

## WHAT IS OUR WORSHIP WORTH?

**James 1:22, 26-27**

(NIV) "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.<sup>26</sup> Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.<sup>27</sup> 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."

### INTRODUCTION

What comes to your mind when you hear these words, "Armed and dangerous": A movie; a video game; someone trying to impress others with being macho? "Armed and dangerous" originated with law enforcement to describe someone who is suspected of a crime having a gun or other lethal weapon and not being reluctant to use it (like Joshua Waiki, who triggered a three-day manhunt on Hawaii's Big Island on July 17, 2018, after fleeing into a wooded area after fatally shooting a police officer when pulled over for a traffic stop; Waiki died in a shootout). To help safeguard law enforcement officers against needless harm or injury, they are given a warning like this: "Suspect is at large and presumed to be armed and dangerous."

Yet, I suspect everyone here could be described as "armed and dangerous." You all carried a "lethal weapon" to church with you today. Someone wrote, "The most ferocious monster in the world has his den just behind the teeth." There's a joke about a wife making a breakfast of fried eggs for her husband. Suddenly, her husband burst into the kitchen. "Careful," he said, "Careful! Put in some more butter! Oh my! You're cooking too many at once. Too many! Turn them! Turn them now! We need more butter. Oh my! Where are we going to get more butter? They're going to stick! Careful. Careful. I said, "Be careful! You never listen to me when you're cooking! Never! Turn them! Hurry up! Are you Crazy? Have you lost your mind? Don't forget to salt them. You know you always forget to salt them. Use the salt! Use the salt! The salt!" The wife had stared at him with disbelief throughout her husband's antics. Finally, she asked him frostily, "What in the world is wrong with you? You think I don't know how to fry a couple of eggs?" Her husband calmly replied, "Oh, I just wanted to show you what it feels like when I'm driving with you."

James, half-brother to our Lord **Jesus**, enjoyed the privilege of observing and learning how **Jesus** dealt with personal, family, and community issues still confronting us today. Scholars estimate James refers to **Jesus'** teachings 35 times in his letter (1-in-3 verses). James learned from his Brother **Jesus** that "wisdom" is "the ability to view life as God sees it and to live for God's purposes, rather than just for our purposes."

Our modern English word "worship" derives from the Old English word "worthship." We often tell others what something is "worth" to us by saying how much we would do or give for it, as when **Jesus** said, "[T]he kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (**Matthew 13:45-46**, NKJV). The original idea of "worship," then, is, "how much God is worth to us by what we are willing to do or to give of ourselves because of the value we place upon Him." Can you think of anyone in the world you'd be thrilled to be able to meet and spend a few hours with? There are a few well-known people I'd be willing to drive 400-500 miles to meet, if I were promised two hours with any of them, because of how much I appreciate the worth of their lives in matters important to our Lord. I would rent a tuxedo, if need be, or agree to meet at a very early hour in the morning or at a very late hour of the night. But there are many well-known people I would not walk across the street to meet, because their life impact seems to be of little worth to God.

James learned what it truly means to worship and please God by direct observation of his Brother, not from legalistic "official" teachers of God's laws in **Jesus'** day who placed a priority upon outwardly pure deeds rather than upon inwardly pure hearts. Did **Jesus** have anything nice to say about religious phonies, especially those who took pride in looking down upon people who outwardly struggled with sin issues?

No. **Jesus** used direct language when speaking with them, as in **Matthew 23:27** (NIV): "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean." In our Bible verses for today, James used language that was equally direct. He provides us with a three-part checklist to help us know what our worship of the Lord is truly worth in God's eyes. James asks if our use of words, our actions toward the weak, or our embrace of worldly values, support or discredit what we profess about how much we are devoted to the Lord. Our three Outline points are Wordiness, Weakness, and Worldliness.

## I. WORDINESS

Here's a question to consider as we explore James' warnings about "wordiness" (which refers to *which* words we use and *how often* we use them): Do you think **Jesus**, as a young man growing up in Nazareth, was known as a better talker or a better listener? In His years of public ministry, it was urgent for **Jesus** to teach the truths about Himself and salvation at every opportunity. But in His private life—at home, work, or at play—would those who knew Him best have described Him as a better talker or as a better listener?

A sermon entitled "Jesus Christ and the Book of Proverbs" presents evidence **Proverbs** played a key role in **Jesus'** development as a young man, as **Luke 2:52** (NASB) describes: "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." "Stature" refers to **Jesus** gaining physical maturity. God reveals to us in this verse that **Jesus**, as fully human, needed to attain physical maturity over a period of years, and He needed to progress in attaining wisdom. All Jewish youth of **Jesus'** day studied **Proverbs** to saturate their minds with the principles of wisdom by which God wanted His children to live.

The Old Testament Book that best presents God's wisdom about our tongue is **Proverbs** (as is true of **James** in the New Testament). As a youth, **Jesus** likely studied and memorized **Proverbs 21:23** (NCV): "Those who are careful about what they say keep themselves out of trouble"; **Proverbs 18:21** (NLT): "The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences"; **Proverbs 10:19** (CEV) "You will say the wrong thing if you talk too much— so be sensible and watch what you say"; **Proverbs 17:27-28** (TPT): "Can you bridle your tongue when your heart is under pressure? That's how you show that you are wise. An understanding heart keeps you cool, calm, and collected, no matter what you're facing. <sup>28</sup> When even a fool bites his tongue he's considered wise. So shut your mouth when you are provoked—it will make you look smart"; and **Proverbs 18:2** (NCV): "Fools do not want to understand anything. They only want to tell others what they think."

