

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

A Religion That Cares

James 1:27

Mark Vroegop

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 1:27).

Over the years one of my hobbies has been refinishing furniture.

It started out of necessity. After Sarah and I graduated from college, I was in seminary and, to be blunt, we couldn't afford nice, new furniture. We had a few pieces that were given to us as gifts from our wedding; but, to furnish our 700-square-foot apartment, we needed to be creative.

So, we would keep an eye on the school dumpster, go to yard sales, or watch for something with a "free" sign on it. There were few things more thrilling than pulling a table out of a dumpster, sanding it down, staining it, and restoring it. After 27 years of marriage, we still have a decorative table I restored. And I'm not sure if I love the look as much as I love the fact that it was free.

But, in this experience of restoring furniture, I learned (the hard way) that not every piece of furniture is worth restoring. Some pieces look good from the road, but if you look close enough, you see that they only have a veneer of good wood covering cheap wood or (worse) glued sawdust.

Those pieces are meant to give the appearance of quality, but there are limits to what you can do to restore them because the quality wood doesn't go very deep. I learned that you need to be able to recognize furniture with a veneer. Just because it looks good doesn't mean it is good.

Do you know that the Bible has a similar perspective when it comes to veneer religion?

I'm sure that you know, at some level, that within the circles of those who claim to be Christians there are people whose beliefs could be described as a veneer. It looks good from the road, but when you get closer, you realize that something's not right.

For that matter, it's not just an individual issue; it can also be the characteristic of a family, a small group, church leadership, an entire church, or even a movement of churches.

Veneer religion is a real thing. It's something to be concerned about. It's something that has often plagued God's people. It's something James cautions against.

Our text today continues the theme we've seen the last two weeks of the connection between faith and works. After learning about the general concept in verses 22-25, we wrestled with the application of it—very specifically—to how we talk.

Verse 27 applies this faith-works paradigm to the issue of how the church cares. Here's what this text is about: **Real religion cares and is careful.**

Today's message is about heartfelt and wise balance for people who are facing the pressure of hardship. Let's look at 1) The Goal, 2) The Call, and 3) The Warning.

The Goal: Pure and Undefined Religion

James identifies what the target for true religion looks like. Remember last week James addressed the problem of self-deception and the blatant inconsistency with a person's words and what they said they believed. He said, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue..." (v. 26). It was a passage warning us about something that we should not do: Don't have an unbridled tongue and claim to be religious.

Verse 27 provides an affirmative case. James casts a vision of what religion should look like. It should be pure and undefined. What does that mean?

Let's start with the word "religion." Last week I mentioned that our present culture demurs the word "religion." It's often associated with an out-of-balance strictness related to rules. To be "spiritual but not religious" is seen more positively in that it tends to feel more heartfelt and less restrictive.

However, I'd like to redeem the word "religion" (and religious). I understand the abuses hidden behind religion and why it's stiff-armed. But in the Bible this word is designed to link the way people worship and how they live. And I think that's something all of us can agree is a good thing. So, the term is important and helpful if understood the right way.

Notice that James adds the phrase "before God the Father" in verse 27. This is an important difference from verse 26, which made the focus on what we think about ourselves. But verse 27 is about what God thinks about our worship. That's a big distinction!

James is pointing us toward what true worship is. He's identifying the importance of asking ourselves what God thinks about our religion. That's an important question to consider because, throughout the Bible, God's people get stuck in a pattern of faking it. Sometimes it was intentional and brazen – like Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5. At other times, it was more cultural and hidden. For example, Isaiah 29:13 says:

And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me..."

James loves the book of Isaiah. There are many overlapping themes. This is why "pure and undefined" are important words. "Pure" refers to ritual cleanliness or to be free of guilt. "Undefined" is saying the

same thing. It means to be untainted by something that causes impurity. One commentator suggested that “undefiled” is the standard and “purity” is the quality of the worship.

It is deeply connected to worship since both the restrictions and the sacrifices were designed to send a strong message about God’s holiness. Without cleansing, coming before a holy God is dangerous. And there are few things that God despises more than fake religion. Take for example what is said in Isaiah 1:

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. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 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. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause (Isa. 1:13–17).

What makes God want to shut down the whole enterprise of religion? It is when there is a terrible disconnect between what people say they believe and what they do. So often the message of the prophets was connected not only to the way people worshipped foreign gods but also to how their worship of the one true God cloaked the idol of self-centeredness.

Religious people always keep their antenna up for two things: false worship and fake worship. False worship involves *believing* that biblical truths don’t matter. Fake worship involves *living* as if biblical truths don’t matter. False worship rejects true religion. Fake worship uses true religion. Both are dangerous. Both are forms of idolatry.

James says that the goal is pure and undefiled religion.

The Call: Care for the Hurting

In the same way that James is pushing against the disconnect between our words and what we believe, here we see that he is commending a direct link between our beliefs and how we care for hurting people. James is echoing the words of Jesus when he talked about loving God and loving our neighbor.

James specifically mentions visiting “orphans and widows in their affliction.” Why does he list these two examples, and what does it mean?

Throughout the Bible, caring for orphans and widows was a vital expression of a right understanding of who God is and what he has done. Redeemed people should be redemptive. Graced people should be gracious. This kind of concern is central to God’s heart, and it should be for God’s people as well.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (Deut. 10:17–19).

You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, 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 (Deut. 24:17–18).

This concern for others flows from grace, and it doesn't stop in the Old Testament. We find this in Acts 6 when certain non-Jerusalem (outsider) Jews were being neglected in food distribution (Acts 6:1-6). And we find that the early church sold their goods to help people in need (Acts 4:32-37). Paul took an offering for needy saints during a famine (2 Cor. 8-9). So, it's important to recognize that this concern for others is directly connected to your understanding of God's grace and the gospel.

