

Pure Religion

Vincent Cheung

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PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA
<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

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We will begin by reading from James 1:22-24. The apostle writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."

Spiritual self-deception is a most remarkable thing. It is both intriguing and infuriating when you have to deal with someone who is self-deceived about his spiritual condition. At one time or another, all of us have deceived ourselves about our own spiritual condition, but it is a most remarkable thing when you are witnessing it in someone else. It is as if that person cannot see the most obvious thing in the world.

Here James calls anyone self-deceived who only listens to the word, but does not do what it says. To illustrate this, he paints the picture of a person who looks at himself in a mirror, but when he turns away, he immediately forgets what he has seen about himself in the mirror. Of course, this person still retains an opinion about himself, about his appearance, but it might not resemble anything like what the mirror tells him.

What an appropriate picture this is of one who is self-deceived about his own spiritual condition. If you have performed any ministry or if you have done any counseling at all, you have probably already faced a number of people like this. But if you have never encountered someone like this, there is no need to learn by experience, as if your observation can tell you about people's hearts in the first place. Let the word of God tell you about it.

In my years of ministry, I have spoken to quite a few people who came under tremendous conviction when reading the Bible. Often they would become very troubled and concerned about their spiritual condition. This happens to believers quite often. Christians who are new to the faith or are temporarily in sin might even waver in their assurance of salvation.

This happens, for example, very often after people finished reading the Sermon on the Mount. They would come to me and say, "If this is what Jesus requires, then I am in trouble. If this is what it means to be a believer, then I must not be one." But they did not realize that a person can never fulfill the Sermon on the Mount by his own power, and this is true even after a person has become a Christian. Only God can regenerate a sinner, and radically changes his innermost dispositions by the Spirit. Then, after a person is converted, it is God who empowers him to be holy by the same Spirit. As Paul writes, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).

Sometimes these people were not really converted in the first place, and they needed to seek Christ for salvation. Otherwise, what they needed was a better understanding of the biblical teaching on faith and grace. But you see, in a sense their response was very positive, because they did not distort the Sermon on the Mount in their minds to protect their previous conception about their own spiritual condition. They took it seriously, and they were reading what Jesus intended to convey by it. They looked at the mirror, and they did not like what they saw there. What they needed was a firm grasp on God's way of salvation. Instead of resting their assurance on their own holiness, they must place their trust on God's promise.

Then, here is the remarkable thing, and that is when you see other people read the same Sermon and not be troubled by it at all. In fact, very often they would read it and feel that they have already done all that is required by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and if they are troubled at all, they are troubled by the idea that other people are not doing the same. Here is the self-deception. They can look into the mirror of God's word, and if they see anything about themselves there at all, it is all forgotten by the time they turn around, by the time they walk away.

This kind of deception is often evident when you are trying to give someone doctrinal instructions. You may give them a step-by-step exposition. You can patiently present your case, and provide meticulous answers to all their questions and objections. At the end, they might even say that they understand the biblical teaching, and that they agree with what you have said. But then the next time you see them, the next time you talk to them, they would speak and behave as if nothing has happened. They would talk to you as if they have not changed their position on the matter, and it would be as if the previous conversation never occurred at all.

Once I was speaking to a woman about a particular doctrine. It does not matter what the doctrine was because our focus right now is spiritual deception, spiritual blindness. The woman was having difficulty because she could not reconcile the biblical doctrine with something false that she believed in. But rather than showing that the doctrine was not really taught in the Bible, and rather than to renounce the falsehood that she affirmed, she sighed and said, "Well, I suppose that it is just a mystery."

But it was not a mystery, as if we lacked the necessary information, or as if it was something impossible to understand. If she had only assented to the biblical doctrine and renounced the false belief, then there would have been no longer any difficulty, and there would have been no longer any need to reconcile two incompatible things. So I insisted to her, "No, it is not a mystery. I just got through explaining everything to you, and answered all your objections."

She appeared shocked by this. You see, she had made up her mind that if she believed one thing and the Bible taught the opposite, then the matter must have been a mystery. It never occurred to her that her belief could be false. But she was teachable, and so she asked me to explain everything again, and I did. By the end of our conversation, she seemed to have finally understood and assented to the doctrine.

However, the next time we spoke, we were right back at where we started, and it was as if the previous conversation never happened. As far as I could tell, she was not deliberately rebelling against what I taught her from the Bible, but this happened without her realizing it. And so when I mentioned the doctrine this time, she again said, "Well, I suppose that all of this is just a mystery." I had to remind her of our previous conversation and how it concluded, and then I explained everything again. You would think that this was the last time, but the next time we spoke, there was the same problem. I had to repeatedly explain the doctrine to her over a period of several months. After that, it seemed that she finally got it.

