



# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## Head, Shoulders, Heart, Tongue, and Hands

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ SEPTEMBER 24, 2023

**Y**ou may have noticed something a bit different about me this morning; I'm wearing glasses! I don't normally wear these because normally I wear contact lenses. Without my glasses, I can't see any of your faces. My vision is probably 20/200 or worse. When I go to the eye doctor and look at the eye chart, the big "E" at the top is just a black, fuzzy ball. My eyes have been gradually getting worse since 3rd grade. Over a year ago, I noticed I was starting to squint a bit and having a bit of trouble reading things far away. I knew I was due for a new prescription but kept putting it off. Finally, I got around to going to the eye doctor, who put up the eye chart, put a little machine in front of my face, and kept switching the lens power and asking me to read the chart. The letters got more and more clear until the bottom line was as clear as the top; we'd finally arrived at my new prescription!

But then the doctor flipped one more lens. The chart became extremely blurry, and I couldn't read below the 5th line! I asked, "What happened? I can't see anything." The doctor responded, "That's the prescription on the glasses you were wearing when you walked in this morning." I knew my prescription was outdated, but I had no idea it was *that* outdated. How had I not been walking into lamps and tripping over curbs everywhere I went? Had I been like a blind bat in a cave, unconsciously using echolocation to get around? OK, it wasn't that bad, they let me drive home, but my vision had become so poor, and I had become so

accustomed to my outdated prescription that I had forgotten what it was like to see clearly. Some of you know this feeling: you put on your new glasses and think, “Oh, that’s what the world looks like.”

The passage we are reading this morning from the Book of James is meant to have that effect on our “spiritual vision.” James will present us with a spiritual eye chart; he will show us what a Christian’s life is supposed to look like and invite us to compare our lives with the Christian model. Some of us might hear James’ description today and feel as I did at the eye doctor’s: “Uh oh. That’s what the Christian life is supposed to look like? I didn’t realize how far off track I’d gotten!” For us, it will serve as a challenge and reminder.

Others might be relatively new to faith or on the fence entirely about spirituality. Perhaps you have had negative experiences with Christianity in the past and for you, this might serve as a new perspective of what a Christian’s life is supposed to look like. Is it something that draws you in, something that appeals to you? Wherever you are this morning, let’s look at James’ spiritual checkup in James 1:26-27.

**I**f anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.<sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

If the Biblical writers were characters in a TV crime series, I think James would be the “bad cop” in a good cop-bad cop interrogation sequence. He comes out swinging.

James’ main idea is that your religion should change your heart. When we hear “religion” in the 21st century, a lot of things pop into our minds. There are many different religions today:

Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, etc. Religion sometimes has a negative connotation. Someone might say, "I'm spiritual but not religious." According to James either you are worshiper of God and a follower of Jesus, or you are a worshiper of pagan gods and pagan religions. "Worthless" is the same word other writers use to describe other religions as well. According to James, if you claim to follow Jesus but your religion does not change your heart, your religion is worthless, and you might as well be worshipping the sun. If you say you are religious, your life should be tangibly different from those in the rest of the world. Specifically, your religion should change your heart in three ways: to control your tongue, care for the vulnerable, and keep watch over your soul. Let's talk about these one at a time.

**First, control your tongue.** In verse 26 James writes, *"If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue...[that] person's religion is worthless."* If you grew up on a farm or in horse country, the image of a bridle might be familiar. I grew up in Rhode Island where we didn't have much livestock, and we'd get very excited whenever we saw a dead deer on the road because seeing an animal bigger than a squirrel was rare, so I needed to familiarize myself with this imagery. A bridle is the contraption the rider puts on a horse's head to help control it. The bit goes in the horse's mouth, and the reins go in the rider's hands so the rider can direct the horse to go left, right, or slow down. Without a bridle, the horse goes where it wants. Without a bridle the rider is not in control of the horse; the horse is in control of the rider. In other words, James is saying if you don't bridle or control your tongue, your tongue will control you.

This might sound a bit excessive because our modern culture doesn't always ascribe great power to our words. In James 3:4-5, he calls the tongue a small rudder that steers a ship or a spark that starts a forest fire. This is a little different from the way our culture seems to view words. There is a good chance you've

heard the phrase, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” The phrase means that unkind words are just words; they are no big deal; actions speak louder than words. But the Bible does not seem to agree with that phrase. In fact, according to Proverbs 18:21, *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”*

When you find a list in the Bible of all the things a Christian should not do, sins of the tongue show up: gossip, slander, making fun of someone, name-calling, lying, or (fill in the blank). This is different from our culture today. You might hear someone say something when they are cut off on Bonita Beach Road that they hope a pastor doesn’t hear. Or you might say something in an argument and afterward say, “Well, I really didn’t mean it.” Even if we don’t mean it, our words carry the power of death and life. How many of you know someone who is trying to disprove words they heard as a child, “You’ll never amount to anything” or from a former lover, “You’ll never find someone to love you”? Even if someone didn’t mean it, how many of us are trying to get out from under “words”? Words stick with us.

