

“Getting Religion Right (Part 2)”– James 1:26-27

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and meet me in James 1...

We are going to continue our examination of the final verses of this chapter this morning and this will lead us into our sharing the Lord’s Supper. Hopefully you received one of these units when you entered today. Don’t open it yet (I’ll tell you when). But at the top there are two covers to peel back. The first gives you access to a little wafer of bread and the second to the juice. We will share those together at the end of the sermon, so just set that aside for now.

I want to make haste into our text this morning because we have a lot of biblical ground together today. One of my goals today is to give you a sense that what James says here is not original. It is a teaching that has been reinforced again and again throughout the Bible. We will survey some of that (though certainly not all) as we progress today. You’ll see what I mean. But let’s start by refreshing our memories to what James said. I’ll begin reading in verse 26. Follow along as I read. This is God’s Word...

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:26-27)

Now then, last time I attempted to clarify James’ use of “religion” and “religious” language here. It’s pretty common for some Evangelicals today to abandon this kind of language and adopt more relational language when it comes to describing Christianity. “Christianity is not a religion,” it is said, “it’s a relationship.” We sought to understand what is meant by statements such as this and the validity of the point that is being made. But then I also pointed out that there is nothing wrong with “religious” language as James uses it. James assumes the relational aspects of Christianity and his language doesn’t have the same negative connotations to his audience. To import modern semantics into our interpretation of this section of James would be anachronistic. We don’t need to recoil from James’ language here. We just need to understand it.

Next we considered that the characteristics that James describes in verses 26 and 27 are traits that we inherit from God the Father. I’ve stressed the last couple of weeks that the Christian ethic derives from the character of God. And we saw another example of this by comparing these verses with the way God the Father is described in verses 17 and 18. The grace and adoption He has given to us translates into an increasing family resemblance as a believer matures in the faith. Like Father, like child.

And finally we pivoted to considering the actual traits that James describes as characteristic of “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father*”. There are three mentioned in these verses. The rest of the letter will unpack them in greater detail. We considered one and a half last week. Together I referred to them as...

Three Marks of Right Religion

The first one is discerned from verse 26: *“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”* So then the first mark is pretty obvious (even if no one wants to admit it)...

Mark 1: Controlled Mouths

It wasn’t all that long ago that James told us to be *“quick to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to anger”* (1:19) and it won’t be long before he goes on to describe the deadly destruction that is unleashed by the tongue. Clearly he sees the way we exercise our mouths to be a revealing litmus test of the substance of our religion. It can demonstrate if our religion is actually worth something. And as we saw last week, Jesus didn’t mince words about the tongue either. He said things like *“out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”* (Matt. 12:34) and *“what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart”* (Matt. 15:18). Therefore, we can’t blame what comes out of our mouths on our adversities. We have to blame it on our hearts. The adversities don’t create those outbursts, they just provide the occasion for them to come to the surface. It’s our heart that is to blame. And the condition of our heart says a lot about the value of our religion.

But that’s not all James says about right religion...

Mark 2: Cared for Margins

As I explained last time, by “margins” I mean people in the margins. The marginalized. For James, the quintessential examples of this kind of person in the first-century, Greco-Roman world were widows and orphans. There was no foster-care system that we are accustomed to, there were no life insurance policies to pay out to a grieving widow, and there were very limited (if any) means of income for women who lost their husband. Widows and orphans could easily become destitute, slip through the cracks, and be forgotten. But God doesn’t forget them. And God doesn’t want His people to either. So James says, in verse 27, *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...”*

When you read the Old Testament, you discover that it is not uncommon for God to describe Himself as for such people and against those who exploit them. In the Psalms, He is called,

“Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.” (Psalm 68:5)

In Deuteronomy 10:18, the Lord is described as the One who...