The same thing can happen when you are giving someone ethical instructions, or when you are attempting to awaken someone out of a backslidden state. You can expound the Scripture to him, and point out his sins. At times he may even come under deep conviction and promise you that he is going to be a different man from that moment forward, and that he is going to change. But the next time you see him, he would cheerfully come up to you and greet you, and speak to you as if the previous conversation had never taken place. And then you find out that he never made the appropriate changes to his life after you talked to him the last time.

If you are in the ministry, you will encounter people like these over and over again, and this is why spiritual strength and inner endurance are essential. You might say that they are necessary for a minister's effectiveness, if not his very sanity. Sometimes these people will push you to the limits of your patience, and you might feel exasperated, and say with Jesus, "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Matthew 17:17), and "Are you so dull?" (Matthew 15:16). And you will identify with the writer of Hebrews: "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!" (Hebrews 5:11-12).

Spiritual dullness and deception are especially difficult to unravel when you are trying to bring someone out of a cult, that is, when you are trying to "deprogram" a person who has been subjected to prolonged brainwashing. Similar difficulties are often present in varying degrees when you try to bring about a thoroughgoing paradigm shift in the person's theology and intellectual perspective, as when you would try to "convert" someone from Arminianism, Catholicism, dispensationalism, empiricism, among others, to the biblical way of thinking.

These projects require intense and excruciating labor on your part, and may take months, and in some cases, years to complete. Even then, no permanent changes will result, unless they have been brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit, according to his sovereign will. An appropriate way to illustrate this procedure is to liken it to surgery. Just as physical surgery cannot succeed without Providence sustaining the surgeon's work and the body's functions, spiritual surgery is complicated, and involves intense labor and

concentration, but the desired results will not come about without the power of God directly working on the person's heart through your efforts.

In principle, all of these people could be helped without individual attention and counseling, which is very labor-intensive, and in *most* cases really unnecessary. Rather, the best way to help most people is by having them sit under a prolonged period of biblical preaching. The Spirit can apply the word of God to their hearts and effect the necessary and appropriate changes. This is why the ministry of preaching, or the ministry of the word in general, is the most important and powerful work that a minister must perform. Everything else is secondary. Now, I say that these people can be helped by the preached word of God "in principle," because whether they are actually changed by the preaching depends on the will of God for them at that time, and whether they are numbered among the elect or the non-elect.

This kind of spiritual dullness and deception should not surprise us, and it is not as if any of us is completely innocent of it. However, it is indeed a problem and will prevent any significant spiritual progress in a person. It needs to be confronted and dealt with. And here is where we can assist one another, since to be self-deceived is precisely to mean that we might not recognize our own failures and weaknesses, our sins and transgressions. God must enlighten us, and bring these things to our attention. He would often use human instruments, but we must always remember that the instruments themselves have no power to awaken the soul. Spiritual progress is all of God and of grace. So others can speak the truth to us, and confront us, sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully. But since only the Spirit of God has direct access and control to our hearts, it is just as important for us to pray that God will search out hearts and revealed to us our faults.

On the other hand, there is another type of man (or, by God's grace, the same man at a different time!). This is the type of man that is not spiritually deceived. He does not entertain false ideas about his own spiritual condition, but he listens to the word of God, and then responds to it. Verse 25 says, "But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does." He responds differently to the word of God than the one who is self-deceived.

Notice what he does. First, he "looks intently." He does not just stare at the pages of the Bible, and he does not just sit himself down under the sound of the preaching of the word of God. He looks intently, and he pays attention to the word of God, to what is actually being said. Second, and after paying attention to the word of God, he does not look away, he does not walk away, but he stays there. The verse says that he "continues to do this," or that he continues to look intently at the word of God.

Third, unlike the person who deceives himself about his spiritual condition, this man is "not forgetting what he has heard." He retains the truth and turns it over in his mind. And fourth, in addition to this, and also unlike the one who deceives himself, this man is "doing it" – he is doing what the word of God teaches him. The result is that "he will be

blessed in what he does." The person who attains spiritual results, and who attains spiritual growth and progress, is the one who pays attention to the word of God, who listens to it intently, who stays with it, and who changes his thoughts and actions according to the teachings of Scripture.

This demands a change and improvement in the way that we approach Scripture, and in the way that we listen to sermons from our ministers. It is not enough to just be "there" when the Bible is opened, or when someone is preaching. You must be awakened to the real danger and possibility of self-deception in your soul. There are some things that you are thinking and there are some things that you are doing that are so much a part of you, that they will remain untouched even if you repeatedly come across scriptural teachings that speak against them. You must deliberately search them out.

