



TEST NO.3: THE RELIGION TEST

There's a T-shirt design that's been doing the rounds over the past few years, based on a certain Richard Dawkins quote:

*Science flies you to the moon;
Religion into skyscrapers.*

Not exactly deep or accurate.

But it does reflect the fact that religion has had a bit of bad press in recent years. Whether you're talking Islamic State extremists or child-abusing Catholic priests, religion is often portrayed as being more trouble than it's worth. And when religion goes wrong, it goes badly wrong (as anyone with a knowledge of the Crusades will tell you).

Which is why a lot of Christians will say, "Christianity isn't about religion, or a set of rules: it's about relationship – a relationship with Jesus." Which is kind of true ... except our relationship with Jesus is sometimes referred to as a 'religion', even in the NT.

So, what does it mean by that? And what difference does it make?

All will be revealed as we look at test no.3:

James 1:19-27

OK, so 'religious' gets mentioned once, 'religion' twice. What is James talking about here?

The word for 'religion' here is the Greek word *threskeia*, and in the NT it refers to a way-of-worship, which is a pretty good description of religion, I think – even Christianity. Because yes, Christianity is a relationship, first-and-foremost, but every relationship has its rules, right? Think marriage, family, friendships.

What James is saying here is: "If your relationship with Jesus is genuine, it will show in the way you practice it." To be specific, it will show in our:

1) Listening (vs19-21). To have a relationship with God you first need to listen, and that requires some preparation. It's a bit like gardening: before you can sow a seed, you need to prepare the soil. And our hearts are the same.

In practical terms, we need to:

- **Quieten down.** "Be quick to listen, slow to speak," James says here. 21st century society is a noisy place, and everyone has something to say – whether it's worth listening to, or not (and that includes us!).
- **Calm down.** "Be slow to become angry," James also says. People can become easily outraged, without considering what another person might be trying to say. It can show in our attitude towards God, too.
- **Open up.** "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent." The Greek for 'moral filth', *rhyparian*, comes from a root word associated with ear wax. I.e. unplug those ears! Make space for God to speak.

Sadly, we live in a world that has by-and-large rejected God, where evil is commonplace, and where opinions can drown out truth. If we're going to hear God speak to us, we have to be different. We have to be willing to *listen*.

2) Looking (vs22-25). According to James, the main way God speaks is through the Bible, which acts as a kind of mirror. And the purpose of a mirror is? To see yourself.

Now if I'm honest, there are times when I don't want to see myself; when I like to fool myself that I've still got the boyish good looks I used to have / like to think I had. However, the more time I spend in front of that mirror, the more I begin to see the 'real' me (please note: this is not an excuse for vanity. Just realism).

The Bible acts in a similar way – it's a mirror to the 'real' you, the person you *really* are. But it only works if you:

- **Spend time on it** (no casual glances, here).
- **Read it often** (make it a habit, a lifestyle choice).

Interestingly, in the tabernacle, the Israelite 'holy tent', there was a large bowl for ceremonial washing, the inside of which was lined with hundreds of bronze mirrors (Exodus 38:8). The idea being: if you're going to know God's cleansing in your life, you've got to be willing to gaze into the Bible, and see yourself as God does.

3) Living (vs26-27). The final step in passing the 'religion test' is to live it. The rabbinic way of reading the Bible was not to ask, "What does this mean?" but "How does this work?" And that's where James is coming from here.

How can we put our faith into practice? We need to:

- **Watch what we say.** According to James, our faith is worthless if we can't control our tongues. We can go to church as much as we like, read the Bible as much as we like, even pray as much as we like, but if we have a runaway tongue, it means nothing.
- **Watch out for others.** James makes it clear here that people matter to God – body, mind and spirit – and should therefore matter to us, too (Deuteronomy 24:17-18). As someone once said, people don't care what you know unless they know that you care.
- **Keep ourselves clean.** Or "from being polluted by the world." Does that mean no TV / cinema / non-Christian books / secular music / pop culture? No. What it means is: yes, engage with the world, but don't succumb to its influences. Filter everything!

So, the kind of religion that God accepts is one that puts this set of books into practice. Because like every instruction manual, you have to do something with it; you have to *follow* the instructions. Otherwise, it ain't Christianity!

The Score

Anyone here seen *Kingdom of Heaven*? It's a pretty good movie (if you ignore the historical inaccuracies). But there's a scene in which the main character, Balian (played by Orlando Bloom) is talking to an old knight (played by David Thewlis) about the fact that he's lost his religion. And the old knight says to him, "I put no stock in religion. Goodness, what God desires, is in your mind and your heart, and what you decide to do every day."

And that, I think, is what James means by religion here. So, how are you doing with test no.3, the 'religion test'? Is it a pass, or a fail? Truth is, if it's down to us, it's always going to be a fail! And that's why we need Jesus. Because Christianity isn't down to us, first-and-foremost; it's down to Jesus, and what He has done for us. But even so, it has to show.

With that in mind, here are a few more questions to mull:

- How can you improve your spiritual listening skills?
- What needs to change in your attitude to the Bible?
- How does your faith impact your life, and others?