“...executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” (Deuteronomy 10:18; cf. Psalm 146:9)

Notice that he adds the “sojourner,” or foreigner, to the list because the Israelites would be quite tempted to neglect and exploit them. Indeed the Law and the Prophets often use that trio to represent the margins—the widows, orphans, and aliens. Those are the groups that best call to mind the forgotten in their day. So God commands them to care for them regularly. For example, the Law instructed:

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge, ¹⁸ but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. ¹⁹ When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the

sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²² You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.” (Deuteronomy 24:17-22)

Notice again the connection between the Law and the character of God. God essentially says, “You, Israel, must take care of the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner because I took care of you when you were forgotten and exploited. I rescued you. I lifted you up. I gave you a place. That’s my character at work on your behalf. Don’t ever forget that. Now, go and do likewise.” This is more evidence to confirm the point I have been making—biblical ethics are grounded in the person and work of God.

And there was no excuse for Israel to not look after the needy because God rescued them in their hour of greatest need. And yet they forgot them regularly. Not surprisingly the prophets call them to task again and again for their neglect. Indeed, much of the prophetic material of the Old Testament is dedicated to outlining before the people how they have violated God’s Law and Covenant. The vast majority of the Covenant violations fall into one of three categories: idolatry (i.e., worshiping false gods), religious ritualism (i.e., going through the motions of religious observance when their hearts were far from God), and social injustice.¹ And that social injustice is generally proven by how the Israelites treated the people on the margins—the widows, orphans, aliens, and the like.

So God, in His patience, pleads with the people by having the prophet Jeremiah stand at the temple and cry out:

“For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, ⁶ if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.” (Jeremiah 7:5-7)

In the opening chapter of Isaiah, God says that He is going to ignore His people until they take Him seriously and care for those in need.

“When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? ¹³ Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” (Isaiah 1:12-17)

This is one of the many examples where the prophets show the emptiness of the people’s profession by means of their actions toward the forgotten of their society. The laws that called them to remember the poor and needy were tests of their devotion and love for God in a way that their professions and religious rituals never were. Indeed, God makes it clear, He doesn’t want the people’s rituals, even the one’s prescribed in the Law, if they come from the hands of people who won’t lift a finger to prevent or counter injustices toward the needy. The prophet Micah supplies the most famous example...

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ ⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6-8)

The prophets show that the people cannot claim to love and serve God and, at the same time, neglect and exploit those God has put in their path to care for. Their neglect revealed the emptiness of their religious talk and

activity. So the prophets beat the drum to call attention to the margins in Israel and warn the people who have forgotten them.

“They know no bounds in deeds of evil; they judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. ²⁹ Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord, and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?” (Jeremiah 5:28-29)

The prophets warned and warned, and the people paid them no heed. Eventually God intervened as He said He would. Zechariah describes the outcome like this:

“And the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying, ⁹ ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, ¹⁰ do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.’ ¹¹ But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. ¹² They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts. ¹³ ‘As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,’ says the Lord of hosts, ¹⁴ ‘and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and the pleasant land was made desolate.’” (Zechariah 7:8-14)

Clearly, even from our brief survey of the Old Testament (and we really only scratched the surface), God cares a lot about how people treat the needy in society. James is really saying nothing new. He’s just reinforcing for the people of God that their religion is worthless if it doesn’t translate into actions that benefit those the world seems to forget. In short, *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...”* (James 1:27). This pleases God. This is the kind of activity we should take part in, individually and corporately.

I mentioned last week a new initiative that our church has undertaken to provide housing for some young people who have aged out of the foster-care system. Our desire is to provide some necessities and a softer transition for individuals who find themselves in a pretty vulnerable place and often without any support system. It would be easy to forget people such as these. They are often forgotten. And it’s one of the reasons for the homelessness and human trafficking crises we face. But God would have us remember. And so we are moving forward in faith and we believe at His direction to look after at least some of these folks on the margins of our society. That’s just one example.

I mentioned last week that one of my favorite things about this church is the adoption culture that God has brought forth among us. I really see it as Gospel-driven. And while not every Christian should adopt children, that kind of culture should not be unusual in churches. Christian churches should be leading the way in orphan care and adoption in societies. It shouldn’t be an anomaly. It should be a stereotype.

