t win. They had backed a corrupt South Vietnam government whom even its citizens did not support.

It was Daniel Ellsberg who exposed these lies by leaking the Pentagon Papers which revealed longtime government doubts and deceit about the Vietnam War. These Papers “documented that the U.S. had defied a 1954 settlement barring a foreign military presence in Vietnam, questioned whether South Vietnam had a viable government, secretly expanded the war to neighboring countries and had plotted to send American soldiers even as Johnson vowed he wouldn’t.” Because of exposing the truth, Ellsberg, the whistle-blower, was charged under the Espionage Act in 1973, along with other charges of theft and conspiracy, carrying a maximum sentence of 115 years. He had expected to spend the rest of his life in jail. But because of governmental misconduct and illegal evidence-gathering, Judge William Byrne Jr., dismissed all charges against Ellsberg five months later. It breaks my heart to think about the 58,000 soldiers who died in a corrupt war, the 150,000 soldiers needlessly wounded, and the thousands of other Vietnam veterans who continue to struggle with PTSD, depression, and Agent-Orange diseases.

The Book of James calls us to pray for wisdom from above and to decide between two kinds of religion. One is a shallow religion grounded only on a philosophical belief in God, where there is a disconnect between belief and action. It is an ego-based religion which is mostly focused on what is best for me, myself, and I and is deeply influenced by “wisdom from below.” The other kind of religion is based on “the wisdom from above which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” (James 3:17) Which of these religions is pure and undefiled? Which one of these religions is God calling you to embrace?

“Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.” *Amen.* (Collect of the Day, BCP)