

Wings

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



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Personal Religion

The little book of James points us to the real purpose of religion. Sadly, we often miss that purpose, even as we seek to defend what we think is important in religion.

"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" (Jas. 1:26).

"Each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12).



The epistle of James is one of the most practical books in the Bible. It addresses a wide range of topics that govern our daily life: how to manage our tongue, the evil of favoritism, the need for patience, the active nature of faith, the danger of wealth, and so on. The book has often been called a commentary on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), since it deals with much of the same subject material.

The common thread throughout the book is *the development of personal character*. Ultimately, my relationship with God is a function of *my* behavior, *my* attitude, *my* loyalty to Him, not the performance of the group with whom I associate. Each one of us will have to answer to God for the life we have lived. No one will get into heaven by riding the coattails of other believers.

Which is another way of saying, religion is not a function of belonging to "the right church." When our view of religion becomes defined largely by issues relating to church organization, church worship, and church work, we have lost sight of what the religion of Christ is all about. Our religion becomes more an exercise in *affiliation* than one of *dedication*—and the dedication part tends to get overlooked in that environment. James offers a specific example of that disconnect: the "religious" person who fails to bridle his tongue. (Witness the ugliness and pettiness that often characterize disputes over "church" issues. We end up destroying the church in order to save it. Our unbelieving neighbors can see the hypocrisy in those episodes, and despise us for it.)

I am not arguing that we can belong to whatever church we want—or no church at all—and that God is okay with it as long as I keep my own nose clean. Neither am I saying that the organization, worship, and work of the church are matters of indifference to the Lord. He has addressed all these topics in the

New Testament with enough specificity and clarity that we can know what His will is on those subjects. We ought to have convictions on those matters.

The issue here is *priority*. James is stressing that the *primary* purpose of the religion of Christ is to reform the character of individuals. The corporate requirements (described elsewhere) are merely a means to that greater end. We should take care to keep that prioritization intact, especially when we are trying to navigate disagreements with each other over those other issues (see First Corinthians for a good treatment of that principle).

One of the components of personal loyalty to God is joining myself to others who share my convictions, as a practical means of strengthening my faith. But that association is not a substitute for a faith that resides in my own heart and life. If my personal religion is what it ought to be, I may even have to sacrifice my association with people who demonstrate that they no longer respect God's word. Either way, my religion is *my* responsibility, no one else's.

— David King



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