So awake to the danger and possibility of spiritual self-deception, and deliberately pay special attention to the word of God, even regarding those portions and even when it comes to the teachings with which you think you are familiar. Never walk away assuming that you are already doing what the Scripture commands you to do, or that you are already refraining from what the Scripture forbids you to do.

Perhaps if we will all look intently at the word of God, and examine ourselves in its light, we will all realize how much we have deceived ourselves about our own spiritual condition. May God search our hearts. May God enlighten us, save us from deception, and transform us by his grace.

Let us quickly review what we talked about last time. We learned from James the picture of a person who is deceived about his spiritual condition, and James even indicates that he deceives himself. He deceives himself when he only listens to the word of God but then does not do what it says. He puts his face before an open Bible. He sits there when someone is preaching, but he pays no attention. He may even get a glimpse of himself – that is, of his true spiritual condition. But by the time he turns away, he has already forgotten the insight that he has received.

On the other hand, the person who is not deceived treats the word of God differently. He approaches the word of God with reverence and he "looks intently." He pays attention to what he is reading and to what he is listening, and he does not look away. He does not walk away thinking that he has learned everything that he needs to know. Instead, he continues at it. He keeps at it, and he continues looking at the word of God. He continues receiving insight from the word of God about his spiritual condition, and James says that he does not forget about what he sees there. Rather, he pays attention, and he continues to look intently. And then rather than stopping there as the self-deceived person does, does what the word of God teaches. He obeys, he performs what he has been taught by the Bible.

That is the difference between a person who is deceived about his spiritual condition, and a person who acknowledges what the word of God teaches, who is not deceived about his spiritual condition. The second one is the one who pleases God and who makes progress in his spiritual walk with God. While the other man remains in bondage, the one who hears and obeys looks intently into the perfect law of freedom, which sets them free from the bondage of sin and deception.

Now we will proceed to the next passage. We read from verses 26 and 27: "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."

Remember that James is concerned about deception. He is concerned that a person should know his true spiritual condition. He has pointed out that a person may have an opinion about his own condition, when this opinion is a mere delusion – it is a falsehood. Here he mentions it again in verse 26. He says that it is possible for a man to deceive himself as to whether he is truly religious, as to whether he is truly spiritual. It is possible, he says, for a man to deceive himself so that whereas he thinks that he is religious and spiritual, in reality his religion is useless. He gives us some examples of what true religion produces, and if these things are absent from a person's life and character, then he is not truly

religious – that is, he is not really devoted to the religion of Christ, and whatever he has is vain and false.

First, he says that a truly religious man will "keep a tight rein on his tongue." Depending on your background – depending on what kind of biblical teaching you have received, and what kind of teaching that the church that you have been attending emphasizes – this item may seem strange to you. The next two items also require exposition, but I think that this one has been neglected, and that is the teaching that true religion is demonstrated in a very large part by what you say, and what you refrain from saying.

The Bible condemns gossip, lying, slander, blasphemy, and also foolish jesting. Who among us are innocent of all these things? But we cannot lower the standard of Scripture. What we need is grace from God and the faith to trust him for salvation. As Jesus says, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). What we say, what we refrain from saying, and how we use our faculty of speech reveal the things that are in our hearts.

If we are wicked and divisive, and if we are busybodies, then we would tend to gossip. If we are foolish and irreverent at heart, then we would lack a gravity and a seriousness in our speech. And those who blaspheme and make unholy talk reveal their hatred of God in their hearts. With those who fear God, there are just some things that they will not say, and there are just some jokes that they will not want to hear and still less repeat. Jesus says, "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36).

How about the righteous use of the faculty of speech? Say that you have information that would vindicate the innocent and convict the guilty. You would be doing others a great injustice if you were to refrain from speaking. Or, if you perceive that one of your brothers is in bondage to sin, then it is your duty to speak out according to biblical guidelines. The Bible says, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5). Under some circumstances, if you "love" secretly, then it might just mean that you do not love at all.

Then, of course, one of the most important things for which you must use your gift of speech is to preach the gospel, to hold out the straight and rigid word of life before this crooked generation. The tongue can be very constructive and also very destructive. Later on in the letter, James writes, "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (3:5-6). When the Bible says that something is set on fire by hell, it would be worth our while to pay it serious attention.

Having commented on that, let us return to the central point of our text. Again, James is concerned to show that some people consider themselves religious and spiritual, but they are sorely deceived. Think about how many people who consider themselves religious, spiritual, and knowledgeable about theological matters who nevertheless constantly

commit sins of the tongue. Let us take seriously, then, what the Bible says about the sins of the tongue. We can start with an earlier counsel in verse 19: "Everyone should be quick to listen, *slow to speak* and slow to become angry."

