

February 2026

Dear Brethren:

Are you religious?

Many consider that to be a loaded question, and no wonder. That is because many who claim to be religious have often given religion a bad name. Some professing to be religious make themselves targets of those searching for signs of hypocrisy, and there is often much hypocrisy to be found. Others can be put off by the annoying zealotry of certain evangelicals. One who "wears his religion on his sleeve" is often not the best ambassador to convince others to become religious.

### **Just What Do You Mean—Religion?**

What does it even mean to be religious? To begin with, what indeed is "religion"? *Religion* can be defined as a system of beliefs, practices, rituals, or ethics that relates humanity to the sacred, supernatural, or ultimate concerns of existence. In short, it is a belief system! And guess what? *Every single human being, without exception, has a belief system.* But, many will claim, "I am not religious." However, everyone *believes something* about his place in the universe, even if he claims not to know what that is. One who is either an atheist or agnostic is just as religious as one believing in an intelligent deity. If you believe that there is no god—that man has been left alone to chart his own way in the universe—that itself is a religion! That is because *humanism* is indeed a religion, and such ideology "informs" how one sees the world's problems and possible solutions. Even if you claim not to know what is true about the supernatural realm, you still make decisions for yourself day-by-day which *prove what you really think about life in the big scheme of things*. All of this is religion.

So, it is really never accurate to ask if someone is religious because, by default, he is! We all are. The real question is, what is your religion, and how do you practice that religion?

For those who eagerly claim to be religious, beware! The word, *religious*, is not a synonym for *righteous*. There are many in this world who consider themselves to be religious, but as God views it, they are anything but righteous. Being religious simply means that someone claims to worship something in a ceremonial way. But does it have value?

## Vain Religion

Are those of you who believe in God, and treat the Bible as the inspired Word of that God, automatically better off than the atheists? Not at all. That is because being "religious" is not always better than being a humanist. There are a lot of people who claim to believe in God, but the Bible tells us that there is something called "vain religion":

If any man among you *seem to be religious*, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, *this man's religion is vain* (James 1:26) [emphasis mine throughout].

The Greek word translated as *vain* means *empty, profitless*. So, God is telling us that a lot of people who lay claim to religion actually hold empty and profitless beliefs. How are they being any better than the atheist? They are not. Why bother to jump through hoops to perform sacred ceremonies if the object of that worship—the Eternal God—considers such practice to be worthless? In fact, the One True God considers *most human worship* to be insulting:

This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But *in vain they do worship me*, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men (Matthew 15:8–9).

It would appear that avoiding a form of "vain religion" requires the rejection of man-made rules which are in opposition to God's instructions. Could that possibly be the secret?

Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and *worshipping* of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, *vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind* (Colossians 2:18).

The word translated here as *worshipping* is the same word that means *religion*. In other words, the Apostle Paul is saying that any religion that makes angels the center of worship (for example), instead of God, comes from the arrogance of the human mind, and it is considered by God to be vain—empty and worthless. God seems to demand that *sincere worshipers* avoid all but *His very specific instructions* for ceremonial observance:

Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, *How did these nations serve their gods?* even so will I do likewise. *Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God:* for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and

their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. *What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it* (Deuteronomy 12:30–32).

## Pure Religion

If human beings are hypocritical by nature (and they are), is there really anything that legitimately can be called a *true religion*? The Bible says that there is:

*Pure religion* and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world (James 1:27).

The Greek word translated here as *religion* is the very same one that we already have been studying, meaning *a ceremonial observance, or an act of worshiping*. So, God is telling us that there is indeed something that He considers to be a pure (or clean) religion. Whatever that is, it is a form of worship that is legitimate, in contrast with the *vain religions* of the majority.

Notice that there are two specific elements included in James' definition of this *pure religion* from verse 27: care for those who are vulnerable and afflicted, and becoming unspotted from the world. This is not just a sappy admonition to "be nice." It just so happens to be a restatement of the very principles that Jesus Himself advanced in defining righteousness!

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew 22:37–40).

Those two "great" principles of God are detailed in particular by the Ten Commandments, defining exactly what it means to show love for God (Commandments one through four) and love for fellow man (Commandments five through ten). Jesus also made it clear that, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Therefore, being *unspotted from the world* (James 1:27) means living according to God's standard of morality, which is defined by those Commandments which require avoiding idolatry and Sabbath breaking. Likewise, showing compassion for the weak and

vulnerable is defined by the last six Commandments which state: do not lie, steal, kill, commit adultery, covet what is not yours, or disrespect elders. By their vain religions, most claim that these very Commandments have been done away, even though they are the expressions that tell us exactly what Jesus Himself loves and practices:

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: *for this is the law and the prophets* (Matthew 7:12).

It is amazing how many in this world—including atheists—embrace this Golden Rule, but reject the basis of that very Rule, which is *the law and the prophets*! It is God, not man, who defines what it means to be "a good person," and it is God, not man, who defines the correct way to show honor for Him in worship. *Pure religion*, therefore, is the only way of living and the source of ceremonial observance that God specifically ordains. Everything else is vain religion.

### **Self Awareness Is Key**

If you correctly reject every man-made religion and embrace only the Laws of God as He has revealed them, are you then assured of practicing pure religion? Not yet. There is more to it than just a profession, more to it than even a *sincere profession*. Recall our original citation from James:

If any man among you *seem to be religious*, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, *this man's religion is vain* (James 1:26).

