



Pure Religion

Thinking About

Religion

By

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I'm not a religious person in the sense of what many people think of as being religious. Religious people turned me off to Christianity when I was a teenager. They say one thing on Sunday and do the opposite on Monday. If that's what religion does to you, I wanted no part of it. I eventually embraced atheism and preached it with evangelistic fervor. So, what am I doing writing about God's Amazing Grace if I'm not religious?

The Apostle James wrote only one letter that we know about, but it may have been the first writing of all the New Testament letters. James wrote his epistle several years after Jesus Christ, James' half-brother, rose from the dead and returned to His Throne in Heaven. James had risen to become the primary leader of Jewish believers in Israel. He wrote his letter to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad." Jews were scattered all over the world because of many dispersions and captivities from the centuries before James' day. Thousands of Jews who believed that Jesus Christ was their Messiah were also scattered after the murder of Stephen (Acts 7) and the persecution of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8).

The letter of James to the "twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" began an amazing period of apostolic letter writing that lasted about 40-45 years. Most of the New Testament was written in the first 20 years with John's letters coming at the end of the 40-45 year period. Each letter from the apostles addressed different needs of the people who received the letter. Thanks to God's provision and direction, we now have all of those letters in the wonderful Book we call the New Testament.

James addresses a lot of topics in his short letter to the “twelve tribes,” but he had a primary theme and it was on being “religious.”

“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion *is* useless.” James 1:26 (NKJV)

The Jews were a very “religious” people. They believed their religion was directly from the one and only God and that all other religions were false. Remember that the Jews had worshiped many gods centuries before, but they learned a hard lesson and held fast to the true religion of Judaism. However, the Jews of James’ day, even those who trusted in Christ as their Messianic Savior, were often arrogant, proud and unloving. They participated in every imaginable sin of the heart while speaking and singing words of praise to God.

James wasted no time in getting to the heart of the Jews’ problems. He addressed his remarks to all of the people who thought of themselves as being “religious.” James said that if they thought they were religious, but didn’t bridle their tongue, they were deceived and their religion was useless. Wow! What a thing to say to religious people: “your religion is useless.” My guess is those words didn’t go down well with the Jews who read James’ letter. How dare he say their religion was useless.

The word “religion” in the Greek of James’ day was *threskeia*. It meant “to worship God” and dealt primarily with the duties of outward service to God. A person who practiced “religion” was called

“religious” and also spoke to the external duties of worship. The Greek word is *threskos* and meant “devout” and dealt with the outward ceremonial duties of worship.

What James does in his letter is compare the outward acts of religion to the inward heart of religion. “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion *is* useless.” A Jew who said they were “religious,” but could not bridle (*chalinagogon* – to lead by a bridle, to restrain, hold in check) their tongue (*glossan* – organ of speech) had a useless (*mataios* – void of result) religion. Think about that! A person who did all of the correct outward things to worship God (i.e. attended church regularly, taught Sunday School, sang in the choir, served on church committees, preached from the pulpit) but could not control their speech, had a religion that was void of result. It was useless. (Reminds me of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1-4)

Then James added one of the most powerful insights into what God thinks about right religion: “pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). The Jews had the wrong idea about what religion should be, so James chose two important words to describe the kind of outward expression of worship that God wanted from them: “to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

Orphans and widows were looked at in ancient societies (and unfortunately even modern ones) as being of little or no use. The needs of orphans and widows were often overlooked in the busy day-to-day life when James was writing. People in governing positions often took advantage of orphans and widows and stole the little they had in the world. God had made it abundantly clear through the Old Testament prophets, His Son Jesus Christ, and the teaching of the Apostles, that orphans and widows should be protected and cared for. They had a special place in God's Heart.

Here are several examples of what the Jews of James' day should have known about God's love for the fatherless and widows.

