

How do you respond when you're under pressure? How do you react when you're attacked? Human beings tend to respond in one of two ways: they either turn to fight or flight. They attack back or they escape. And often it isn't one or the other, but both. For many people, they initially retaliate or lash back at people who have hurt them and then retreat into a spot that's safe, cocooning themselves from others.

This human response is so predictable that James knows that there is a real danger to these Christians who have been attacked and persecuted and scattered. He knows that they could lash out in retaliation for the pain they've experienced and retreat into a safe mode where they neglect doing what they ought to do. When pressured, what comes out of us is what is actually in us. So James wants these believers to entrust themselves to Jesus and let the true religion that they believe come out of their lives. What is this true religion?

### **1. Avoid Unbridled Worthless Religion**

What happens when we are attacked? For most people, the first response is to lash back out. It's to retaliate with harsh words. Someone tells you off? You want to tell them off and give them a piece of your mind. Someone hurts you? Hurt them back. But this is not the way of Jesus. Jesus made it clear that our tongues can be very revealing about what is inside of us. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34).

If we are the kind of people who lash out when we are hurt, James says we are deceiving our hearts. The evidence is plain and clear, but we suppress the truth. When we are hurt, when we are attacked, what comes out of us is what is in us. It's not some aberration or distortion.

How many relationships have been destroyed by harsh words? How many churches have been split by uncharitable words? How many people go to counselling to unpack the harsh or terrible things that have been said to them? Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will profoundly hurt me.

So the temptation is to let our mouths run wild like an untamed horse. We will kick and buck back. We will let our tongue roam wildly. But the damage we do causes our religion to be called into question. There is nothing that causes people to question our faith like a tongue that hasn't been tamed.

If you've ever ridden a horse, you know how a bit and bridle can control such a large animal. I remember the first time I was on a horse. Friends of ours had trails through their wooded acreage and invited me to go along for a trail ride. It sounded so pleasant until we got out and the horse realized that I was an inexperienced rider. He brushed me up against the trees, took off at a gallop pace, and tried to really shake me. But because he had a bit and bridle, I pulled on the reins hard.

In the same way, James says we should have a bit and bridle in our mouths, especially when times are hard. This is the way of Jesus. Peter would say this about Christ:

<sup>21</sup> For <sup>z</sup>to this you have been called, <sup>v</sup>because Christ also suffered for you, <sup>a</sup>leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> <sup>b</sup>He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup> <sup>c</sup>When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, <sup>d</sup>but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> <sup>e</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we <sup>f</sup>might die to sin and <sup>a</sup>live to righteousness. <sup>h</sup>By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For <sup>i</sup>you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to <sup>k</sup>the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

In the 1700s, John Wesley, the American evangelist and itinerant preacher, was speaking at a church. The story goes that his tie was a little long for one woman's liking, a woman who was known for expressing her opinions in an uncontrolled fashion. She told Wesley how much she thought it was inappropriate for him to wear the tie that he was wearing. So apparently Wesley went and got a pair of scissors and asked the woman to trim it to her liking. And she did! When she was done, Wesley turned to her and said, "Dear woman, I find it highly inappropriate how long your tongue is and I was wondering if I could trim it?"

The hardest thing we have to learn is to bridle our tongues. Jesus kept his mouth shut when falsely accused and did not lash out at those who mistreated him. Peter says that Jesus entrusted himself to the one who judges justly and died to take our sins – especially the sins of our mouths – to the cross so that we would live for him and he would heal our mouths.

When under pressure, when falsely accused, when people lash out at us, the genuineness of our faith is seen not by arguing back and throwing back insults, not by yelling and losing our cool, but by keeping our mouths shut.

## 2. Care for Others with Pure Religion

If we are prone to lash out and attack when we are attacked, the other thing that we tend to do is to retreat. But James doesn't want us to pull back but engage in a proactive way. And what is that proactive way? To care for the most vulnerable.

James says that this is the kind of religion that is pure: to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world. Let's unpack these two commands.

First, James says that it is to visit orphans and widows in their distress. When he uses the word "visit", he doesn't mean that we just go and see someone when they are having a hard time. He is using a word that was frequently used to describe what God would do when people were

suffering and afflicted in the Old Testament. The purpose of the Lord's visit was not merely to provide comfort, but to relieve the suffering of the people. So when the Lord visited Sarah in Genesis 22 and Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, he comes to deliver them from their inability to have a child. When Joseph meets his brothers at the end of Genesis (Gen. 50:24-25), he says that the Lord will visit them and deliver them; and this is what the Lord does in Exodus 4 in promising deliverance.

So to visit orphans and widows in their distress isn't to just go see them when they're facing a hard time, but to do something to help care and alleviate their suffering. This is why James says that it is to visit them "in" their distress. It's to meet them and care for them.

We have to remember that in the world of James, there wasn't a social safety net. If you fell into hard times, there wasn't unemployment or Old Age Security. Your children were your pension. Your parents were your protectors. And this is what the early church did. They cared for the most vulnerable. When people were displaced, attacked, and left without support, they were left to die.

But God had commanded his people to be a generous people. They were to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger from another country. They were to leave the edges of their fields unplowed and not go back over the harvest fields a second time, but to leave the leftovers for those in need.

In the Old Testament, one of the most beautiful stories of this kind of care is in the book of Ruth. A famine hits the land. Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi are widows who are left without food, so they go to Moab. There, Ruth meets a family relative who cares for her and Naomi by providing extra from the harvest. He eventually takes Ruth to be his wife, and the result is that Ruth is lifted out of poverty and cared for in a most beautiful way.

The Old Testament made it clear that true religion wasn't just doing religious services, but caring for the most vulnerable. Consider Isaiah 1:10-17 (Read). And this idea carries over in the New Testament. The early church saw that those who were displaced, in need, lost jobs due to persecution and hardship should be cared for. In Acts, we are told that they each sold belongings and gave to those who were in need, willingly doing so. And there was not a needy person among them (Acts 4:34). So John can write and say that love of God is seen in love of neighbour (1 Jn. 3:17-18).

What this means is simply this: Christianity cares for the vulnerable. Those who can't take care of themselves. It doesn't have to be organized by the church, but it ought to be the impulse of every believer. There are times where churches do organize ministry because there are those who are neglected for various reasons (see Acts 6). Our church has a mercy ministry for this very reason. Joel, Carlos, and Bernard are three men who work to care for those who are in need. Connected with our Pastoral Care Team and our Parish Nurse, we want to provide ways of caring that meet the whole person's needs.

The second part of pure religion is to be unstained by the world. It is tempting to read this in isolation from the other commands. But in its context, what James seems to be implying is that Christian care is different from the way that the world cares. We aren't to be tempted into the thinking of this world in terms of how care looks.

Just consider what we are witnessing in Canada. In the past few years, we have gone from valuing life to now promoting death. The most vulnerable people – those who struggle with mental health – can now apply for MAiD – medical assistance in dying. In other words, we are encouraging people to end their lives prematurely. Articles now show up telling people how virtuous it is to end their life rather than burden the health care system.

Life is valuable – from conception to natural death. The value of a life cannot be determined by dollars and cents. We cannot be stained by this kind of thinking. It places the value of life on productivity and efficiency rather than being made in the image of God. Our call is to care. The early church did this – they found children left to die and would rescue them, taking them into their homes and raising them. For this reason, non-Christians would say, “Truly they love one another.”

What does it mean to entrust ourselves to God when people do wrong to us? We don't get even. We don't respond harshly. We continue to love. And instead of attacking and retreating, we love deeply. This is the kind of Christianity that James says is pure.