This describes the sincere Christian—one who has embraced the real Truth of God, but one who is not truly walking in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. He knows what God wants from us and agrees with that standard, but he is still *not actually doing it*! Control of the tongue is cited as *a litmus test* for verifying pure versus vain religion. Perfect control of what we say is not God's only requirement, otherwise, all of the Commandments that Christ reconfirmed would be extraneous. They are not. But the level of self-control needed to harness the words that we utter acts as *a window to the soul* concerning every other practice.

For in many things we offend all. *If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body*. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great

things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be (James 3:2–10).

The point is to show us how *to bridle the whole body*, meaning to learn to obey all of God's commands. But testing our outward fruits regarding the words that we utter will tell us (and others) where we really stand, spiritually:

A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for *of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh* (Luke 6:45).

This is why James was inspired to highlight the direct relationship between *control of the tongue* and *vain religion*. A true Christian is one who recognizes these principles and is working to overcome—to harness the carnal inclinations and bring them into subjection to God's laws—even as Jesus Himself showed us His personal self control.

None of this can take place in us without a strong sense of self awareness! If we fail to see ourselves for what we are—and acknowledge where we are spiritually—there is no way that we will ever learn to *become converted* and begin to act and behave as Jesus did.

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass [mirror]: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed (James 1:22–25).

This is the very passage that leads into James' statement in verses 26 and 27 about *vain religion*! Accepting God's revealed definition of righteousness is Step One. But one who is called to see this Truth and yet still *fails to measure himself in that spiritual mirror* and make personal changes is failing Step Two, by *still practicing vain religion*.

This is the very reason that we keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread each year, to be reminded by God of the need to evaluate ourselves honestly and to strive to put out habits of the flesh that are in opposition to God's laws:

Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore *let us keep the feast*, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; *but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth* (1 Corinthians 5:7–8).

But *let a man examine himself*, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For *if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged* (1 Corinthians 11:28–31).

### **Act, and Act Wisely!**

If we never do the difficult work—with the help of God's Holy Spirit—of identifying and putting out those thoughts and behaviors that God hates, what good is our religion? He wants to see good fruits, and He has every right to require it:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but *he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven*. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, *I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity* (Matthew 7:21–23).

This warning from Jesus perfectly describes the case of one who is *very religious*, but nevertheless fails to receive salvation in Christ's Judgment. This is speaking of one who lives a life full of "religious works," but is counted in the end as practicing *vain religion*. If our ceremonial observances do not provide a means to make it into God's Kingdom, what good are they? It is empty and worthless as an exercise!

What, then, is the key to avoiding this terrible outcome? Christ tells us in the parable what the problem really is: ". . . depart from me, *ye that work iniquity*." Iniquity is sin. Sin is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). Therefore, all of these religious activities and sacrifices, though numerous, *were not according to Christ's instructions for obedience and*

*proper worship!* If they had been proper, it would not have been deemed unrepentant sin, and the individual would have received an eternal reward.

This is not advocating trying to "earn our salvation through works." This is the common diatribe thrown at us by ones who believe that God's Law "was done away." If you are trying to keep the spirit of God's Law by observing the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5), they will claim that you are actually trying to *earn a reward* from God. No, salvation is only through *faith and grace*. But grace is defined as *unmerited pardon from sin*. If God's Law was "done away" by Jesus Christ, then I need no pardon for anything! If the law is no longer binding, then there is no such thing as a "trespass" of that law anymore either. If there is no sin, there is no continuing need for forgiveness of sin! The entire concept of *forgiveness* and *grace* can apply only to one who acknowledges that *the Law of God is still binding upon human beings* and that sin against that Law *requires someone to pay a death penalty for that transgression*. The blood of Jesus Christ will never be applied to pay that death penalty for anyone who is still justifying a lifestyle of sin. Oh, the duplicity of all of these who use the name of Jesus Christ, but then claim that God accepts them "just as they are." That is indeed a vain religion!

Likewise, is it vain religion in the case of one who is called by God, but accepts His revealed Truth *only philosophically*? In this instance, he fails to follow through to show God a willingness to be converted, spiritually. That miraculous, spiritual transformation will never take place within the mind of anyone who is not *actively practicing God's pure religion*.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but *be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind*, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (Romans 12:1–2).

That ye put off concerning the former [conduct] the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And *be renewed in the spirit of your mind*; And that ye *put on the new man*, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:22–24).

The proof that your religion is not vain is shown by the transformation taking place in your life year by year. Practicing God's pure religion produces spiritual fruit! That is why Jesus said that His disciples would be compared to lights:

*Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matthew 5:14–16).*

The true, sincere, children of God are not angling to become "a light" by doing things that bring attention to themselves religiously. No, that is part of a *misguided evangelism* that often gives Christianity a bad name. Becoming a light is not to be the goal. The goal should be to draw closer to God by using His Spirit to be transformed in thinking. One who is transformed to think and act more like God will be casting a very bright light *as a by-product of this orientation of life*. *Being a light* is not the *primary goal*. Instead, the light results from the practice of God's pure religion. If you are *quietly living your faith*, you cannot help but make a positive impression upon people with whom you come into contact. Do not try to be a witness. Just live a life of faithful obedience to God's principles, and you cannot help but become a witness.

May every one of you—called by God through the revelation of His precious Truth—make full proof of your calling by learning to quash your natural thinking and replace it with the thinking of Jesus Christ. In so doing, you will be proving exactly what God's pure religion is all about.

With love and devotion in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jon W. Brisby