

What is true religion? (Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

And are we practicing it?

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This week's texts examine the question, what is true religion?

The psalmist asks,

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;
who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors.

James offers a New Testament refrain: "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless."

Deception, accusation, slander, and sparring are the communication orders of the day, even in churches and denominations. In religious contexts there is often an emphasis on who can be in and who is out, who is God's chosen and who is not, which religion is right and which one is not, which denomination is most accurate and which ones are not. God, in Psalm 15, seeks those who speak the truth from the heart. No deception, please. No slander with the tongue. There is a great deal here about how we speak, and about bridling our tongues. This is a spiritual discipline

that requires fervent and constant practice.

Slander, deception, “fake news,” and accusation have found new homes in our culture. But this is not true religion. This is not religion at all. James reminds us that true religion includes being slow to speak and quick to listen and slow to anger. Being doers of the word and not merely hearers.

There is more finger-pointing these days, more dissecting and critiquing, and less listening to one another and learning how God is working and speaking to and through one another. James reminds us that every good and perfect gift “is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” True religion, religion itself, is a gift from God. A gift—not an obligation or a measuring stick. True religion comes directly from God to humanity, to creation. And that religion is not for the cutting off or the dividing of the world; it is to bring light into the world.

God calls us to undefiled religion, religion that “looks after the orphans and widows in their distress” and avoids being “polluted by the world.” This is a bit different from Mark 7, which examines the notion of defiled people and that which defiles. James 1 is looking at defiled *religion*, religion that is marred or impure in God’s sight.

These days, there is less emphasis on helping those in need and more emphasis on scapegoating them. Attacks on the vulnerable have become commonplace. When people of faith are silent, this is not true religion before our God.