

**True Religion – A Biblical Perspective
(Jeremiah, Jesus, and James)
By Lieutenant-Colonel Wanda Vincent**

Introduction:

This Bible Study series is designed to be conducted in three sessions. It is not meant to be an in-depth exegetical look at particular Scripture passages. It is intended to stimulate dialogue, reflection, and action steps. The Inductive Bible Study method is used to help guide the discussion. Further personal insights by the study leader/facilitator are encouraged.

Before beginning this Bible Study, ask everyone in the group to share some initial thoughts on two questions:

1. Religion today is often dismissed as being irrelevant. Why might that be?
2. What do you think “true religion” looks like when it is lived out?

Let everyone have an opportunity to share their thoughts. Emphasize that everyone’s voice is respected and welcomed.

One of the greatest pieces of evidence for Biblical truth is the consistency of its teaching from the beginning to end. This series allows opportunity to consider “true religion” as expressed in both Old and New Testament teaching. Once the three studies are completed, spend a little time discussing the congruencies that appear between each. At the end of this material, you will see some of my reflections from the Kenya West context. I trust this will provide a global context to the topic at hand. I pray it will also stimulate more conversation regarding the Partners in Mission campaign.

Be sure to begin each session with prayer, seeking the revelation of the Holy Spirit who lives within every believer’s heart and who is our supreme Teacher.

Read the following Scripture portions and use the Inductive Bible Study Method (outline attached) to work through these passages.

1 True Religion - JEREMIAH

Jeremiah 22:13-16 “Woe to him who builds his house with unrighteousness and his chambers with injustice, who uses his neighbor’s services without wages, and gives him nothing for his work, who says, “I will build myself a roomy house and large chambers,” and cuts out windows, paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion. Do you reign because you

compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness, and then it was well with him? He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him. Is not this what it means to know Me? says the LORD.”

OBSERVATION

What is this passage saying as you read it for the first time? What grabs your attention?
What seems to be the strongest statements? What do you understand here at first glance?

INTERPRETATION

Who is the author and what do you know about him? (Allow sharing in the group before offering your own knowledge of Jeremiah.)

Here are a few facts:

- One of the greatest prophets of Israel
- Born the son of a priest (raised in a religious environment)
- Never reluctant to show his personal feelings, emotional and spiritual struggles
- Called people to repentance and transformation of their spiritual lives
- Endured a lot of opposition in his life and ministry
- Known for his deep love for his people. A true patriot who agonized over and with his people. He endlessly interceded for the plight of those who were oppressed.
- He led from his heart.
- Tackled corruption and authentic religion. (See 5:1-5; 7:1-11)
- He preached genuine spirituality (condition of the heart) above any ‘religious’ activity.

Jeremiah 22 – addressed specifically to the king of Judah (22:1) who was Jehoiakim at the time. Known for huge injustice and oppression (22:3,4).

How would you describe what is happening in verse 13? How can injustice and luxury co-exist? (Background: See 2 Kings 23:34-35 and compare to Lev. 19:13. What law was being broken?)

- Without being judgemental, what words would you use to describe Jehoiakim?
- What was being mistaken as the true marks of a king? (vs. 14-15)
- What are the true attributes of a spiritual life? (vs. 16)
- What was obviously the main message of Jeremiah in this passage?

APPLICATION

- What lessons does this Scripture have for my own life?

- Identify where in “your world” you see examples of injustice and luxury co-existing. (Note: be hesitant to point fingers at large scale examples. Try to think locally and personally.)
- Where or how do you see injustice and luxury co-existing in the church? If so, don’t be afraid to share examples.
 - What action steps can I take personally and what action steps could our church take (with the current Bible study group being included) to make a difference?

2. True Religion - JESUS

Short Reflection: Before probing into the Bible study, consider the following quote. Take a few moments to reflect and share what stands out. How do these thoughts strike you? What common thoughts are in your group? Are there any questions?

“Jesus’ mission is captured in a single vision with two dimensions. His hope for a restored humanity envisions well-being for people who are spiritually poor and people who are socially poor. And in their midst, righteousness and justice mark the events of his days and nights. Jesus lives right and makes life right with others. In Jesus’ code, to love is to be just. To be just is to love. And when we claim to follow Jesus, we are disciples of justice. Jesus’ mission on earth in his time is our mission on earth in our time.”

“Jesus and Justice” published by the International Social Justice Commission, New York

Following your discussion on the above quote, read **Matthew 25:34-40**.

OBSERVATION

As before, begin with simple comments/clarifications on what these verses are saying. It may sound basic but it is a good place to start. What words or phrases are commonly understood? Remember to use different translations to bring a fresh perspective. Are there some contemporary words used that are helpful?

INTERPRETATION

- What do you know about the style of Jesus’ teaching?
- Why does he begin this section with talking about “sheep and goats”? (Remember: Allow the group to share before providing any insights.)
 - Note: While this passage is sometimes referred to as a parable, scholars disagree on whether it is truly a ‘parable,’ though it has parabolic elements.
 - Note: Regarding the separation of sheep and goats, this often happened at night in the countryside. Sheep could tolerate cool air in open fields whereas goats needed

to be herded together for warmth. Also, Jesus often referred to ‘sheep’ as those who had a relationship with the shepherd (see John 10).

- To whom is Jesus speaking?
- Who do you think Jesus is referring to when he says “the least of these brothers of mine”? How should we interpret “the least”? Can there be more than one interpretation?
 - Note: Some scholars will say it refers to anyone who is hungry, distressed, or needy. Others say it refers to apostles and missionaries **or** all true disciples. (Open discussion about this should be interesting.)
- What is the biggest meaning relayed in this passage? And why was that important?
- How does the teaching here compare to Matthew 22:34-40?
- Are there other parables or passages from Jesus that reflect the same message?
- How does this Scripture compare with the previous lesson from Jeremiah?