Here’s a litmus test to see if you are in control of your tongue or if your tongue is in control of you. In the past week, has there been a time you said something and then immediately regretted that you had said it? Before you got any feedback, you knew it was a stupid thing to say but you said it anyway. You may now be thinking that you need to do a better job biting your tongue. The application of today’s text is not just to do a better job biting your tongue. Jesus said when He was talking about this topic in the Gospel of Matthew, *“Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks”* (Matt 12:34).

What comes out of your mouth reflects what is in your heart. If you are saying unkind things to your spouse, kids, or friends, the issue is not primarily with your tongue. The problem is that

unkind thoughts have been kicking around in your heart long enough to explode. Perhaps you're upset about a task your spouse keeps forgetting to do, or the kid at school who keeps making fun of you, and anger builds. By the time you've said something in anger, a lot of things have already gone wrong in your heart. The answer is not just biting your tongue; it's biting the angry thought that started the chain reaction in the first place.

It would be like a volcano realizing how harmful it can be and trying to hold back the lava flow only to have the magma build up to the point of an enormous explosive eruption. It doesn't work! We don't need a *tongue* transplant; we need a *heart* transplant. The question is not how do we stop saying bad things but how do we address the thoughts in our hearts with the truth of the Gospel of Jesus before bad things come out of our mouths? Otherwise, we might as well be treating heart disease with ibuprofen. We are addressing the symptoms, not the core problem.

**Second, true religion results in caring for the vulnerable.** In verse 27, James continues, *"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to remain unstained by the world."*

You might be surprised by the inclusion of orphans and widows in the description of a true Christian. "Wait, I thought I was a good Christian, but I haven't visited an orphan lately. Quick! Someone find me an orphan!" Let's pump the brakes for a moment and talk about the cultural context. In patriarchal societies, the husband and father brought home all the income. There weren't modern systems of welfare, life insurance, or social security, so if you lost the man of the home, in addition to grief over the loss, you were in deep fiscal trouble: no man, no money. Therefore, in Biblical times, orphans and widows were considered the most vulnerable members of society. They had needs they could not meet on their own.

Throughout the Bible, God consistently identifies himself as having special care for the most vulnerable. In Psalm 68:5, He is called, *“Father to the fatherless and defender of the widows.”* He identifies himself with a heart for the poor, the sick, the immigrant, the imprisoned, or anyone in need and unable to provide for themselves. Conversely, there are fewer things we see that anger God more than when the vulnerable are mistreated.

In the first chapter of Isaiah, God tells the Israelites that if they won’t care for the needy, they shouldn’t bother worshipping him. *“Bring no more vain offerings...New Moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly”* (Isa 1:13). God is saying He cannot stand it when people gather to worship him and, their worship is not matched by their actions. Just as James called religion “worthless” if not matched with control of the tongue, Isaiah calls worship “worthless” if not matched by care for the vulnerable. In modern-day words, Isaiah would say, “Don’t even bother going to church if you aren’t going to care for the needy.” In Isaiah’s and James’ context, the most vulnerable were widows and orphans. In our context today, who are the most vulnerable? It might be a lonely widow; it might be a migrant worker whose family is in Cuba; it might be a teenager from a broken home whose parents aren’t emotionally present.

According to James, care for the needy has two components. The first is generosity with *resources*, at which this church excels. Remember raising a half million dollars for the Hurricane Ian Fund? There is the wall of Compassion children sponsored by people in our church family, too. Giving resources to widows and orphans is a major component of the Christian life and something this church does very well.

The second component according to James is generosity with time. The word James uses for *care* is translated as *visit*. It carries the connotation of seeing something with your own eyes. For James, care is not just giving money, though it is that; it is also

personally and physically being present with the needy. It's actively using our hands and hearts to contribute to the vulnerable; not just giving our resources but giving our time and ourselves through the discipline of Christian service. When we physically serve the needy with listening ears or working hands and our time, something special happens inside us.

