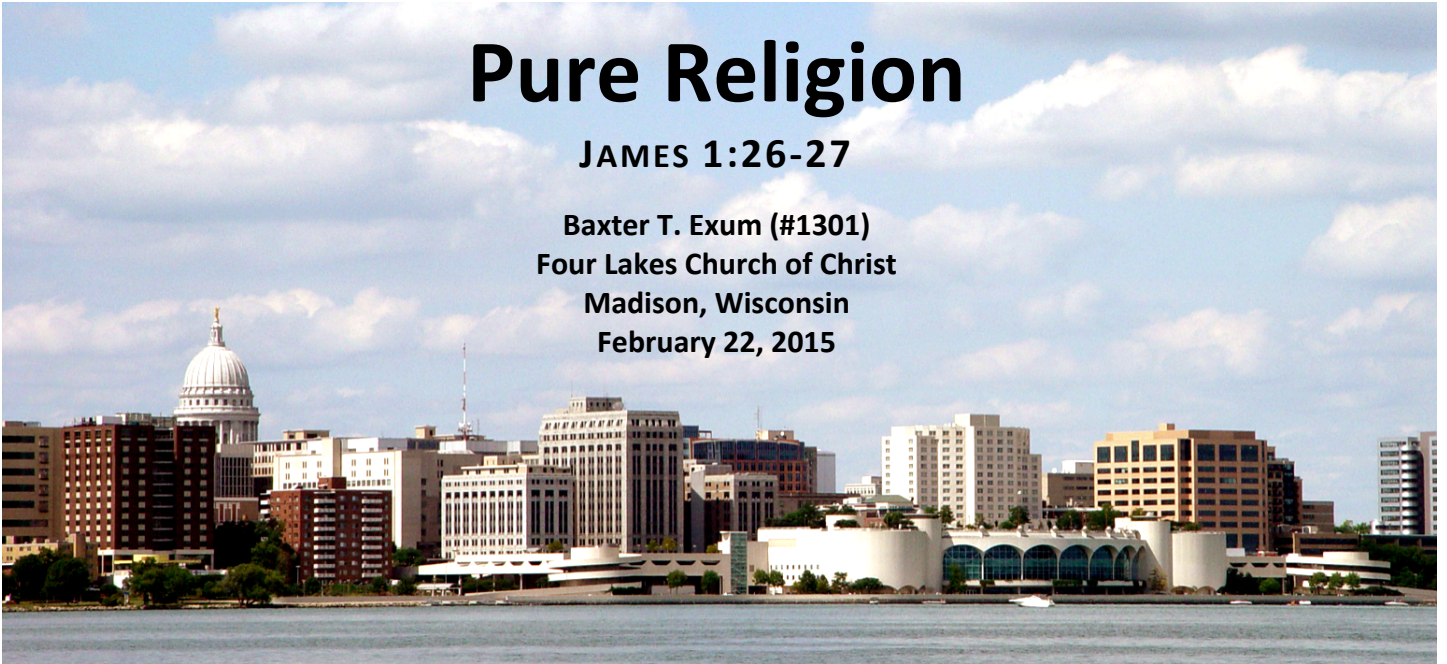


# Pure Religion

**JAMES 1:26-27**

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This morning I would like for us to study a request from one of our members, a request for a lesson on the question, “What is pure religion?” Obviously, there are many in the world around us who do not have a very high view of religion in general. Some of you might be familiar with the “spoken word” production that came out several years ago in the form of an online video that very quickly went viral, with millions of views in a very short amount of time. And the title was, “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus.” And in the spoken word piece (which is basically poetry), the author makes a clear distinction between religion and Jesus, as if we must choose between one or the other. I sent out a link to this along with the bulletin last night, not as an endorsement, but rather by way of informing all of you concerning what is out there. His piece of work is quite catchy, we feel quite comfortable listening to what he has to say, he seems to have a pleasant personality, much of what he says is right, and yet at the same time, much of what he says is also dead wrong. And I say this primarily because he seems to equate being religious with being a hypocrite. He seems to equate being religious with a lot of things that are rather negative. And in truth, this is the perception that many in the world at large definitely have. And so in this sense, the young man’s spoken words accurately reflect what many in our culture tend to believe about religion.