To "visit" means to care for someone in a crisis. It can also mean to deliver or to make something right. It's what God does. It's what we are to do if we understand what God did for us (Ex. 4:31). Furthermore, it says "distress" which is used for the combination of grief and need (Acts 7:10).

Now, why does James refer to "widows and orphans"? First, he must mean widows and orphans. We know that the early church took care of widows (1 Tim. 5). But he also means more than that because 1 Timothy doesn't instruct the church to care for every widow the same way. The issue was more than marital status. It required something else: need.

That gives us a clue as to why James specifies "widows and orphans." New Testament scholar Doug Moo says, "The orphan and widow become types of those who find themselves helpless in the world."¹

We see this in Isaiah 1, the text we examined previously. It sounded like this:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool (Isa. 1:16–18).

A right understanding of who God is and what he's done will affect how God's people treat those who are marginalized, helpless, and unfairly treated. God's heart is for the vulnerable. Those who know God's heart and love God's heart know and love those who are on God's heart.

Now, it's important to realize how this applies at multiple levels. Some of you are already jumping into understandable fears about social justice. This text needs to be applied, in balance, in three domains:

- Personal: We need to ask ourselves to what extent our personal lives reflect the gospel-centered concern for those who are vulnerable. Ask yourself who fits that category in your world.
- Church: We need to collectively ask ourselves about our gospel-centered concern for vulnerable or marginalized people in our church.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 117.

- Society: We need to consider what the net effect of Christians living in our city is on caring for those who are hurting and those who face situations that aren't right.

To be very clear, my main concern is for the personal and the church categories. But, too often, theologically conservative churches neglect their collective influence on a society.

That's why we have a benevolence fund. It's why we have deacons who care for our widows. It's why a group of church members raked a member's yard this week. It's the reason we are in the Brookside neighborhood. It's why we are thinking about the needs in our 5-mile radius. It's why we are thinking about addiction counseling. It's why we've tried to pursue racial reconciliation and have conversations about racial injustice. None of this is to advance a secular social justice mindset. And it surely isn't because we've abandoned the gospel.

It is to be sure that, at a personal and church level, we are living out God's grace such that our ministry is effective on the world around us.

Remember when I talked about realizing that I have a high probability of being a Pharisee? I think there's always a risk of preaching a false gospel. But I think our greater risk is that we'd be content *preaching* the gospel while not *living out* the gospel. Each of us must figure out how to do that.

Dale moved to Brookside, yet I live close to the church. We have a team thinking about addiction counseling. You may make meals for sick people or fund scholarships for at-risk kids. You may be engaged in conversations about the experience of minority church members, or you might tutor kids after school. Some of you are adopting orphans. The point is merely to connect your religion with the way you care. Pure religion is called to care.

But there's more.

The Caution: Compromise with the World

So much of the Christian life is about balance. And we find it here with verse 27. James issues a caution that we need to hear. He commands: "...keep oneself unstained from the world." What wisdom we find here!

James wants us to be sure that we aren't polluted by the world and its system. How does that happen? It means acting and thinking in a way that fits with the parts of society that are either un-Christian or anti-Christian.

Pure religion results in a morality that fits with the gospel. In Galatians 5, Paul lists things like sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, orgies, and things like these (vv. 19-21). We can become stained by adopting the world's behaviors and attitudes.

But we can also adopt the world's thinking. There are many things for us to be cautious about. In the last few months, there's been a lot of talk about Critical Theory or Critical Race Theory. It's a complex secular

theory that, among other things, can paint people as merely oppressors or oppressed and suggests that racism is the singular evil underneath every issue, that redemption isn't possible without dismantling aspects of society, and that all white people are racist. We should reject it.

Secular social justice believes that society should be fair, but it works to accomplish that aim through arbitrary standards and puts its entire hope in governmental intervention. It focuses on the system and neglects the heart. We should reject this as well.

I could give you other examples, but I think you get the point. We must be careful with our behavior and our thinking.

This is where a great amount of wisdom is needed. Individual Christians and the church have too often veered off into the ditches of secular solutions on the one side and uncompassionate Christianity on the other. We can be guilty of a lack of discernment on the one hand and a lack of love on the other hand.

Regardless of which ditch you tend to gravitate toward, let me encourage you to care and to do it carefully. The aim of James's message here is not to critique the culture. The main point of this text is for us to look inside our hearts and inside our church.

We need to be warned about the possibility of embracing a veneer religion. Ask yourself: When God peels back the surface, what does he see? When Jesus considers the witness of your life and our lives together, what does he know? And when the Lord puts someone or something in your path that requires compassion, be sure you care and do it with care.

About 15 years ago at my last church, the Lord did a major work in my heart about how easy it was to be righteously insular as a church. I came to realize that part of my discipleship calling as a pastor was to not only preach the gospel clearly but to help people live out the gospel.

To start, we revamped our benevolence ministry. Instead of our posture being "We might be taken advantage of," we shifted to "Where can we help?" When an over-the-road truck driver who was our neighbor wanted to park his semi in our parking lot, I said, "Absolutely." Previously, I would have said no. Sarah and I became foster parents. When we learned that there were budget cuts in our county such that there were no supplies (clothing, diapers, etc.) for emergency placements, we rallied our little church and provided about a year's worth of resources. A few years ago, I learned of a social worker who came to Christ because of that project which continued even after I left. Not only did someone come to Christ, but new opportunities for the gospel emerged because of that effort.

Because real religion cares and is careful.

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