

The Tests of True Christian Religion, Part 2 (James 1:27b)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on August 23, 2009

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John Witherspoon (1723-1794), was president of the college now called Princeton, and was a minister of the gospel who signed America's Declaration of Independence. He wrote: "He is the best friend to American liberty who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion."¹

In James 1:25, we read of an even greater "liberty" found in the Scriptures, God's "*law that gives liberty*" (spiritual liberty and blessedness for those who abide in front of God's Word and apply God's Word). Now in the next 2 verses James speaks of resulting "*pure and undefiled religion*" - what it is NOT and what it IS.

James 1 (NASB95) ²⁶ *If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.* ²⁷ *Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

I spent more time on v. 27 this morning, mercy, than I originally planned for this morning because of how overwhelming and abundant the biblical teaching is on mercy to the needy in general, and to orphans and widows in particular, and I didn't want to shortchange it. Before we get to the final point of v. 27, I want to develop further that 2nd point we left off with. Maybe you haven't heard a lot of sermons with focused attention on widows as the epitome and example of how we must treat them and other needy, but it's not for any lack of biblical attention to this subject, as I want you to see tonight. I hope some of you meditated further about Luke 20-21 and what Jesus said about the widow who gave her last 2 coins to the temple God's about to destroy, the den of robbers who devour widows.

Turn back to the book of Exodus and I want you to see that what I argued from the story of the widow (the idea that our Lord is very serious about and angry when widows are mistreated) is not some obscure minor debatable point, or just an interesting spin on that one story, or just some individual's interpretation or the focus of an individual passage only, or some isolated incident that's relatively insignificant compared to the bigger and weightier teachings of Scripture – this is a **major** teaching of Scripture from the time God first gave His Law that continues to the NT.

Ex 22:22 *"You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. "If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.*

Dt 10:17-18 *"For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸ "He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love ..."*

God shows His care for them through His people caring for them.

14:28-29 *“At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall deposit it in your town. “The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.*

24:17-21 *“You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge ...¹⁹ “When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.²⁰ “When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.²¹ “When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow.*

If you study the book of Ruth, it’s really a picture of how widows are treated by true religion (both Naomi and daughter-in-law in great need, provided for by Boaz, a Lord-like kinsman-redeemer).

Job could say of himself in good conscience: *“I delivered the poor who cried for help, And the orphan who had no helper ...And I made the widow’s heart sing for joy.”* (Job 29:12-13)

Isaiah 1 gives a negative example of God’s people, very religious people, who did not give justice and mercy to ones like orphans and widows, though they were very religious on the outside, doing all the religious routines. James 1:26-27 is in some sense a 2-verse summary of the worthless religion that Isaiah talks about for much of this chapter and book, which our Lord hates as much as He hates what Israel did to widows in Luke 20-21. God has His strongest words for those who mistreat His weakest people in the OT, and Jesus in the NT has the same for merciless religion.

Isaiah 1 (NASB95)¹¹ *“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” Says the LORD. “**I have had enough** of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle; And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.¹² “When you come to appear before Me, Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?¹³ “Bring your **worthless** offerings no longer, Incense is an **abomination** to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies— **I cannot endure** iniquity and the solemn assembly.¹⁴ “**I hate** your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them.¹⁵ “So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.¹⁶ “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil,¹⁷ Learn to **do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.**¹⁸ “Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the LORD, “Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.¹⁹ “If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land;²⁰ “But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword.” Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken. ...²³ Your rulers are rebels And companions of thieves ... **They do not defend the orphan, Nor does the widow’s plea come before them.***

²⁴ Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts, The Mighty One of Israel, declares, “Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries And avenge Myself on My foes. ²⁵ “I will also turn My hand against you ...”

Strong words for religionists that aren't merciful to the weak. The whole point of OT is love to God and neighbor (good Samaritan story). The context of Luke 20-21 by itself is conclusive to me that the point of the widow's mite story is how judgment comes to religionists who aren't merciful to needy ones like widows – but as I read the OT, the more clear it becomes to me that this is one of the things most near and dear, deepest in God's heart of love. Those who neglect it receive the deepest anger from God's heart. God looks at man's heart to see if man cares, but man looks on outward appearance, external religion, temple, etc.

Jeremiah 7 ¹ The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ² “Stand in the gate of **the LORD'S house** and proclaim there this word and say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah, who enter by these gates to worship the LORD!’ ” ³ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, “Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. ⁴ **“Do not trust in deceptive words [cf. Jas 1:26], saying, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.’** [cf. Lk 21:5-6] ⁵ “For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow ... ⁷ then I will let you dwell in this place ... ⁸ “Will you steal ...? ... ⁹ “Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,” declares the LORD. ... ¹⁴ therefore, I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to the place which I gave you and your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. ¹⁵ “I will cast you out of My sight ... ²⁰ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, My anger and My wrath will be poured out on this place ...”

