

Sunday, September 2, 2012: James 1:17-27

My childhood church used offering envelopes with six checkboxes on them, a sort of spiritual scorecard. When I finally met James, hiding behind Paul, I proudly showed him my envelope. He laughed.

by [Wallace W. Bubar](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue

It was called the six-point record system. In the Southern Baptist church of my childhood, the offering envelopes in the pews had the usual line for your name and the amount of your contribution. But they also had six little boxes underneath where you could put a check mark, and next to the boxes were six actions: worship attended, Bible brought, Bible read daily, Sunday school lesson studied, prayed daily, gave an offering.

Somebody at Southern Baptist headquarters in Nashville had decided these were the six things that were worth recording. Not the Ten Commandments, not the nine fruits of the Spirit, not the eight Beatitudes and not the seven cardinal virtues. No, there were six essentials of the Christian life, and bringing your Bible to church was one of them.

To show up at church without a Bible in hand was unthinkable. Some visitors once came to the service and sat down in front of us. I whispered to my father, "Did you see that? They don't have Bibles!" He said, "Must be Presbyterians."

Even the size of the Bible seemed to indicate something about the sincerity of one's faith. Women toted them around in giant embroidered cases with lace trim. Men would carefully place their leather-bound *Thompson Chain-Reference Study Bible NIV* open on the pew in order to flaunt how dog-eared and underlined their Bibles were compared to others'.

As a kid I took this business seriously. I brought my Bible every Sunday and did all the other things prescribed on the offering envelope. I was proud when I could check off all six of those boxes. It was my spiritual scorecard. I knew as long as I was doing these six things, I would stay on good terms with the Lord.

It wasn't until some years later that I met James—I'd never really noticed him back there, hiding behind Paul. But I met James, and when he asked me about my faith I proudly showed him my envelope, with all the check marks in the boxes. Six out of six! He took one look and laughed. Then he said, "I think maybe you need some different boxes on there."

"Be doers of the word," James writes, "and not merely hearers, who deceive themselves." James is a helpful corrective to our tendency to reduce the gospel to a system of beliefs or doctrines, or to a matter of personal piety or self-centered spirituality. After all, Jesus didn't just want people to hear him and understand him, but to follow him and to do the work of the kingdom.

James defines true religion as "[caring] for orphans and widows in their distress." Now orphans and widows weren't on the six-point record system envelopes. There were no boxes for them. But according to James, that's what really matters in the end. The ultimate test of our faith is how we take care of the most vulnerable, the most powerless among us.

James even goes as far as to say that religion without action is "worthless," which is a little harsh, if you ask me. The religion of my childhood certainly wasn't worthless. It taught me to hear the word, to believe the word, to love the word and to treasure the word—all of which are important. But I needed James to teach me to do the word, to take it out into a hurting world.

Apparently, then, it's not about whether you've brought your Bible, but about where your Bible has brought you.

I once met a man who worked with a border ministry in Arizona, reaching out to people on both sides of the border—those in Mexico trapped in poverty and threatened by drug violence, and those who risk the journey through the desert into a foreign land, often at the mercy of human smugglers.

He told me that as a student, he had taken a mission trip with Campus Crusade to Mexico. They were to take the gospel to the people, apparently unaware that the

gospel had been there for several centuries. But they preached, showed the Jesus film and led Bible school for children in a poor village. One day, a young boy who had taken a liking to the man cheerfully grabbed him by the hand and started pulling him. The man didn't know what the boy wanted. The man couldn't speak much Spanish, and the boy couldn't speak any English. But together they walked around the corner to a small, ramshackle house. The boy opened the door and pointed inside. He was showing him his home, introducing him to his family. The man told me that it was there—standing in the doorway, looking into this dilapidated house with five or six children scampering around on the dirt floor, holding the hand of the little boy—that he knew what God was calling him to do with his life.

The boy's name, incidentally, was Diego, which is Spanish for James.