Other thoughts that may help in the discussion:

- Many Scripture passages indicate that we will be judged by our response to human need.
- Jesus makes compassion toward himself equivalent to compassion for others and adversely, lack of compassion toward others is somewhat sacrilege.
- Pursuing justice was always Jesus' intention and mission for his followers.
- A good passage to discuss the implications of the sins of omission.
- However we choose to define “the least of these”, this passage can lend itself to a great discussion on how we treat outsiders who may be considered “the least” in society.

APPLICATION

Personal: What does this passage mean for my life? Where have I found myself re-considering my actions and reactions to others? Where have I been guilty of either sins of commission or sins of omission on this topic?

Group Discussion: Who do we see society looking upon as “the least”? What people around us are treated unjustly? Who feels excluded or like they are outsiders? How can we as a church respond better to the call of Jesus? Is there a willingness among the group to commit to some action steps as a result of this study?

3. True Religion - JAMES

James 1:19-27. Focus on verse 27: “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.”

OBSERVATION

What is being said in this verse? How is it linked to the previous eight verses? How do other translations or paraphrases word this verse?

INTERPRETATION

Who is the author of the book – James, the brother of Jesus (most accepted view). How would his relationship affect the writing and instructions? Is there anything else we know about James from the Bible? (Hint: Inner circle)

Who are the readers? – James 1:1 & 2:1 (Believers, scattered Jewish people)

What appears to be the overall reason for James writing this book? (Hint: Look at some of the headings of the chapters.)

Note: There is more focus on practical Christianity than theology in this book.

What specifically is James addressing in chapter 1:19-27? How would you describe the language in this passage – suggestive, implied, directive? How is it narrowed in verse 27 and what does that mean? (Note: Consider the fact that ‘orphans’ and ‘widows’ in this verse can refer to any person in society who is vulnerable.)

APPLICATION

In this step, use the specific example in verse 27 to consider the following:

- Who are the ‘orphans and widows’ in the context of my city, my church, my neighborhood, or my circle of family and friends?
- What is my response to them normally?
- How does this passage lead me to respond differently?
- Is there one action step I am willing to make? Either
 1. Spend some more time praying about and considering God’s direction for me regarding what I have learned in this study, OR
 2. Respond specifically in the coming weeks to what God has brought into my mind from this passage.
- Who will hold me accountable? (Don’t leave the group without some form of accountability.)

GLOBAL CONNECTION – Kenya West Territory

In the context where I currently serve, there are many vulnerable people. Women, children, people who are disabled, and people living with the stigma of HIV/AIDS are a few examples. Each of these groups of people have unique personal and social challenges. I discovered that widows, for example, can be particularly targeted. When a husband dies, the husband’s family often abandons any connection with the widow. She can be displaced from her home because the

husband's family has the 'rights' to the house and land. The husband has often been the one who handles the money in the house and thus the wife can be left without any resources. Widows often have several grandchildren that they are raising because their young single daughters brought babies home for them to raise. This puts added financial and personal responsibilities on them. At a time when they need extra support, often they have less than ever.

Social stigmas affect many people here too. I was somewhat alarmed to learn that families who have children or adults who are physically or mentally handicapped actually hide these family members from society. Some of our Salvation Army schools have sent their staff into the village to search for handicapped children to coax the parents to let these children come to school. We celebrate the successes and pray for more. The stigma attached to people living with HIV/AIDS is also still a reality. Women's Ministries is working hard to provide awareness, education, and a welcoming atmosphere for women who are suffering because of this.

People who are poor have been described as: *"those who are held captive. They are oppressed. They are victims of their circumstances. People living in social poverty need eyes to see beyond the barriers that imprison them. They need to be freed to explore a new future."*

(International Justice Commission)

The first day I arrived in Kenya, I was in shock. Struck by the poverty I saw the moment I left Kisumu airport. I was not expecting to see so much so soon. I thought I would have to go inland to the remote rural villages to see the very poor but it was not so. Poverty was everywhere. Many of the roads are in poor condition. Hundreds of markets line the streets with people working hard to make a living. Markets that are made with sticks and old iron sheets, or are simply a spot on the ground with goods lined out for people to buy. Over the past year, I've seen much more. Most houses in the villages have no indoor plumbing and many have no electricity. (I've now used more than one pit latrine!) Women and children walk long distances for firewood and water. Officers live without their full salary, which is a low income at best. I would agree that many of them are victims of their circumstances. They did not choose to be born here. Yet, many are beginning to see a way forward, a future. The Salvation Army is helping so many families find ways to generate income for themselves so that their children can go to school and their families can have nutritious meals. In some places the Army is providing larger support, like water tanks for schools so the children can drink safely.

Yes, the poor need eyes to see beyond the barriers that imprison them and many of them do, but sometimes they need help from others to "provide the eyeglasses" so that their sight (metaphorically) is improved and their hope strengthened. How are you willing to be part of that hope?

My prayer is that this Bible Study series will help increase conversations about ‘true religion’ and provide you with your own answers to how you can be “*doers of the Word and not hearers only.*”

God bless you!

Inductive Bible Study

Three steps:

Observation: What does it say? Simply understand what the verse is saying. What words or phrases are common? If there are several translations available, read them. How is the verse phrased differently?

Interpretation: What does it mean? Find the meaning of the verse(s) in its context. Why was it written? Who was speaking and who was being spoken to? Consider the background.

Application: What does it mean for my life? What lessons here speak to my current reality? What is God communicating to me? Where and how can I own the Biblical principle being taught here? What action steps will I take as a result of this Scripture?