

Demonstrations of Loyalty
James 1: 26-27, Matt 5:38-48

Brothers and sisters, an orthodox Hasidic Jewish father was concerned that his son was not religious enough. So, he decided to pay for his son to live in Israel for a few years, hoping that it will inspire him to religious orthodoxy. The son returns; he thanks his father but says *"Father, living in Israel has inspired me to become a Christian!"*

Exasperated the father complains about this to his friend, and his friend says *"that's odd – I did that with my son and he became a Christian also!"* So, they decide to visit their Rabbi and ask his advice. But to their surprise the Rabbi says *"I also sent my son to Israel... and he became a Christian as well!"*

Bewildered and perplexed they decide to pray and bring this before God. So, the Rabbi says *"Heavenly Father we each sent our son to Israel, and they became a Christian!"* And God answers back *"well now, its funny you should mention that...."*

And speaking of lighthearted humor about fathers and sons, this particular comic strip about Calvin imitating his father always makes me smile... (show comic)

Calvin's father can't find his glasses, because as you can see Calvin has dressed up like his dad and then comes into the room and proceeds to lecture his parents with the kind of fatherly wisdom that his dad is known for. His dad is not very impressed but his mom thinks its hilarious.

It reminds us of how we are perceived by our kids, and when we discover what we look like in their eyes, we are wise at times not to take ourselves too seriously. Of course, we can't downplay the example that we set for them either.

Kids look up to their parents and they are always watching and learning from us and imitating what we do. This McCain commercial does a good job of capturing that dynamic between son and father. (show video)

So, brothers and sisters these humorous, light-hearted, and heart-warming examples highlight the father-son context for what James is teaching us this morning.

It's all about sons being like their fathers, like father like son as we like to say – especially when it comes to being religious. Which is what James means when he says *“if anyone thinks they are religious...”*

Now normally being religious relates to the concerns of the Jewish father in my opening joke; observing the Sabbath, following the dietary laws, the clothing and haircut laws – we know what that looks like right? That's being religious.

But what James is referring to are people who are imitating their heavenly Father in the same way that a son tries to imitate his dad.

They obedient to what Jesus had taught in Matt 5, because they want to be, as Jesus says in vs. 45 *“sons of your Father who is in Heaven.”*

Because as we learned two weeks ago from vs. 18, we have been given new birth by God's word, so for James this imitation – being religious - is the natural progression that takes place as a child gets to know their father.

Brothers and sisters, if God is our Father in this way, then as his children it is only natural that we should want to imitate Him, to show that we are like Him. Maybe you can you think of a way in which you imitated your father when you were younger, or perhaps how you are like your father now?

So naturally, that begs the next set of questions we should consider and think about. *“How are you imitating your heavenly father? How does ‘like father like son’ apply to you and God?”*

Maybe we've never thought about this kind of parental relationship with God before, and we've never really considered that being religious is really about the ways in which we seek to imitate God, and to show that we are his children – born of Him.

But an even more poignant question to reflect on is whether we have the excitement and desire and single-minded focus of child who wants to imitate their father? Maybe this childlike admiration that imitates the Heavenly Father is part what it means for us to become like children?

So brothers and sisters as we look at what James says about bridling our tongue, looking after widows and orphans, and keeping ourselves unstained by the world, its my prayer that the Holy Spirit will give us that childlike admiration and desire to be like our Heavenly Father. I don't think you can find a better demonstration of loyalty than that.

But here's the challenge brothers and sisters – in order to be so enamoured with our Heavenly Father, we need to see Him, know Him, observe Him, spend time in His presence.

You can't buy the same cologne as your dad to smell like him if you don't know which cologne he wears. You can't really imitate him if you don't know about his work ethic, or what he likes or dislikes or what his values are.

You can try, but people who really know your dad are going to see that you've got it wrong. You might wear work boots like he does – they've got no mud on them.

So James cautions us that if our exuberance to imitate God is not shaped by the three characteristics he outlines, we're not imitators – we're poseurs.

So characteristic number one, a bridled tongue. This draws from what we learned last week as James emphasized the importance of being quick to listen and slow to speak. There the emphasis was on desensitizing our tendency to respond to all the external stimuli, so that we can listen for God's word.

But now James' shifts the directive about speaking - we are to bridle our tongues. For those familiar with horses, you know a bridle is put into the horse's mouth so you can lead it, direct it. And James will come back to this metaphor later in ch3 when he goes into greater detail on the taming of the tongue.

