

Semicontinuous
Song 2:8–13
Ps. 45:1–2, 6–9

Complementary
Deut. 4:1–2, 6–9
Ps. 15

Jas. 1:17–27
Mark 7:1–8, 14–15,
21–23

Pure Religion

Goal for the Session Adults will affirm with James that Christian faith includes social ministry and personal morality.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on James 1:17–27

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Aaron L. Utti

One not doing the Word is deceiving him/herself. This is like a person who looks into a mirror and then goes away unmindful of his or her faith. What is this deception about? On a practical level, someone might say, “I really believe in Jesus; I really believe in the resurrection,” but then give no evidence of such faith in dealing with his or her neighbor (2:18–19). It is not enough merely to hear the word. James promises that hearers will be blessed *in their doing* (cf. Luke 11:28; 12:43; John 13:17). The mere hearer is deceived; the doer is blessed.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Haruko Nawata Ward

Historian Jeannine Olson noted Calvin’s contribution to modern society through his creation of welfare institutions. The city of Geneva during the Reformation period had many poor, widows, and orphans. Calvin himself came to Geneva as a French religious refugee. In his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541), Calvin established the General Hospital and designated the offices of deacon and deaconess to supervise citizens’ works of mercy as the “doers of the pure religion” in care of the poor.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Archie Smith Jr.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words. James counsels us to a practical morality that is quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. What we do matters, and what comes out of our mouths can make a difference, for good and for ill. But our actions speak louder than our words. Words may touch our emotional life and help us anticipate what is going to happen. But our actions establish the structures of meaning that build our worlds. Through faithful activity we create and re-create ourselves in trustworthy ways and help build worlds worthy of trust. Actions add value to our words and give them life. In this way, morality has the practical aim of creating relevance, meaning, and integrity in the world.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Peter Rhea Jones

The justly famous definition of genuine religion at James 1:27 is juxtaposed against a religion that is “worthless” (1:26), “barren” (2:20), or even “dead” (2:26), so the stakes run high. In a kind of dialectic of Christian existence, James understands pure religion as being inclusive of both social ministry and personal morality. One’s relationship to God means showing mercy (2:13), striving for peace (3:18), helping the needy (2:15–16), loving the neighbor (2:8), and recognizing the social justice of a fair minimum wage (5:4). In terms of personal morality, it means keeping from the “stain” (Moffatt) and being “uncontaminated” (Jerusalem Bible).

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

James 1:17–27

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

For Responding

- option 1: paper and pens, Resource Sheet 1
- option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 2, pens
- option 3: piece of newsprint, marker, magazines, glue stick or tape

It is always helpful for the leader to be the first person to arrive. It allows you to arrange the room, get settled yourself, and be a warm, welcoming presence for participants as they arrive.

The letter of James includes more than 100 imperatives, pleading for Christians to demonstrate their faith to others with action.

Focus on Your Teaching

Many Christians feel confused about the relationship between Christian belief and Christian action. Is one more important than the other? Can one exist without the other? Unfortunately, some denominational cultural wars have pitted Christian evangelism against Christian social justice, causing further confusion. Some in your group may believe that Christians should favor one over the other.

Today's lesson provides an opportunity to examine that relationship. Encourage participants to see this as a both/and characteristic of discipleship. Both Christian faith and Christian action arise from the same source, Jesus Christ.

Empowering God, may your words open my mind and heart to the strength you give through your Spirit to work in the world. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants as they arrive and introduce any newcomers.

Have participants turn to the person next to them and tell them about a person in their life who practices what they preach. Each participant should take only a couple of minutes to describe the person's actions. As a single group, have participants call out characteristics of people who practice what they preach based on what they heard from their partner.

Tell the group that today's lesson is about the relationship between our beliefs and our actions as seen in the book of James.

Lead the group in this prayer or one of your choosing:

Loving God, for the testimonies of those who have gone before us, we thank you. May your discerning Spirit guide us during this study so that we are witnesses to your transformative light. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have participants find the book of James in their Bibles. Invite a volunteer to read James 1:17–27 aloud.

Ask the group to read the passage again in silence and choose one phrase or sentence that most sticks in their mind. After a minute has passed, invite people to call out the phrase or sentence and offer a brief comment about what intrigues them about it.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on James 1:17–27) and have a volunteer read the “What?” excerpt aloud. Invite initial reactions to the excerpt. Have volunteers read aloud the three biblical passages named in the excerpt that also promise hearers will be blessed in their doing (Luke 11:28; 12:43; John 13:17). Note that James’s words are supported by Jesus’ teachings.

Tell the group that for a time in the history of the Protestant church the book of James was viewed with suspicion. Martin Luther, one of the original reformers of the church, believed the book of James *only* emphasized Christian actions as important. Luther believed that the apostle Paul’s message of salvation by faith alone proved that any attempt to win God’s approval by our actions was foolishness. Therefore, he argued at one point that the book of James should be removed from the Bible. As generations passed, however, most came to believe that it is not an either/or argument. People should believe *and* act according to our faith. Have participants take a few minutes and find passages in the Gospels where Jesus demonstrates and insists on followers doing concrete actions of mercy and justice. Some examples they may find include Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 6:27–31, 43–45; John 13:14–15.

Invite a volunteer to read the “Where?” excerpt aloud. Ask participants to name examples where Christian communities and churches have demonstrated their faith through actions helping others. Examples mentioned may include establishing schools and social programs, or participating in civil rights or antiwar struggles.