Let's reread **James 1:22, 26**: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. <sup>26</sup> Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless." James presents us with two main lessons: (1) It's not enough to hear God's warnings of being "armed and dangerous" because our words can inflict devastating harm. Such warnings should change our speech. If we have a reputation for criticism, judging, or gossiping, neither our tongues nor our hearts are submitted to Christ. **Jesus** insists, "Whatever is in your heart determines what you say" (**Luke 6:45**, NLT). This saying used to be posted in our Church: "I'm careful of the words I say to keep them soft and sweet. I never know from day to day which ones I'll have to eat." William Norris, a journalist who specialized in memorable rhymes, wrote: "If your lips would keep from slips, Five things observe with care: To whom you speak; of whom you speak; And how, and when, and where." (2) No matter how faithful we are in "outward acts of worship" (what "religion" in **1:26** refers to)—like church attendance, tithing, Bible reading, or acts of service—if we do not "keep a tight rein on" ("bridle," NASB) our words by the "bit" of the Holy Spirit gaining control of our tongue, God says our worship of Him is as "worthless" (useless, fruitless) as those who do not truly know Him as Savior and Lord! God gave us two ears but only one mouth. Some people say it's because He wanted us to spend twice as much time listening as talking. With this background in mind, do you think **Jesus** in His private life—at home, at work, or at play—was known as a better talker or as a better listener?

## II. WEAKNESS

Look again at **vs. 27**: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." James reminds us our "worship" of the living Christ often shines forth most "pure and faultless" when we demonstrate His redemptive love by caring for the powerless and helpless of society. A well-dressed, wealthy businessman I knew put his arm around a kneeling, smelly homeless man who'd come forward in his church to give his heart to Christ. In **Luke 14:12-14**, **Jesus** told a Pharisee who'd invited **Jesus** to his banquet: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

By coming to earth as a man, the Son of God turned the values of this world upside down. Ideas like the value and equality of all people in the eyes of God, and health care and education for all (not just for the wealthy and privileged), were unknown in the pre-Christian world. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the most influential political philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and source of Nazi Germany's drive to advance the human race by ridding the world of the weak and deficient, despised Christianity. His book, *The Antichrist*, argues the Christian concept of sin makes us ashamed of our instincts and sexuality, and the concept of pity teaches us to value and cherish weakness. Nietzsche thought Christians were nuts, whose values were the exact opposite of what a society should value. In some ways, Nietzsche was right. **Jesus did teach** that the values God blesses and that most bless a society *are the opposite* of what the lost world values. Here are some examples of the upside down values our Savior promotes: The way up is down; The way to be first is to be last; The way to achieve success is to serve; The way to get is to give away; The way to be strong is to be aware of weakness; The way of peace is forgiveness, not retaliation; The way to life is death—death to self, society, and family; Want to get the most from God almighty? Care for the least of His; Want to be free? Give complete control to God; Want to find yourself? Forget yourself; Do you want honor? You most honor yourself by humility. Maybe if Nietzsche had become a Christian "nut," he would not have spent the last 11 years of his life in an insane asylum. He came to the shocking realization his philosophy could neither explain nor remedy the very real presence of evil in the human heart.

## III. WORLDLINESS

The third item upon James' checklist about the worth of our worship is found in **vs. 27**, "to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" ("to keep yourself clean from the sinful things of the world," NLT). Do we give evidence we are being progressively transformed by the Heavenly values dear to our Savior's heart (in our words, actions, dress, amusements, spending and health habits, etc.)? Are we becoming less conformed to the Hellish values dear to Satan's heart, which dominate the fallen world in which we temporarily live until Christ returns to destroy Satan and his value system (**II Peter 3:10-18**)? If not, our lives reveal the Lord means far less to us than we claim; our worship may be "worthless" to God!

## CONCLUSION

A Japanese colporteur (a seller and distributor of Bibles, gospel tracts, and religious materials), once sold 400 copies of Scripture in a Japanese village of just 430 homes. He was astonished over this unusually high response from the Japanese, who usually showed little interest in the Bible. He soon discovered that the sparkling Christian testimony of one of the village men who accompanied him was responsible for the eagerness of these people to own God's Word. Time and again, the villagers would exclaim as they purchased a Bible, "If Christianity is like Miyamoto's religion, we would like to believe it."

Miyamoto was condemned to penal servitude at age 17 for manslaughter (unpremeditated murder). He spent more than 25 years in prison. One day, he gathered with other malcontents in the prison library to plan a riot. Suddenly a Book fell from a shelf and struck him on the head. As he picked it up, he noticed it

was open at **Jesus'** words in **Matthew 11:28** (NIV), "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The Christian governor of the local province had placed a copy of the New Testament in the prison. Miyamoto asked for an interview with the governor to learn the meaning of **Jesus'** words, and this good man led him to Christ. As Miyamoto read the New Testament and applied **Jesus'** teachings to his heart, his character demonstrated such an inspiring transformation that he was released under special Imperial amnesty. When he returned to his own village and family, his hard work, uplifting words, Christ-like concern for the distressed, and morally pure life won him the respect of the village. He once planned to move to another community, but his fellow villagers begged him to stay so his life might be an example to their boys. No wonder that many of his fellow villagers told the colporteur, while eagerly buying Bibles of their own, "If Christianity is like Miyamoto's religion, we would like to believe it"!

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