We are discussing what makes a truly religious man, and by "religious," of course, we mean to have the kind of faith and life that the Bible teaches. Right now we are not using the word in a negative sense. A truly religious man, or a man who practices a pure religion, a religion that is faultless before God the Father, is one who listens to the word of God and then does what it says. But the one who falsely thinks that he is religious is one who merely listens to the word, but does not do what it says.

You see, many Christians think that a religious man, a spiritual man, is one who prays all the time, who studies all the time, who meditates in the word all the time, who is uninhibited in worship, and who possess boldness to preach the gospel. These are indeed some very good indications of a spiritual man, and a truly religious man would possess these qualities. But what does he do when he comes across an orphan in need? And how does he react to a struggling widow? Our faith, if genuine, ought to produce good works and reflect the compassion of Christ.

The Corinthians were endowed with various spiritual gifts, and because of this they thought they were spiritual. There are many who think the same way today, and you do not have to be a charismatic to be one of them. You may be gifted in theological understanding. You may be gifted in preaching. You may be gifted in administration. You may be gifted in finances. But if, like the Corinthians, you make a gift of God the basis for strife, for division, for jealousy, and for competition, then Paul says that you are carnal, not spiritual, no matter how gifted you are, or think that you are. Your faith may look pretty to others, and especially to yourself, but it lacks reality and substance.

James gives us a concrete illustration of this in the second chapter of his letter. He writes, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:14-17).

It is fine to say to the needy person, "I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," because a truly compassionate heart will indeed wish this person well, and will indeed wish this person to keep warm and well fed. However, a pure religion, a truly spiritual person, would do more than this. James is saying that you should also show that you mean what you said, and do something about this person's needs.

And so back in 1:27, James says that a pure religion, one that is faultless before God the Father, is one that will "look after orphans and widows in their distress." On another occasion, perhaps using another text, I would like to discuss how a church can implement works of charity. James here is talking to the church, and we should not interpret what he says from a perspective of extreme individualism. So I would like to talk about how *a*

church can implement works of charity, why it needs rules and policies, and what kind of rules and policies the Bible would teach and support.

But while we are saving that for another time, the final words in this verse lead to an important warning about implementing works of charity in the church. There are right ways to do it, and the wrong ways to do it.

Now, if you read only the first part of this verse, which says that a pure religion is one that takes care of orphans and widows, and then you throw away the rest of the Bible, then you will end up with a humanistic religion, a social gospel that has no spiritual and saving power. Instead of a pure and faultless religion, you will end up with the antithesis of one.

There is a context, a background, behind all the charitable works that the church performs. and this background is faith in Jesus Christ. It is a grave error – a damning error – to suppose that Christianity is primarily a system of ethics, or that it is mainly a call to social justice and charitable works. To interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ as purely, or even mainly, a social gospel is to distort its message and rob it of its power. Good works do not make a pure religion, but it is the pure religion that produces these good works. This distinction must be maintained.

Some people are seemingly so eager to reach certain types of people that they would transform themselves so much to adapt, that there remains hardly any noticeable difference between them and the people that they are trying to reach. If they are so like those people, then why do they need to convert at all? If they go to these people and use the same slangs, wear the same kind of clothes, make the same kind of dirty jokes, sing and listen to the same worldly songs, and do pretty much everything that the unbelievers do, then these people have already been polluted.

James says that a pure and faultless religion does not only look after orphans and widows, but it also keeps oneself from being polluted by the world. This reinforces the idea that Christianity is not a social gospel. The biblical philosophy of ministry and of evangelism is to remove any unnecessary entrances without going to ridiculous lengths to do it. What is ridiculous, you say? One actual example is to paraphrase the entire New Testament into "street talk." When a believer goes to the "street" with this, right from the start he gives the impression that God does not care about the purity of his words, or at least *he* does not care about it.

Again, the biblical philosophy of ministry is to remove any unnecessary hindrances, but the misguided philosophy that we are now talking about believes that the way to reach the world is to show the unbelievers that we are not so different from them after all. From the perspective of effectiveness in ministry, faithfulness to the word of God, and from the perspective of maintaining a pure and faultless religion, if this is our philosophy of ministry, then we might as well let the orphans and widows starve.

What I am saying is that we cannot let social concerns drive our faith and practice, and we cannot let our message become a merely social gospel; otherwise, our entire enterprise will become powerless and meaningless. Our work will become one that saves the stomach but starves the soul. In fact, if the church becomes a merely social institution, an organization to promote charity work and natural human welfare, then it loses its very reason for existence.

Now, the world would welcome such an institution, and it would love nothing more than for the church to become humanistic and powerless, rather than to hear it preach a message from heaven that also has ethical and social implications. Thus our social and charitable work must be driven by spiritual concerns and biblical principles. It must be a fruit of true faith and pure religion, and not the ultimate object, nature, or purpose of our faith.