I saw this in a powerful way a few months ago when we took 6 kids from our youth group on a mission trip to South Carolina. On the first day, we were split into 2 groups to go to our mission sites. One group spent the day doing hard outdoor labor pouring out and spreading black mulch that stained their fingernails for the week. The other group of which I was a part went to a food pantry that had just received a shipment of 60 boxes of vegetables, half of which were spoiled rotten. I have some very beautiful photos demonstrating the state of the cucumbers. If you ask most teenagers what they'd like to do with their first week of summer, most wouldn't say, "I'd like to rinse moldy cucumbers off of potatoes for four hours." But our teens and an adult chaperone volunteered for that project and had a great time, tossing moldy cucumbers and scrubbing potatoes. (Unfortunately, zucchini squash was for dinner that night, and we couldn't even look at it!) But something happened when we served together with our own time and hands. Every member of that group will tell you they came back a different person. Everyone is begging to go back again. And if you told them they could choose between that trip and one that's exactly the same but without the service element, I think they'd all choose service. Maybe not the cucumbers again, but service. People ask me sometimes where the young people are in our church—we have them and they're awesome!

Service isn't only for mission trips. If orphans or widows were most vulnerable in ancient times, we might ask the question, "Who is the most vulnerable in our neighborhood? In our community? In our social circle? What might it look like to visit

them?" It might mean taking the time to have an extended conversation with a Mexican landscaper in our community or an Uber driver who left his family back in Cuba and is here alone and just wants to talk to someone. It might be visiting a widow or widower or spending time with a teenager who has no parental guidance or support. It might mean sitting with the lonely kid at the lunch table or taking extra time on the phone with a lonely grandmother. For some of us, it's even going to jail! Our Jail Ministry constantly steps into incredibly broken lives with the gospel which powerfully resulted in someone being baptized a few weeks ago. About visiting the sick, imprisoned, and poor Jesus said, "*As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me*" (Matt 25:40). Jesus is drawn to the needy just as God is. Where in your life are you serving "the least of these" with your time, resources, and energy?

I've been reading a book about polar exploration, and one of the writers tells the story of an expedition leader who, when his team was starving, gave one of his biscuits to a man who appeared to be in worse shape than he. The man wrote, "Thousands of pounds could not have purchased this one biscuit!" There are some gifts more valuable than all the money we can give. Is there anyone in your circle who is starving for a bit of your time? Maybe it's just five minutes more on the phone with your lonely grandmother or your lonely neighbor. Controlling our tongue and caring for the vulnerable were two areas about which James spoke, but there was one more area for our spiritual appointment.

**Third, keep watch over your soul.** As a final word, James says the true Christian should remain "*unstained by the world*" (James 1:27). What does this mean? It's simple: never do anything wrong! Sounds simple, right? When James says "the world," he doesn't mean every single thing in the world is bad.

There are different meanings of *world* in the New Testament; *world* can refer to evil practices that are habits of the world, but



not pleasing to God. That's what Paul means in Romans 12:2, for example, when he says, "*Don't be conformed to this world.*" So, practices like sexual immorality, cheating on a spouse, murder—we can agree these would be practices of the world. But so are things like greed, dishonest business practices, pride, and unkind words—things that are a lot more commonly accepted. And James does not say, "Have less of the world in you than others," but, to be "*unstained by the world*" (verse 27). When we live in the world, that's very hard to do.

Has anyone heard the term "lifestyle creep"? It's the idea that you might be content with your lifestyle, but then people around you start to adopt a different lifestyle and you feel the need to change yours. For example, you liked your brown fence. But then the Joneses built a nice white fence and now you start feeling that you need a white fence to be happy, too.

When we came here a year ago, we moved into a third-floor condo. We could never remember our big reusable grocery bags, so when we went shopping, my wife and I would load our arms with all the grocery bags and haul them up to the third floor—a Herculean effort—just so we could do it in one trip. Then one day someone walked by us with a wagon. Apparently, sometimes people purchase wagons and haul their groceries to the elevator, so they don't have to haul all their bags up the stairs. In all my adult life the idea of owning a grocery wagon never once crossed my mind, but now I was thinking, "You know, my life might just be a little easier, a little more complete with a grocery wagon..."

This can happen with all sorts of things. If we move into a wealthier community, we might feel pressure to conform our lifestyle to have a nicer home, a nicer car, or eat at nicer restaurants. If our friends dress in cooler clothes, we feel the pressure to get cooler clothes. There's nothing inherently wrong with nice cars, designer shoes, or grocery wagons; the problem is when this mushrooms into envy. That type of want and gradual shift can

happen in all sorts of things. We begin to think if they can do it, it's probably OK for us to do it, too. Slowly, what we watch online, what we do at school, or what we say to people begins to look more like the world's eye charts than God's eye charts.