I think that is exactly what the same Lord applies in Luke 21! Look at the same language in the same context – they're saying “look at the temple, the temple, the temple” and the Lord says, “yeah, look at what they're doing with the temple.” It is because they don't practice justice but oppress the orphans and widows while trusting in their temple and their external place and form of worship that God will take both away; a judgment continuing till the end times. They had turned God's house into a den of robbers, they stole, even under the guise of religion, and because they haven't honored God in this place, God's wrath and anger will be poured out on this place. The whole house is coming down, and the prophets seem to say that until the Lord is coming down from heaven again, God's judgment will be in effect on Israel until they turn to the Messiah.

From beginning to end of OT we see God's unchanging nature:

Malachi 3 ⁵ “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness **against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me,**” says the LORD of hosts. ⁶ “For I, the LORD, do not change ...”

Our unchanging Lord's attitude towards widows and others in need was not missed by the disciples in Luke 21. Unlike the other false religious cultures of ancient times, and unlike the corrupted false religious Judaism of their day, Christianity took care of the widows and the needy in their midst.

Acts 4 ³⁴ *For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales ³⁵ and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.*

Acts 6 ¹ *Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. ² So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. ⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. ⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.*

The point is not that prayer and preaching is important ministry and true religion while caring for needy is not – both are vital and the text says after proper attention was given to both *then* the Word spread and church grew greatly and even ungodly priests who used to take advantage of widows now converted to true religion. James was there in the Jerusalem church and when he thinks of “pure and undefiled religion,” it’s especially these seven men he probably thought of.

You may know the letters to Timothy give instruction on church ministry and how the church is to be run, how elders and deacons are to be chosen, what the ministry priorities should be, etc. What you may not know is that Paul has more to say about caring for widows than he does about character of elders – more verses are devoted to caring for widows than just about any other subject. We certainly don’t want to take the sheer number of verses in any book on any subject to conclude it’s more important than other matters, but I do think this is more important than many of us think – there are not other things “more religious.”

But we don’t want to go too far to social gospel welfare, and say it’s all about charity and humanitarianism, not the gospel or to the neglect of the gospel which is the church’s great commission, making disciples. In mercy ministry the church must take care as it cares for its own

1 Timothy 5 ³ *Honor widows who are widows indeed; ⁴ but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God. ⁵ Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day. ⁶ But she who gives herself to wanton pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach. ⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. ⁹ A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, ¹⁰ having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work.*

¹¹ But refuse to put younger widows on the list, for when they feel sensual desires in disregard of Christ, they want to get married, ¹² thus incurring condemnation, because they have set aside their previous pledge. ¹³ At the same time they also learn to be idle, as they go around from house to house; and not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention. ¹⁴ Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; ¹⁵ for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. ¹⁶ If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.

So the church's official care for the needy was not a mere handout system, this was no communism or socialism as some have tried to distort the NT to say, and a local church cannot stop world poverty. But it can care for its own with discernment while investing more in the support of its ministry (v. 17-18), and of course, individual Christians can express mercy and care for others in other ways.

Galatians 6 ² ***Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.*** ³ ***For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.***

Sounds like Jas 1:26 *"if anyone thinks himself to be religious, when his religion is really nothing / worthless, he deceives himself."*

When Paul says "bear one another's burdens," the "one another" is first in the Greek sentence to add emphasis! Real religion reaches outward away from self! The "one another" passages in the NT especially relate to one another in the churches being written to.

Galatians 6:10 *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.* [NIV "family of believers"]

Because James speaks of "brother or sister" in need in James 2, I think we should especially think of those within the body of Christ.

Are you bearing each other's burdens in this body? Can you think of someone you've tried to minister to in some way recently, in a simple way by an encouraging phone call, wanting to visit with someone to encourage them, praying with someone, asking how you can help? Don't just think of food or finances, think of practical and emotional and spiritual needs among us? Don't think Sunday is "the real religion" day – James says it's all week long.

There are many ways to apply mercy ministry, I don't want to limit your thinking to one type or one segment of the population (there are many who need help), but I also don't want to limit the intent of God's Word in James by not thinking of ways to apply.

But just doing merciful acts to an orphan or widow (or homeless or helpless), giving to charity or philanthropy isn't necessarily true religion either. There must be agape love behind it. 1 Cor. 13:3 says *if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*

Looking back at James 1:27, “*pure and undefiled religion is this: to visit ...*” You say, but visiting is the pastor’s job. That’s not what the Bible says. This verse isn’t addressing pastors rather than Christians – it’s addressing all Christians, all who have a true relationship with the Lord and therefore true religion in His sight.

Ministry is every Christian’s job, or I should say, privilege. Now James will say later if someone’s sick and they ask church elders to pray for them, they should do that. And we do that and a number of us have done that this month, visiting people in distress, praying with people in need. But that’s another chapter and context, here this is talking about a ministry / service for all of us to one another.