In the United States, on any given day, there are somewhere around 437,000 children in the foster care system. Of those, around 125,000 are eligible for adoption and waiting for an adoptive family. There are over 300,000 Protestant churches in the United States. So that means if one family in every three churches adopted one waiting child, every child in the United States waiting on a family to call their own would have one. When you factor in sibling groups, it would require even fewer families. When I see numbers like that, it seems pretty attainable. And, again, not every family should adopt. God doesn’t call everyone to sacrifice in that way. But every Christian should support the cause of adoption. And the orphan crisis in our society is one that exists because, in my opinion, God’s people have not taken to heart what texts like ours this morning say on the matter. The numbers don’t lie. They show that churches across our country are failing to care for the margins. *“Religious observances, no matter how perfectly observed and appropriately reverent, are empty if there is no concern for the needy.”² Our religion is worthless and “our worship is ashes on the altar!”³*

However, it's not just orphans and widows that we should look after. Remember, for James, those are representative groups of vulnerable people. They represent the defenseless or those who are at greater risk of suffering poverty and exploitation. But they are not the only vulnerable people, in his day or in our own. Different societies push different people toward the margins. Who are the forgotten? "James asks, in essence, 'Did you in fact realize that the meeting of needs is not peripheral, nor optional, but central and obligatory to your faith?'"⁴ So who are the forgotten of our day?

There are still many widows who suffer alone. Maybe that would appreciate a call and an invitation. There are still thousands of orphans who need a home. Maybe you should at least ask the Lord if He wills for you to take one of them in. There are many families who are eager to adopt. Maybe you could help make that possible by helping them cover the costs that are needed to make that happen. There are kids who are in need of mentors. Maybe you should check out the Mentoring Alliance here in town and volunteer some time to hang out with one of those students on a regular basis. There are single parents all around trying to get by in a Covid-pandemic world. What needs do they have that you might be able to help with? There are so many people in need. So many more these days. The issue is not opportunity.

Don't overthink it. Some of us are guilty of paralysis by analysis. We get overwhelmed by the scope of a need that we end up doing nothing. Or we analyze every possible need we could help with and we end up doing nothing at all because we can't figure out where our time and resources would be best directed. Just do something. If there is a need and God has made you aware of it, you can honor Him by seeking to meet that need.

Years ago I came across a helpful book called, *What Is Mission of the Church?*, by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert. Greg Gilbert is the author of the book *What Is the Gospel?*, which is available at the exits for you to take home if that's a question you want to dive more into. In any case, toward the end of the first book I mentioned, they discuss a principle known as "moral proximity." They explain,

"The principle of moral proximity is pretty straightforward, but is often overlooked: The closer the need, the greater the moral obligation to help. Moral proximity does not refer to geography, though that can be part of the equation. Moral proximity refers to how connected we are to someone by virtue of familiarity, kinship, space, or time. Therefore, in terms of moral proximity Greg is closer to other Southern Baptist churches in town than to First Presbyterian in Whoville. But physical distance is not the only consideration. In terms of moral proximity, too, Kevin is closer to his brother-in-law who lives in Australia than to a stranger who lives on the other side of Lansing... The closer the moral proximity, the greater the moral obligation.... This doesn't mean we can be uncaring to everyone but our friends, close relatives, and people next door, but it means that what we *ought* to do in one situation is what we *may* do in another."⁵

They go on to outline some of the biblical precedent for this principle. There are certainly exceptions to the rule. God can call us to live extravagantly generous toward and sacrificially for whomever He wills and sometimes those people will seem quite random to our senses and a watchful world. But in general, this principle has served me well. And I think it will you also. It reminds us to start where we are, in the circles God has placed us and the relational contact He has orchestrated. And certainly that means that a good place to start is within your own church. The Apostle John's words, for example, remind us,

"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:16-18)

Or as Paul told the Galatians,

“And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” (Galatians 6:9-10)

You see? Start where you are. Individually and as a church we could never meet all the needs around us. It’s overwhelming to even think about. But God doesn’t call us to do everything. He does, however, call us all to do something. What that something is will look different for each of us, depending on our context and means. Jesus said, *“Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more”* (Luke 12:48). So do something for the betterment of other people with whatever it is God has entrusted to you. And start where you are.