"You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child." Exodus 22:22

"He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing." Deuteronomy 10:18

"And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who *are* within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do." Deuteronomy 14:29

"And you shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who *are*

within your gates.” Deuteronomy 16:14

“You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow’s garment as a pledge.” Deuteronomy 24:17

“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 stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean *it* afterward; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.” Deuteronomy 24:19-21

“When you have finished laying aside all the tithe of your increase in the third year—the year of tithing—and have given *it* to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your gates and be filled, then you shall say before the LORD your God: ‘I have removed the holy *tithe* from *my* house, and also have given them to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, according to all Your commandments which You have commanded me; I have not transgressed Your commandments, nor have I forgotten *them*.’” Deuteronomy 26:12-13

“Cursed *is* the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’”
Deuteronomy 27:19

“You have sent widows away empty, And the strength of the fatherless was crushed. Therefore snares *are* all around you, And sudden fear troubles you.” Job 22:9-10

“You are the helper of the fatherless.” Psalm 10:14b

“A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, *is* God in His holy habitation.” Psalm 68:5

“Defend the poor and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and needy.” Psalm 82:3

“The LORD watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow; But the way of the wicked He turns upside down.” Psalm 146:9

“Your silver has become dross, Your wine mixed with water. Your princes *are* rebellious, And companions of thieves; Everyone loves bribes, And follows after rewards. They do not defend the fatherless, Nor does the cause of the widow come before them. Therefore the Lord says, The LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel, ‘Ah, I will rid Myself of My adversaries, And take vengeance on My enemies.’” Isaiah 1:22-24

“Woe to those who decree unrighteous decrees, Who write misfortune, *Which* they have prescribed To rob the needy of justice, And to take what is right from the poor of My people, That widows may be their prey, And *that* they may rob the fatherless.” Isaiah 10:1-2

“As a cage is full of birds, So their houses *are* full of deceit. Therefore they have become great and grown rich. They have grown fat, they are sleek; Yes, they surpass the deeds of the wicked; They do not plead the cause, The cause of the fatherless; Yet they prosper, And the right of the needy they do not defend. Shall I not punish *them* for these *things?*’ says the LORD. ‘Shall I not avenge Myself on such a nation as this?’” Jeremiah 5:27-29

“For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, *if* you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.” Jeremiah 7:5-7

“Thus says the LORD: ‘Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the plundered out of the hand of the oppressor. Do no wrong and do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.’” Jeremiah 22:3

“Look, the princes of Israel: each one has used his power to shed blood in you. In you they have made light of father and mother; in your midst they have oppressed the stranger; in you they have mistreated the fatherless and the widow. You have despised My holy things and profaned My Sabbaths.” Ezekiel 22:6-8

“For in You the fatherless finds mercy.” Hosea 14:3b

“Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, The alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart Against his brother.” Zechariah 7:10

“Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.” Isaiah 1:17

James made an excellent point in his letter about God’s Heart toward orphans and widows. He loves and honors them and wants His people to take good care of them “in their distress” (NIV). It was hypocritical of a Jew who confessed Christ to worship God outwardly but not care for orphans and widows who were suffering. Religion that was pure (*kathara* – clean, pure by cleansing, unsoiled) and undefiled (*amiantos* – undefiled, unpolluted, unstained, unsoiled, free from contamination) had to include ministering to the needs of children without parents and women whose husbands had died.

This pure religion and undefiled also included keeping oneself “unspotted” from the world. The idea of being unspotted (*aspilon* – unstained, without blemish or spot) was a familiar theme to Jews.

They knew that the sacrificial lamb had to be a male “without blemish” and “the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it at twilight.” (Exodus 12:4-6) Messianic Jews of James’ time understood that Jesus Christ was the Lamb of God “who takes away the sin of the world!” They knew what James meant when he said they should be “unspotted from the world.” The message was clear that they should live holy lives committed to being like Christ in word and deed.

The rest of James’ letter to the “twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” explained what pure religion and undefiled meant. Here’s a quick summary:

- We should not show partiality among ourselves
- We should do good to our brothers and sisters
- We should control our tongue
- We should rebuke wordliness
- We should endure until the Lord comes again

I am attracted to **pure** religion. It looks good and sounds right. The Lord is pleased with it.

Now, before we become proud about having a pure religion and look down on those who don’t have what we have, we need to remember a couple of key elements from James’ letter:

“God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.”

And ...

“Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.”

God gives us a new opportunity every morning to serve Him and others in love. What will we do today?

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