What James means by "stained by the world" does not mean to be less stained than our neighbor. He means we are to be "unstained." If we are to control our tongue, care for the vulnerable, and be unstained by the world odds are that most of us aren't feeling like great Christians right now. We are all stained in some way; we let sins or bad habits sneak into our lives. Maybe you are thinking, "I'm a mess! I'm not a true Christian according to James!" If that's how you are feeling—**GOOD!** I think that is right where James wants us.!

Two weeks after my eye appointment, I put my new glasses on for the first time, and my first thought was, "Something is wrong." Everything seemed too sharp, and I had trouble focusing. When I turned my head, objects seemed to take a second to catch up. But the optometrist explained this was perfectly normal. For years, my eye muscles had been straining to make up for my poor prescription. They were so used to the strain that it would take a little while to get used to my new prescription. Trying harder to see wouldn't fix it. The only way I would get used to my new prescription was by continuing to wear the glasses until what was inside me began to be changed and molded by them. Trying harder wouldn't help me see better; only an internal change outside my control would.

There is something very bizarre about this passage in James. There are no commands. You might be thinking that we just talked about three: control your tongue, care for the vulnerable, and guard your soul. But those are *descriptions*, not *commands*. James did not say, "Here are the three things a Christian should do, now go do them!" He said these three characteristics describe a true Christian. James has no problem commanding people.

There are 50 imperative words in James' 108 verses. I think the application of today's scripture is not to bite your tongue, go find a widow to help, and never do anything bad. The application is to look at the spiritual eye chart, look at our own life, and ask the question: What needs to change inside of me so that my life begins to look this way? This cannot be accomplished by trying harder!

The word James uses for "spotless" is the same word often used in the Old Testament for "sacrificial lamb." A lamb was to have no blemishes or spots. The spotless lamb was sacrificed to take on our spots, stains, and sins. All of us are stained by the world. None of us control our tongue all the time. All of us struggle to consistently serve the vulnerable.

In 1 Peter, the Apostle is similarly challenging us to live holy lives as followers of Jesus and reminding us, "*You were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*" (1 Pet 1:18-19). Peter tells us two things: first, God sees us with Jesus-tinted glasses; stained though we are, because of Christ's sacrifice for us, God sees us as spotless. And second, we can't change our hearts on our own. Only Jesus Christ living in us can change our hearts to be like this.

We can't become the person we want to be by trying harder. We only become increasingly like the 20/20 Christian described in James 1 by being with Jesus. Walking with Jesus, wearing Jesus' prescription as uncomfortable as it may be at times, and accepting that because of Jesus' death for us, we are spotless in God's eyes no matter how stained we feel. God sent his only Son to bear the price for us.

So, if the application is *not* to try harder, what is it? What can we take away today?

1. **Bite your thoughts, not just your tongue.** Jesus says what comes out of the mouth starts in the heart. Next time your

tongue wants to go rogue, notice what happened in your heart first. What angry thoughts were you thinking? What pride got pricked? How can belief in Jesus Christ address the fear, the insecurity, or the bitterness that is trying to come through your words?

2. **Look for a place to serve, not just to give.** Giving is great—please don't stop giving. But James' challenge to us is "Are we visiting with the vulnerable?" Our Mission Director Trusha might know some great places for you to serve or volunteer. It may simply be an extra-long phone call to a widow you know is lonely or giving a kid in your neighborhood a ride when transportation is needed.
3. **Keep your eye on God's eye chart, not the world's.** Don't evaluate the standards of your life by whether you're a better person than the Joneses with their white fence. Watch out for the spots of greed, gossip, pride, and other sneaky things that are always trying to creep into your life like a grocery wagon you don't really need.

My contact lens prescription hasn't been updated yet. Some days I see clearly; other days, I don't. I think that's a picture of our spiritual lives; all of us are "in progress." Sometimes we nail James' eye chart, we walk with Jesus, we hold our tongue, and we love the needy. At other times, we have much further to go. Remember this truth: when God sees you, He sees you as the unstained, spotless lamb of his Son Jesus Christ. The more you walk with him, the more like him you'll become. It brings to mind the words attributed to John Newton: "I'm not what I want to be. I'm not what I ought to be. I'm not what I hope to be. But by the grace of God, I'm not what I used to be. And by the grace of God, I am who I am." ■