But as a description what imitating our Heavenly Father looks like, or sounds like - perhaps it's helpful to think of that fatherly trait of "being a man of few words." Many people describe their fathers in this way; *"he didn't say much, but when he did, you listened... because it was significant and important and profound."*

And closer to the point, this is a godly trait we should imitate not because God is a God of few words, but because He is a God who does not speak an idle word, He does not speak a careless word, or a casual word.

Every word of God is intentional, specific, focused, as Isaiah 55:11 says *"It will not return empty, but will accomplish what God desires, and achieve the purpose for which He sent it."*

So, while controlling our tongues certainly means avoiding lies, gossip, slander, swearing, and cursing, the more positive characteristic for emulating our Heavenly Father is to speak intentionally and purposefully, as Paul says in Eph 4:29 to speak *"only what is helpful for building others up according to*

their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

As well as Eph 5:19-20 *"speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks..."*

And lastly, it should be understood in terms of using our grace gifts such as in 1 Peter 4:11 *"If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God."* What better way to imitate our Heavenly Father, than to bridle our tongues so that we are speaking like Him and sound like Him. Amen?

But there's one more part to bridling our tongue that we need to consider.

Maybe you've noticed how a little kid tries to imitate their dad in saying something, and they are trying their hardest or their best, but they are just getting the pronunciation hopelessly wrong. But we think it sounds so cute, so we just let it slide instead of correcting them.

That's one of the dangers of not bridling our tongue, we can sincerely think that we're imitating our Heavenly Father in what we say... and be sincerely wrong in that, so as James says *"we deceive our hearts."*

For example, did you notice how many time Jesus says in our reading from Matthew *"and you have heard it **said**..."*

That's because the Teachers of the Law had been speaking God's word to God's people, but saying it in such a way that it was wrong.

For example, *"an eye for an eye and the tooth for a tooth"* was intended to prevent excessive retaliation for an offense. But by Jesus' time it was being said to justify taking revenge and extracting what was owed for the slightest offense.

They sincerely thought they were speaking like God, but they were sincerely wrong, and they were deceived. So, Jesus has to correct things like this, *saying "you have heard it said - but I say to you... Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes*

you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also..." Bridle your tongue to speak God's word correctly, not to twist it and make it say something God did not intend.

Furthermore, the religious leaders would **boast** of their obedience to God's Law. They spoke of it as if it gave them righteous standing before God. In Jesus' parable in Luke 18, two men go to the temple to pray, and the Pharisee prays loudly *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."*

Brothers and sisters, bridle your tongue and don't let it take credit for what God's grace has wrought in you, how His word has saved you. Speaking in such a manner about your obedience and devotion, your correct doctrine and teaching and so on avails you nothing.

Remember Jesus finished his example saying it was the tax collector who went home justified before God, having simply confessed *"Lord have mercy on me a sinner."*

Brothers and sisters, unless we bridle our tongue so it boasts in the Lord instead, what James says is true, *“our religion is vain”* – meaning it accomplishes nothing in regards to our salvation or sanctification. As Paul says in 1 Cor 4:7 *“What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”*

Which brings us to the next characteristic James gives for imitating God, which he says makes our religion, our imitation of God, pure and undefiled; and that is to visit orphans and widows in their distress.

But let us be careful not to speak, or even think, *“Lord I thankyou that I am not like other Christians – those greedy capitalist Christians, those uncaring fundamentalists who only care about doctrine, or those right-wing Christians mixing in with politics - I do as your word says, I visit the widows and orphans in their distress and make sure that I’m helping the poor! That’s real Christianity!”*

This is not a qualification that “social justice” must be a focal point of your faith otherwise its not true Christianity; this is about imitating God’s care and concern. God’s reveals His in heart in Ex 22:22 saying *“Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless.”* And in Ps 68:5 where He is describes as being *“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows.”* God’s heart has a soft spot for those who are defenceless and have no one to help them, and can only turn to Him.

So, this is about imitating God as a giving God, whom James has already described for us as giving generously to all without finding fault, echoing Jesus description in Matt 5:45 where God sending the rain on the righteous and the wicked.

But even more, this example is about imitating God in a way that shows you fully grasp your own standing before God. If you recall the metaphor of the mirror from last Sunday’s message, it was all about having God’s word show us our shortcomings and failures and our sins so that we realize we need Jesus.

Brothers and sisters when we see ourselves standing before God, we will see ourselves as having nothing worthwhile or good to offer him. All we have is our sin, rebellion, self-righteousness and our treacherous and fickle hearts. The truth is that we are not a good investment for the return we give based on what we bring to the table.

So, if we know this about ourselves spiritually, we will be naturally drawn to and willing to engage with those who reflect this reality materially. Do you understand this?

