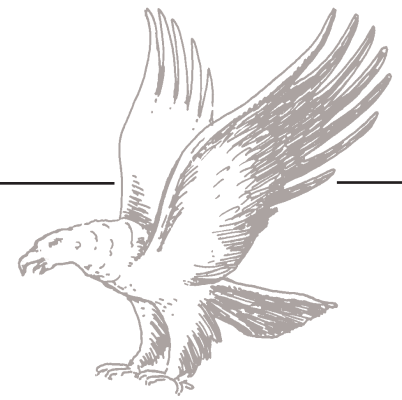


Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



July 6, 2014

Pure Religion

Nothing turns unbelievers away from religion more than Christians who fail to practice their faith. James gives us a simple three-part test to help us determine if we're part of the problem.

“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Jas. 1:26-27).



Talk to unbelievers about why they despise religion, and you'll hear one complaint come up again and again: *those who claim to be religious are shameless hypocrites who don't practice what they preach.* Some of this hostility can be discounted as a cover for avoiding God, but there is enough truth in the charge to render it a serious problem.

In this passage, James takes a swipe at believers for their role in creating this perception. Briefly, he argues that *if we are going to claim religion in our lives, we had better live it.* Specifically, he points to three necessary components of “pure and undefiled” religion; that is, religion that will impress outsiders as genuine. He is not saying that these three items are all there is to religion.

Rather, these are the qualities that will make the greatest impact, for good or ill, on those who are looking for something to criticize in our faith.

The first thing that people always notice is *how we use our tongues.* When we are careless with our speech, people will use that against us—even if they use inappropriate language themselves. (At least they don't claim to be holier than others.) This misuse of the tongue can take a variety of forms: cursing; outbursts of anger; bragging; belittling those who are “inferior” in some way; harsh criticism; and so on. Such language is an instant turn-off to those who are looking for something to criticize.

People also look for *our involvement in benevolent activities*—or lack thereof. “Orphans and widows” is a shorthand expression for all of society's less fortunate. These are people who, through no fault of their own, are in difficult straits and need help to survive. They don't need another celebrity “raising awareness” of their plight. They need someone who is willing to get personally involved and help them rebuild

their lives. God's people are ideally suited to this work; but if we have no interest in doing it, what message are we sending to the world?

Finally, if we claim to be religious, others will pay careful attention to see if we “*stay unspotted from world.*” If they see sexual immorality, substance abuse, shady financial dealings (including gambling), serious marital conflict, and other character flaws in our lives, they will (rightly) question the authenticity of our faith. Our religion clearly makes us no better than the rest of the world. On the other hand, if people see in us an exemplary model of integrity and purity, they will sit up and take notice (without us having to point it out to them).

Our culture is saturated with contempt for religion, and people will pounce on any hint of inconsistency between what we claim and how we live. If we are to have any hope of deflecting this attack, we must clean up our language, get busy helping others, and maintain a lifestyle above reproach. If we can't get these basics right, James tells us, our religion is “useless.”

– David King