The question, though, is not “What does our culture think about religion?” Instead, the question for us today really is, “What is pure religion?” In other words, “What does God have to say about this?” And before we can come to an answer to this question, we need to have some idea of what the word “religion” actually means. The problem is: The word “religion” is not actually a word that we find in the Bible in the original Greek. Instead, our English word “religion” actually comes from Latin (as do about 70% of our English words), and the word literally means, “to bind again.” We know the prefix “re,” meaning back or again, and the main part of the word goes back to the same root as our English word “ligament,” or “ligature,” a connector, or something that binds two things together. A ligament in the human body is tissue that connects bones to other bones. In a religious sense, then, true religion is a system that connects humanity to God. We want to be bound to God!

In modern times, though, the word “religion” has come to mean something else. Today, we hear the word “religion,” and many think about the mess that we find in the religious world in general. Perhaps we think of large churches with their bureaucracy and their man-made rules. Perhaps we think of clergy with their fancy robes and backwards collars. Maybe we think of huge buildings with all of the gold-plated utensils and expensive artwork. Perhaps we think of the pompous ceremonies, the candles, the incense, the processions.

And so yes, if this is what we think of when we think of “religion,” then I believe we do have a problem according to the scriptures. What we need to do, though, is to go back to the Bible. And when we go back to the Bible, we find that the word “religion” is used just a small handful of times in our English translations. This morning, I want us to look at one use of the word “religion,” as it is found in a single verse in the New Testament book of James – James 1:27 (p. 1888).

The question is: What is pure religion? And thankfully, James (the Lord’s brother) tells us exactly what it is! If you are somewhat familiar with the book of James, then you know that James is perhaps one of the very first New Testament books to be written, perhaps as early as 15 years or so after the Lord’s death and resurrection, only 15 years after the beginning of the church. And so the book of James is practical as James pretty much answers the question: How do we live the Christian life? In James 1, he speaks of how we gain wisdom – we ask God for it. In continuing to answer this question, James then goes on to emphasize the importance of accepting the word of God for what it really is. In James 1:19 he says that we must be **“quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.”** Sometimes people apply this to interpersonal relationships, but in context that is not the main point. In context, James is speaking about the word of God. We are to be quick to hear God’s word, we must be slow to speak out in response to it, and we must be slow to get angry with what God has said. In all humility, then, we are to **“receive the word implanted which is able to save our souls.”** We must **“prove ourselves to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”** In James 1:26, we have a negative statement on what it means to be religious, **“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.”** So again, we do have warnings against false or worthless religion.

Today, though, we have the question: What is pure religion? And James answers that question in verse 27. Notice, please, James 1:27, **“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.”**

Before we even get into the definition here, I want to point out a few things here at the beginning. I want us to notice, first, that we are talking, here, about acceptable religion **“in the sight of our God and Father.”** In other words, God’s opinion on acceptable religion is all that really matters here. We don’t care what some church says. We don’t care what some guy on YouTube might say. But what we are concerned about this morning is what God has to say on this question. God is the only one who has the authority to determine the standard for what is right in the realm of religion. When we go to bind ourselves to God, we are not the ones who make the rules. I would also point out that we are indeed, then, talking about **“pure and undefiled religion.”** There are many religious systems out there that are not pure and they are absolutely defiled. The word **“pure”** here represents a quality that most of us appreciate. We want pure water, we want pure gold. And the same goes for **“undefiled.”** We often want our food without additives and preservatives. We don’t want to find somebody’s finger in our can of tuna. But we want our food to be undefiled. And that is what we are talking about here. God is the one who sets the standards for religion. God is the one who determines what is acceptable. God is the one who determines whether our religion is pure and undefiled. And so with this, we jump right into it as we find two qualities that determine whether our religion is pure and undefiled in the eyes of God. The wording here is very simple and easy to understand.

- I. Notice, please, first of all, that pure religion is defined as **REACHING OUT WITH COMPASSION AND CARING FOR THOSE WHO ARE AFFLICTED.**

The NASB (and many other translations) use the word **“visit”** here, that we are to **“visit the orphans and widows in their distress.”** And literally, this is about as close as we can get. The word literally refers to “looking

upon” something. It goes back to the word for “scope.” We know that a scope is something we look through. And the word here literally means “to look upon.” Today we might refer to “checking on” somebody. We might refer to “looking after” somebody. If you have a bulletin, you might notice that this verse is always on the front page, right down there in the lower left-hand corner. Normally I use the NASB on things, but when I started putting this verse in our bulletin several years ago, I used the NIV on this one, and the reason is, the NIV gets the thought across a little bit better. Today, when we hear the word **“visit,”** we often think of popping in for a few minutes, a quick stop, a few moments to say hello, but that is not the true meaning of what James is saying here. Instead, James is telling us: We need to care for these people, we need to look after them, we are to care for them. We need to scope out the situation, and then we need to do something about it. Pure religion is compassionate.