Read James 1:26–27 aloud again to the group. Ask:

- ✧ How do verses 26–27 connect with verses 22–25?
- ✧ What mandate do verses 26–27 present to Christians?

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

1. **My Witness** Give each participant a piece of paper and pen. Have a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt to the group. Have people make a list of three or four of the faith beliefs they hold as most important for Christians to have and another list of three or four kinds of actions they do as disciples. They may wish to use some of the actions read in the excerpt if they are relevant to their lives of faith.

When they have finished, invite participants to take a minute or two to reflect on these questions. Answers will not be shared but they may wish to write on their paper.

- ✧ How does my personal morality resemble James’s definition of religion?
- ✧ How is my involvement in social ministry similar (or not) to James 1:17–27?

- 2. The Transforming Current** Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (The Transforming Current) and a pen to each participant. Explain that this is a longer excerpt from the same author as the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt and another volunteer read Resource Sheet 2.

Invite participants to silently read the excerpts again and then consider the illustration on Resource Sheet 2. Have them think of themselves as one of the many creeks running into a Christian current that can transform the world. Ask them to write actions they take individually and other actions the larger movement takes that help transform the world into a more peaceful and just place. Finally, ask them to think of a few actions they can take in the next week and to write them down. They may be actions of practical morality or community acts of justice. Stress that they are all part of this transformative current.

- 3. A Genuine Religion Collage** Have a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Invite participants to sit around a table with a piece of newsprint titled “Genuine Religion.” Have them find pictures in magazines of their understanding of genuine religion based on today’s lesson and paste them on the newsprint, forming a collage. Consider posting the collage in the classroom or somewhere in the church where others might see it.

CLOSING

Ask participants to recall the phrase or sentence that initially stuck in their mind when they first heard the passage read at the beginning of the session. Now, after studying the focus scripture, is it still the verse that they will most remember from the text? Invite a few volunteers to respond.

Challenge the group to be doers and not just hearers of the Word. Also, invite them to be especially mindful of this challenge in the coming week and to return to the group ready to tell one action they took during the week. It may be an action of personal morality, such as being slow to anger. Or it may be a more social act of mercy or justice.

Conclude with this prayer or one of your choosing:

Loving God, you called us to live with one another and to act justly and love mercy. Help us to walk humbly with you as we listen for your Spirit as it guides us in your ways. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage class members to read the focus scripture and resource sheet before the next session.

Focus on James 1:17–27

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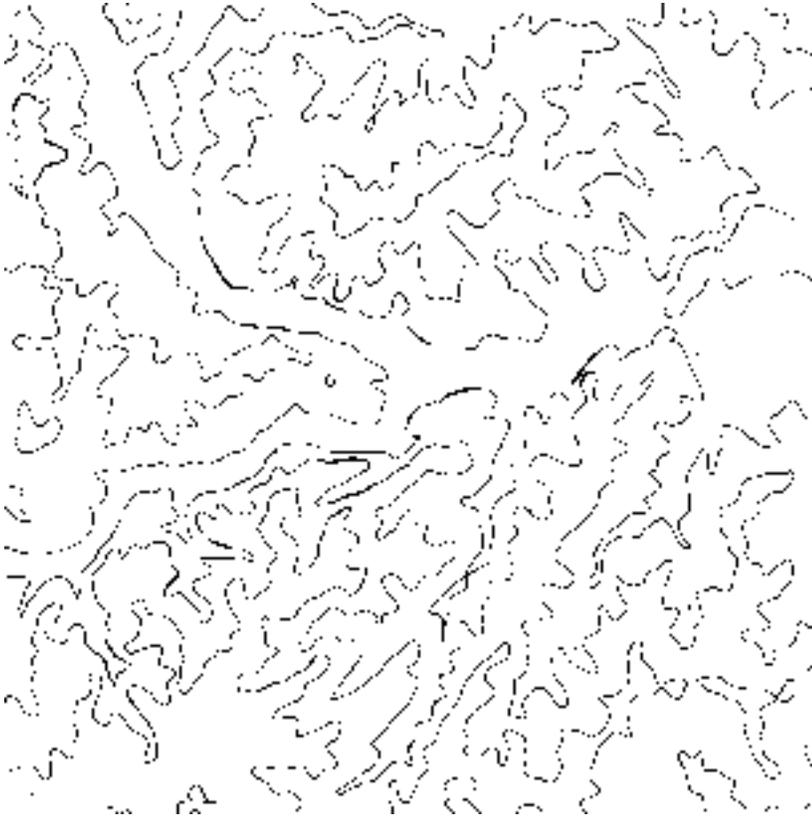
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The Transforming Current



James calls us to make a distinction between worthless and worthwhile religious morality. The discernment of the difference between these two kinds of religious morality is an ongoing process. It exists in a fluid relationship with the changing circumstances in which we find ourselves every day. Hence, James calls us to continual accountability and to a deeper appreciation of the vicissitudes of our emotional lives. By acknowledging and taking responsibility for our own anger, we may exercise self-control and become decision

makers, architects of relationships, and builders of the beloved community. This is what James requires of us. He does not ask us to undergo psychoanalysis or psychotherapy, or to engage in fundamental character reconstruction. Rather, he calls us to be responsible, taking seriously our emotional lives, our religious faith, and our behavior. We can envision ourselves as early signs of God's new creation. We can begin by embracing the whole of ourselves and taking responsibility for our constructive and destructive potentials. Living this way can increase our critical discernment. It can foster the development of persons and communities. Such living, when joined by the faithfulness of many others, can become a strong current that helps to transform the world.

Excerpted from Archie Smith Jr., *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 18.