

“Pure and undefiled religion before God” James chapter 1 verse 27

The New Testament letter of James is quite controversial. Protestant Christianity is founded on the proposition that salvation is by the grace of God through faith. It has nothing to do with our own effort, righteousness or merit. We cannot work our way into God's favour through good works or religious practice. You've heard me say it often enough, and there is plenty in the pages of the bible that bears it out.

But James wants us to consider that it's not enough to claim to have faith if our faith doesn't produce some outcome in our lives. Neither is it enough for that outcome to be no more than religious disciplines, rituals and observances. James insists that those who claim to be right with God through faith in Jesus Christ should read what his word says and then do it. Doesn't Jesus say just the same when he tells the parable of the two builders, one of whom builds his house on sand and the other on rock? The one who built his house on rock, so that it stood when the storms came is the person who hears what Jesus says and does it.

So what outcomes does James look for in the lives of those who claim to have faith? Here, he mentions two characteristics of the kind of religion that God is looking for.

One is *“to look after orphans and widows in their distress.”* In Jesus's time, orphans and widows were usually people who had lost the usual means of support; parents or a husband. Christians, James, says, were to look after them. For us, this means to identify and care for those in our culture who have lost their means of support; the poor and the homeless, among others.

How do we do this? Many of us live in relative luxury and comfort, shielded from the realities of the lives of the poor and disadvantaged. But that doesn't mean that they are not there, and just as in need as ever. We can be thankful for those Christians and churches who are helping through such things as food banks, especially in these difficult times. Whatever our situation, we can get involved by offering help, or providing food and finance so that they are properly resourced. There are also numerous missionary and aid organisations that would benefit from our assistance. Do we have the courage to ask God to show us where we can help our own 'widows and orphans', and are we willing to step out of the comfort of our own civilised lives to do it?

Another characteristic of religion that is pure and undefiled before God is *“to keep oneself unstained from the world.”* It is all too easy to drift towards worldly values, but we can choose what we allow to shape our lives and our characters. There is a better way in choosing the leading of God's Spirit instead.

## **Prayer**

*Father, I don't want my faith to be just words. I believe that you called me to yourself because you have a purpose for me to fulfil in my life. Please open my heart to your leading so that I can live as you want me to live and be what you want me to be. In Jesus name, amen.*

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