What does “visit” mean in v. 27? The Greek verb means more than just stopping by to say hi (although that’s a good start!). It’s a care and concern you have, and a desire to help in some way if you can. The word was used in Greek times for a friend visiting someone sick or in the hospital, not a professional chaplain or clergyman, and maybe you don’t even know what to say or do, but you want to be there to express your concern, comfort if you can, to at least be there. It’s a personal contact word. That’s how the Greek word was used in Job 2:11: *Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place ... to come to sympathize with him and comfort him.*”

There’s a final mark of true religion in v. 27: “*and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*” James moves from care for those outside you to keeping pure on the inside of you, from charity to purity. While getting your hands dirty helping, keep your heart clean. James will say more about worldliness later, so we don’t need to say all there is to say tonight, but this is a fitting place to conclude. Avoiding worldliness in your heart is just as much an important part of pure and undefiled religion. In fact, if you do everything else in this verse but fail here, your religion has failed and is faulty. Think of celebrities who give hundreds of thousands, millions to orphans and widows and AIDS children in Africa, but they are worldly and their deeds are stained by the world, and their motives are stained by the world, and are not pure and undefiled to God.

Think of churchgoers, think of yourself if this is you, who maybe serve and contribute in many ways from a heart that does care, but who are thoroughly stained by the worldliness of our day and age. As important as mercy and charity is, inner purity is equally vital.

Charles Spurgeon said: ‘Charity and purity are the two great garments of Christianity. I sometimes fear lest we should by no means insist too much on purity, but should certainly insist too little upon charity. The visitation of the fatherless and widows in their affliction is not left optional. It is not to be the privilege of a few worldly men who give all their substance to orphanages. Every Christian is bound to wear his part ... Yet charity without purity will be of no avail. In vain should we give all our substance to the poor, and give our bodies to be burned, if we do not walk in the way of holiness, “without which no man shall see the Lord.” If we do not come out from the world, and keep ourselves from its polluting influence, we have not yet learned what pure and undefiled religion really is. We may be very orthodox in creed, or we may be very far advanced in our knowledge of religious matters [*thinking ourselves to be religious*, as James 1:26 says] ... but we are in the sight of God only as sounding brass, or a [annoying] cymbal, unless, by divine grace, we have learned to keep ourselves unspotted from the world.’²

The word “keep” in those days came from a word that originally meant a guard or warden. The verb meant to keep an eye on, keep something in view, to attend carefully, to watch over. It speaks of guarding something which is in one’s possession. It means to watch as one would some precious thing. In the Greek OT of Prov 4:23, it’s translated “guard your heart above all else” (NIV) or “keep your heart” (NKJV, ESV). NASB: *Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.* ²⁴ *Put away from you a deceitful mouth And put devious speech far from you ...* ²⁶ *Watch the path of your feet And all your ways will be established.* ²⁷ *Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil.*

That’s a great expansion of the end of James 1:27 “keep yourself unstained.” The idea is to observe attentively, to keep watch over and to retain in custody. James’ use of the present tense calls for believers to exert constant vigilance to remain undefiled. A lot of young people say they want to make their mark on the world, but James says make sure the world doesn’t leave its mark on you!

Oneself in v. 27 is a reflexive pronoun indicating the action exerting in the keeping or guarding is on ourselves not on others. Too many of us have a tendency to focus on the faults of others and forget what we look like in the mirror of God’s Word!

By the world - Not the material creation but the fallen world system headed by Satan (Jn 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, Ep 2:2-note; 1Jn 5:19, Re 12:9) and run primarily by unredeemed men and women who are alienated from God and hostile to His will and Word.

Think of the **world** like an ocean filled with water. Believers are to be like **boats** -- the boat’s purpose is fulfilled when it is in the water (cp “in the world”), but it’s function and usefulness deteriorates when water gets in the boat. When too much of the world gets into believers they are defiled. Saints must keep their “vessels” firmly anchored in the water of God’s holy word but not let the water of the world get into their “vessel”! Paul has a parallel thought writing to Timothy

if a man cleanses himself from these [worldly influences], he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. (2 Timothy 2:21)

World in v. 27 most often in the NT refers to this present evil man-centered (humanistic) world-system, its thinking, patterns, etc. David Guzik reminds us, ‘From the book of Genesis, Lot is an example of a man who was spotted by the world. He started living **towards** Sodom, disregarding the spiritual climate of the area because of the prosperity of the area. Eventually he **moved to** the wicked city and **became a part** of the city’s leadership [A little of Sodom “moved into” Lot! Many today are a lot like Lot!].³

How does one keep himself or unstained (separated from) by the world? John 17:17, Eph. 5:26, James 4:3, 1:26-27

¹ As cited by James Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary*, p. 91.

² <http://www.recoverthegospel.com/Old%20Recover%20the%20Gospel%20Site/Spurgeon/Spurgeon%202001-3000/2313.pdf>

³ This page of commentary from www.preceptaustin.org