We also think of what the Lord himself said in Matthew 25 as he uses the same word **“visit”** in that passage about the Judgment. On the last great day, the saved and lost will be separated for eternity. The word we are discussing here actually comes in verse 36. Notice, please, Matthew 25:34-40,

***<sup>34</sup> Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; <sup>36</sup> naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? <sup>39</sup> When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” <sup>40</sup> The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”***

Did you catch the word **“visit”** in verse 36? This is not just popping in for a minute to say “Hello,” but this is scoping out the situation and doing something to help. I want us to notice here: Jesus takes this word and he says: When you do this for others, when you care for the sick, when you clothe those who are naked, when you visit those in prison, you are actually doing all of these things for Me. Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, and sick, and poor. We are talking, then, about genuine love for those in need, taking ownership and responsibility for someone’s care, acting on our Christian faith, proving ourselves to be doers of the word, and not hearers only.

I hope it is obvious at this point that this compassion is not LIMITED to widows and orphans. Widows and orphans do have a special place in God’s heart, the Bible is full of instruction on this. But the passage seems to open it up at least a little bit with the word **“distress”** in James 1:27. Literally, **“distress”** here refers to pressure, to those who seem to be beaten down and burdened by life. Here in Madison, we think of the homeless. This past Tuesday night as I dropped off the election results at the City-County Building, there were about a dozen, primarily women (it seemed), tucked in their sleeping bags for the night right there outside the front doors of that building. I don’t know if you remember the weather this past Tuesday night, but as I remember it, it was around 0 degrees that night. We can hardly imagine that! And I know homelessness is a complex problem, often involving mental illness and substance abuse, but isn’t there something we can do? We noted several weeks ago that there are approximately 30 homeless students right here in this neighborhood, attending Kennedy Elementary School (about two blocks east of here). Again, we can hardly imagine that. On one of our park cleanups several years ago, some of us came across what appeared to be

some kind of homeless encampment over here in the woods at Kingston-Onyx park, backing up to this industrial park over here (about a block to the west of us).

From cover to cover, the Bible tells us to take care of those in need, and James is asking here: Will we obey the word of God or not? Will we obey, or will we be like the man who looks at himself in a mirror and then walks away, immediately forgetting what kind of person he was?

The question for us is: What happens if we seem to be religious in every outward way, but we fail to care for others? What will the Lord Jesus say to us on the Day of Judgment? Pure and undefiled religion is the religion that cares for widows and orphans in their distress. People matter to God, and people need to matter to us as well. One way we act on God's word is to go out there and do something. And I would say: It doesn't necessarily need to be huge. We might not be able to singlehandedly solve the homeless problem here in Madison, but let's focus on what we CAN do. We have a food pantry here at this congregation. Sometimes we give the reminder: Bring food that can be eaten in a car. And the reason for that is: Sometimes we get calls from people needing food, and they say, "What am I going to do with a can of green beans in my car?" You see, they are homeless and have no way of preparing a tuna casserole. A box of mac and cheese means nothing to them. What am I going to do with a box of mac and cheese if I am living in my car in Madison, Wisconsin, in February? As we go shopping, then, we go by the Golden Rule: If I were living in my car, what would I want to eat? If I were living in my car, what might I appreciate?

And this goes for all of us here this morning – the little children all the way up to our most mature members. All of us can help. I think of how our children helped so much with the laundry detergent for Shults-Lewis Child and Family Services. Let's also remember that all of the change collected here each week goes directly to Shults-Lewis. Parents, when you get here every Sunday morning, send your kids back out to the car to clear all of the change out of the cup holders! Over and over I have encouraged parents to give their children an allowance – not just to learn how to handle money, but especially, to learn how to give to God. Every Sunday morning, my dad would give us an allowance, and as I have said before, even when my allowance was one quarter, he never gave me a quarter! Instead, he always made it some combination of smaller coins (adding up to a quarter), and the reason for that was: So that I could make a decision concerning how much to give to the Lord. Every kid here needs to be giving something each week. In our family, we have the policy that: \$1 per kid for every year they are old. Well, when our kids were 1 and 3, this was a brilliant plan! Now, of course, as they are 14 and 17...sometimes I wonder! But parents: This is your responsibility, to train your children to value giving to God and giving to those who are less fortunate. So kids, you can go home this morning and say, "The preacher says that I need to be getting an allowance!" Again, all of the coins collected here go directly to the care of children who do not have parents of their own, a direct fulfillment of James 1:27.

