

January 20/21, 2024

“Faith & Religion”

Pastor Aaron Buer



SPEND DAILY TIME WITH GOD AS YOU READ, THINK, PRAY + ACT.

2024 Challenge: Finding Jesus in the Old Testament

JANUARY: Read Luke to see how the author points back to the Old Testament

Day 1 James 1:19-27 | Faith & Religion

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. James 1:22

James addresses what real religion is. He knows how easy it can be to just go through the motions of following Jesus. It's more than just showing up and listening to Bible teaching or doing spiritual things. Real religion shapes the way people live. It's belief in Jesus put into practice. James challenges the early church to not just listen to what God says in his Word but to actually follow through and do it. Their belief in Jesus should shape how they speak and care for one another, especially the most vulnerable among them. This is religion that isn't "worthless" (James 1:26-27).

We can also go through the motions of showing up at church, listening to a great message and reading our Bibles. But we often walk away unchanged. This week, we will see how following Jesus makes our faith real. This isn't about earning God's approval. Rather, it's about living differently because we know he loves us. Our deep gratitude for the forgiveness and new life we have in Jesus motivates us to put in the effort to grow. Real religion isn't about earning God's love and forgiveness, but it does result in life change.

TODAY: Review your religious habits. Ask God if you need to grow in discipline and to reveal what has become an empty routine. Ask for his help to do what his Word says out of gratitude. "God, help me live out your Word today in gratitude for what you've done for me in Jesus. Help me be a doer of your Word and not just a hearer. Amen."

JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: Read Luke 15. Highlight anything that refers to the Old Testament and how Jesus fulfills it. Note the three parables of "lost" things and consider any Old Testament images or references they point back to.

Day 2 James 1:19 | Quick to Listen

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen. James 1:19a

James writes to the early church which is scattered due to persecution. He's sharing what real religion looks like—a life shaped by belief in Jesus. His readers have fled their homelands. They know the need to be heard and understood during grief, pain and suffering. It's in this environment that James calls them to listen. Listening requires humbly valuing another's story, pain and perspective before responding or reacting.

We often struggle to listen to one another. We might not be speaking, but that doesn't mean we are listening. We may be forming a response or rebuttal and not truly hear someone. Listening requires intention. It might involve starting a conversation and asking questions. When we listen well, we are caring well. It's treating someone the way we want to be treated, which is Jesus tells us to do (Matthew 7:12). Listening well also shapes our responses. As we pause to hear the other person, we can also invite God to shape our words and actions through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us.

TODAY: Be an intentional listener. Throughout your day, ask God to help you not interrupt others but instead ask questions and gain understanding. Ask God to show you who needs someone to listen to them and then start a conversation.

JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: Read **Luke 16**. Highlight anything that refers to the Old Testament and how Jesus fulfills it.

Day 3 James 1:19-26 | Slow to Speak & Anger

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. James 1:26

James shares some hard truths with the early church. He says those who don't rein in their tongues have worthless religion. His practical words get right to the point. Hasty, angry words often escalate conflict and harm community rather than solve problems. James cautions believers to restrain reactive speech and to instead pray and ask the Spirit to calm their inner frenzy first. From a place of humility, compassionate truth can then be spoken in a constructive way. Ultimately, unreined tongues demonstrate an unchanged heart.

Likewise, our reactive comments can amplify strife and create additional hurt. Words matter. If we don't keep a "tight rein" on our tongues, then we aren't following Jesus seriously. We deceive ourselves when we think otherwise (James 1:22). We've all been on both sides of this issue. We've received hurtful words, from parents, teachers, coaches, friends, classmates or colleagues. We've also been the giver of hurtful words in moments of anger, frustration or disappointment. Through God's power, we can hold our tongues and bring life and healing instead of hurt (Proverbs 18:21). With God's help we can apologize for hurtful words and forgive those who've hurt us with theirs.

TODAY: Reflect on the situations when you are most likely to let your tongue loose. Share that struggle with a trusted, Christian friend, family member or your small group. Invite them to check in with you about your words in those situations. Pray for the ability to rein the tongue and respond in a way that reflects the character of Jesus.

JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: Read **Luke 17**. Highlight anything that refers to the Old Testament and how Jesus fulfills it. Note the title Jesus uses for himself and the Old Testament stories he points back to.

Day 4 James 1:27 | The Vulnerable

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress. James 1:27a

James expands on what real religion looks like by highlighting care for widows and orphans. These are the most vulnerable people in their society. James gets this teaching from Jesus. Jesus preaches the good news of God's kingdom and lives it out by caring for the vulnerable (Matthew 4:23). Caring for the vulnerable of society is a consistent theme throughout the Bible (see Isaiah 58:6-7). God cares for the people others might not notice or care about.

We reflect the heart of God when we care for the most vulnerable in our society. This includes befriending classmates who are bullied or social outcasts. Or we can come alongside a single parent struggling to make ends meet. We might support foster families or parents caring for children with special needs. Or we can befriend refugee families as they adjust to a new culture.

As we share our time, energy and resources with the vulnerable of our society we show the world what Jesus is like. We can share our faith with words and deeds, being those who listen to the Word and do what it says (James 1:22).

TODAY: Consider ways to help those who are vulnerable around you. Journal practical steps you could take this week like dropping off a meal, asking to hear their story or purchasing an item they need. Ask God for wisdom to know how and when to help.

JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: Read Luke 18. Highlight anything that refers to the Old Testament and how Jesus fulfills it.

Day 5 James 1:27 | Polluted Religion

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. James 1:27

James teaches his readers that real religion that reflects Jesus doesn't look like the world. By "world" James doesn't mean the created world that is full of beauty which God deemed "good" (Genesis 1). Rather, the "world" means the systems and ways of living that go against God as revealed in Scripture. It's the things that oppose the work of Jesus on earth. James knows how easily people can be influenced, even in subtle ways, by the culture they live in.

We are also immersed in a world that seeks to influence us away from Jesus. The world says truth is defined by an individual, not by God's Word (John 17:17). The world gives more value to people who look a certain way or achieve certain things, but God's Word says people have value simply because they are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). The world says sex can be experienced however we want with whoever we want. God's Word says sex is a gift to be enjoyed exclusively in marriage between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-6). The world says to hate your enemies and cancel them. God teaches us to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:44). With God's help, we can resist the lure of the world and live by his Word.

TODAY: Consider everything you read, watch and listen to. Does it encourage you toward Jesus or toward the world? Commit to allowing God's Word and godly voices to have the most influence in your life. Consider joining the Bible reading plan as we look for Jesus in the Old Testament.

JESUS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: Read Luke 19. Highlight anything that refers to the Old Testament and how Jesus fulfills it. Note Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and look up the Old Testament cross references listed in this section.