There is nothing inherently more godly or spiritual or virtuous about being a widow, orphan, or being poor and needy and lacking wealth and being impoverished. In fact, widows and orphans are a bad investment if you are looking for some sort of return in terms of wealth or influence or connections.

But - we go to them and help them in their need, because we recognize it, we see it and know it in ourselves before God, and He is the kind of God who helps spiritually worthless

people such as ourselves and we wish to imitate that generous giving heart of our Father. Amen?

This is what make our religion pure and undefiled – meaning that our imitation of God accurately reflects God’s heart. But... our hearts – as James has pointed out earlier - are easily led astray by our desires and temptations.

So as James identifies this generous charitable characteristic of God’s heart, the temptation is for us to say *“great, as long as we’re helping the poor and needy – all that doctrine and theology and covenant framework stuff doesn’t really matter. All that church politics and governance, forget about it! Don’t get all “nit-picky” about sex and marriage and personal lifestyles... that’s so legalistic, just focus on love instead!”*

So this is why James adds a third characteristic for imitating God, and it is *“to keep oneself unstained by the world.”*

This is how James’ addresses our tendency to *“sin all the more so that grace may increase for us”* (Rom 6:1) and disregard

God's laws because James 1:27 says that pure religion is all about helping widows and orphans. (Bridle our tongues here brothers and sisters)

James wants us to understand that if we are going to be sons of our Father in Heaven, we must also pay attention to Jesus words in Matt 5:48 *"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Now this perfection that Jesus speaks of here is the same word for the maturity and completion that James has already spoken to us about earlier in 1:4 *"Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*

Brothers and sisters, we can't do a Meatloaf imitation of God, where 2 out of 3 ain't bad. If we don't imitate the holiness of God in our personal lives – our religion is as impure and defiled as if we are neglecting the widows and orphans.

We need all three characteristics, bridling our tongue, care for the widows and orphans, AND keeping ourselves unstained by the world - holiness.

And this makes sense because James has already explained to us in 1:18 that we receive new birth from God's word SO THAT... *"we might be a kind of first-fruits of all that He created."*

Brothers and sisters, not only should we be Holy *"because God is Holy"* (1 Peter 1:16) it is what God has purposed for us as first-fruits. The first fruits of any harvest we set apart, dedicated to be given to God as an offering, used for His purposes – and that is the definition of Holy.

So, to keep oneself unstained by the world is to imitate God in His purposes and plan. It is essentially as Jesus says, in Matt 6:33 *"to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven."* Not our own plans and ideas, not the world's goals and priorities.

And neither is it retreating from the world around us, to deal with it at arm's length and avoid engaging the business, politics, media and education, so that we don't get soiled. No... James says we are "visiting" the widow and orphans, not sending donations to other people so they do it for us.

Remember what Jesus' prayed in John 17 to the Father, *"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one"*

Now James will give us a whole lot more teaching about this later on in chapter three all the way through to the end of the letter in chapter 5. He's got almost two chapters expounding on how to live a holy life, being in the world but not of it, and we'll get to that later.

So, for now – just realize that genuinely imitating God means that our lives do not follow our society's pursuit of happiness, they are not focused on our own goals and dreams. Rather we keep ourselves unstained by setting ourselves apart and living by the Holy Spirit.

In Gal 5:15 Paul teaches us *"walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."*

So we will stay set aside for our Father's mission and purposes; pursuing things like going out to make disciples, pursuing our work and careers to be stewards in our respective fields, and to be redemptive, reforming of the practice of business, politics, media, education and so on according to God's word in Creation.

And most importantly, reminding each other that whatever we're doing now – in this life – is just preparing us for something far better that is yet to come. We are building that anticipation of Christ's return and the New Creation - the Kingdom of our Heavenly Father! Amen?

Well brothers and sisters, we've finished the first chapter of James. Congrats! And from this point forward James is going to take us deeper into each of these three characteristics by which we can genuinely imitate God and demonstrate our loyalty to Him.

But as we've been introduced to what characterizes our Heavenly Father this morning, I pray you will have come to see and know God is a way that make you want to imitate Him.

That you would not be so focused on the bridle for your tongue, so much as you would hear your Father's beautiful voice...

That you would not be so focused on the care of widows and orphans, so much as you would be moved by your Father's tender compassion and care...

That you would not be so focused on what might soil and stain you in the world, so much as you would be inspired by the Father's amazing plans for making all things new!

That as you see these characteristics of your Heavenly Father you just want to be like Him! So brothers and sisters, God helping us, may we all demonstrate our loyalty and be sons of our Father in Heaven. Amen.