What about the widows? You do know we have some widows here! We have one Christian woman, 98 years young, who is pretty much stuck at home these days. Harold and Stuart are in the process of developing a schedule to make sure she has the opportunity to partake of the Lord's Supper each week. Wouldn't that be an awesome opportunity for some of our children, to be involved in that, to take a turn maybe once every 2 or 3 months, literally "**visiting a widow in her distress**"? The possibilities for living this verse in other ways are truly endless – shoveling snow for a neighbor, cleaning windows, replacing batteries in smoke detectors, delivering food, making calls, writing notes to those in prison, giving a cup of cold water to someone who needs it – doing whatever needs to be done. That is the point of this passage. Pure religion is active in helping those who need it. Pure religion is compassionate.

**II. As we go back to our text, we find in verse 27 a second aspect of pure religion, and that is: PURE RELIGION INVOLVES KEEPING OURSELVES UNSTAINED BY THE WORLD. \*\*PPT\*\***

Remember: When most people today think of religion, they think of the outward display. James, though, is saying that we must be pure. We must keep ourselves pure on the inside. There is an outward component to it, in that we must reach out and help others, but we must also stay pure on the inside. We are to actively serve in the world, but we are not to let any of the world rub off on us. We are constantly bombarded with messages, and images, and words – even from those in the religious world – and there is a constant pull trying to keep us away from God. James, though, says that we are to keep ourselves from being stained by the world. The struggle is real, as they say. But we are not to be polluted by a worldly way of thinking. The world has a way of sneaking in. So often, it's not the catastrophic failures that get us, it is the constant dripping. I think of our van that we're nursing along right now. So far, we have not had anything blow apart on us, but you know what's bugging us right now? There is water coming in somewhere. Right at this moment (at 0 degrees) this is not really a concern, but as the weather warms and when we travel south, this thing is about to drive me over the edge. We are currently at around 228,000 miles, so far so good, but it is this water coming down one of the side pillars that is about to make me lose it. And that's the way it is in our struggle with the world. We might not give in on some big issue, we might not be tempted to murder a neighbor or anything, but there is the constant dripping, the constant tug of the world on our priorities, on our finances, on our families. James is telling us here: Hang in there! Keep yourselves unstained by the world! What a challenge it is! It is a constant struggle to be different. The world keeps pulling us back.

I think of what Peter said over in 1 Peter 4. Peter was writing to some people who understood that struggle very well, and his message basically was: Dig in! Get ready for it! Notice what Peter said in 1 Peter 4:1-5,

***<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, <sup>2</sup> so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. <sup>3</sup> For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. <sup>4</sup> In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; <sup>5</sup> but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.***

Living a clean life in a dirty world is not easy. We live in a culture where drunkenness is not just tolerated, but often expected. Did you notice the reference to ***“drinking parties”*** (in verse 3)? When we refuse to go along with that, notice what happens (in verse 4): Those who are closest to us are ***“surprised”*** that we do not ***“run with them”*** down the same road, ***“and they malign you.”*** That is, they make fun of us, they ridicule us for not joining in. To me, that sounds like work, that sounds like high school, that sounds like life on the UW campus. The pressure to conform to a life of sin is enormous. James, though, tells us to keep our guard up. We are in the world, but we are not to be of the world. As he will go on to say later in James 4:4, ***“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”*** I think of what Paul wrote over in Romans 12:2, and I love how The Message paraphrases that verse, ***“Do not become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You will be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it.”*** Isn't that what Paul was saying? ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”***

**CONCLUSION:**

Obviously, many people in the world around us will have widely varying views on what it means to be religious. Many will look at the outward appearance of devotion to God and conclude that God wants some kind of a show. This is especially relevant because of what is coming up tonight, but as I was preparing for this lesson, I ran across one author who pointed out that some people could win an Academy Award for acting religious. But we have learned this morning that acting is not what God is looking for. Instead, ***“Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit [to care for] orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”*** He wants us to show compassion, and he wants us to stay pure. The question for us personally, then, is: Are we truly religious? And more importantly, is our religion considered PURE in the eyes of God?

As we close, we want to invite those of you who are not yet pure in the eyes of God to make a change. The work has already been done through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We respond to that sacrifice with faithful, loving obedience – we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, pull us aside after the service. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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