But as we do such things we must remember why we do them. We do them, according to James, because it pleases the Lord. We do them for His glory and pleasure and not our own. We do them, as Christians, not to earn God’s favor, but because He has graced us with His favor in Christ. We do them because they are exactly the kind of thing the Lord has done for us, though our deeds are much more meager in comparison.

Take the Lord’s Supper unit that you grabbed when you came in today and go ahead and peel back the seals to access those elements.

In writing on this passage, Daniel Doriani reminds us that:

“Care for orphans and widows is essential to true religion for several reasons. Above all, kindness to them is pure kindness. It is mercy for the sake of mercy, because those who help widows and orphans cannot expect to receive anything tangible in return.”⁶

I think he’s right. We don’t do it to get paid back. They could never pay us back any way. And when we consider the grace of God shown to us in Christ, we are reminded that nothing we do could ever pay God back for the salvation that Christ has accomplished on our behalf. So we should never try to pay Him back. But when we contemplate that grace, when we contemplate the work of Christ on the cross, when we contemplate the love of God expressed in our adoption into the family of God, we cannot go on being like we once were. We are part of the family. And the family resemblance should show. We do these things to show it. Not that people would praise us, but that, as Jesus said, others would see in the deed something to give God glory for. We live and act in radical ways with radical care and generosity toward those in the margins, not so that people would think much of us. But so that they will think much of Him. Our loving deeds are done with a cruciform shape, so that questions are raised that have only Gospel answers. We love, because He first love us.

Here again, Doriani is helpful.

“We should care for orphans because the gospel teaches that we once were and still are poor. The gospel of Jesus says, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’ That is, blessed are those who know their spiritual poverty. They know that apart from God’s grace, they are estranged from God and more desolate than orphans. By faith in Jesus, we are adopted into God’s family. We should care for widows and orphans, thereby living out the gospel principle of adoption of the needy.”⁷

It all comes back to the Gospel. The ethic is grounded in the character and actions of our God.

The wafer of bread that you hold in your hand is meant to remind you of the body of Christ that was broken for sinners on the cross. God sent His Son into this world to save sinners. He took on our humanity that He might die in our place and for our sins. He suffered the condemnation that we deserved, so that we could be spared God’s judgment and experience His kindness. His body was broken, because that’s what we deserved for our sin, our disobedience, our rebellion against God. He took our place on the cross.

The cup that you hold reminds us of the blood that He shed to atone for our sins. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. But no animal sacrifice could truly atone for sin. Every Old Testament sacrifice was meant to teach us the cost of sin and our need for a saving sacrifice. They all pointed ahead to Christ—the Lamb of God who came to take away sin. His blood was shed so that by it we could be made white as snow. Fully cleansed from the filth of sin. And His blood was sufficient to take away our record of sin. All of it. Past, present, and future. He was the perfect sacrifice.

And He saves freely—apart from our works—all who turn from their sin and trust in Him to save. We can't save ourselves. We can't work for salvation. We could never be good enough to earn access to a holy God and entrance into glory. But Jesus paid for our entry. And if we would receive Him by faith, He would save you today. So if you have never received Him, then know that you don't really need to partake of these elements today. You need to partake in the One to whom they point—Jesus Christ. Pray to Him. Confess your sin and need. Ask Him to save you by His work. And begin today to follow Him as Lord. That's what you need. And that's why God may have brought you here today.

“*But to all who did receive him,*” writes John, “*who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,*”¹³ *who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God*” (John 1:12-13). And that is who we are through faith. Children of God. Forgiven. Cleansed. Adopted. Right in God's sight because we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ through faith. And that is why we do what we do. It's worship. It's thanksgiving. That's the Christian life. Not an effort to earn grace. A response to God's grace to us in Christ.

So I invite you all to take, eat, drink, and remember...

Let's pray...

¹ For a great overview of this, see j. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 397-419.

² R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 83.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 95.

⁵ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 183.

⁶ Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 59.

⁷ Ibid.