

Pure and Undeified Religion (James 1:27)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely *practical letter* to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In the prior messages we discussed:
 - i. Why this letter was so disparaged by Martin Luther, the founding father of modern Protestantism. Luther said things like:
 - 1. “St. James’ epistle is really *an epistle of straw*...it has nothing of the nature of the gospel in it.”
 - 2. “Some day I will use James *to fire my stove*.”
 - 3. “[The epistle of James] has *no value*.”
 - ii. James directed us all to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath” (**James 1:19**).
 - iii. Based on the topics James covers, the churches he is writing to were clearly addressing a number of problems. They were not ideal or perfect churches (similar to the church in Corinth that Paul addresses in **1 Corinthians**, or most of the seven churches of Asia Minor that Jesus spoke of in **Revelation 2-3**).
 - 1. When we see problems in the church in our own day, we should not be surprised or lose faith. This has always been a challenge, from the beginning.
 - 2. Rather than get discouraged, we should pay attention to the instructions given and address the problems.
 - 3. Satan is real, and there are sinful people in the church who need to repent (including us sometimes).
 - iv. *What comes out of our mouths* is much more important than most Christians think it is.
 - 1. James said that if we don’t bridle our tongues, our religion is *worthless*.
 - 2. This is consistent with what Jesus taught in **Matthew 12**.

- a. “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (**Matthew 12:36–37**, NKJV)
- v. **Important pattern to notice when we are reading through James:**
What James teaches throughout his letter is completely consistent with what Jesus taught in the gospels.
 - 1. “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher.” (**Luke 6:40**, NKJV)
 - 2. “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.” (**Matthew 23:8**, NKJV)
 - 3. Therefore, let us look for similar teachings in the gospels to understand the foundation of what James is teaching.

II. Pure and undefiled Religion

- a. Read **James 1:27**.
 - i. “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**, NKJV)
 - ii. This is a two-fold directive. Pure and undefiled religion, in the sight of God, consists of BOTH
 - 1. Looking after widows and orphans in their trouble; AND (or while)
 - 2. Keeping ourselves unspotted (uncontaminated) from the world around us.
- b. **Observation:** Most churches tend to focus on one or the other. James insists on both.
 - i. **On the one hand, we have many culturally liberal or progressive-leaning Christian churches.** These churches tend to ignore hard teachings of Jesus on holiness and not conforming to modern culture (especially regarding things like: sexual immorality, roles of men and women, permanence of marriage, etc.), but may be strong on helping those in need (immigrants, poor and needy)
 - ii. **On the other hand, we have culturally conservative Christian churches.** These churches may be strong on separation from the world, holiness, modesty, Biblical gender roles in family and church,

sexual morality, etc. However, they may neglect teaching and practicing a lifestyle of sacrificing to meet the needs of others (such as widows, orphans and the poor).

1. **Question:** Which of these *tendencies* do you think best describes our local church, and other churches we most commonly have fellowship with?
2. **Answer:** In my opinion, we tend to emphasize keeping ourselves from being unspotted by the world and by sins of the flesh. We are known for that much more than we are known for helping the poor. Just my opinion!
 - a. Based on that tendency, our fellowship would more naturally fall into this second, 'more conservative' group.
 - i. Therefore, the challenge for us is: *to excel in the other area as well!*
 - b. **Personal Illustration:** My infant grandson No. 4, Levi.
 - i. As a newborn, he had a natural preference to turn his head toward the right side and look to the right. His parents had to work with him over time to correct that tendency. That could either be accomplished through natural encouragement or (if necessary) with a special helmet!
 - ii. Some of us may be like Levi, but spiritually. For whatever reason, it may be easier and more 'natural' to have an unbalanced view of the Christian life. For some of us, it is easier to look at one aspect of the faith (keeping ourselves from being contaminated by the world) more than the other (helping widows and orphans).
- c. **Question:** Did *Jesus teach anything this strong and foundational about the importance of helping the poor and those in need*, which would include people like widows and orphans?
 - i. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins by calling His followers to a *very high standard of righteousness* if they want to enter the kingdom of God.
 1. "For I say to you, that *unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees*, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." (**Matthew 5:20**, NKJV)

2. "But seek first the kingdom of God *and His righteousness*, and all these things shall be added to you." (**Matthew 6:33**, NKJV)
- ii. **Question:** What did the terms 'righteous / righteousness' mean to Jesus and to those He was speaking to? This was neither a new nor unfamiliar term to them. Does 'righteous' mean simply avoiding worldly sins of the flesh, or was there more to it than that?
1. Certainly, Jesus expanded on what Moses had given previously in a few notable areas, in **Matthew 5-6** (divorce/remarriage, lust, nonresistance, oaths, etc.). However, He was building on the foundation previously given by Moses and the prophets.
 2. We can appreciate the meaning of the term 'righteousness' by how the word is used in the LXX, from the example of Job:
 - a. [Note: **Job** is generally considered the oldest book of the Bible. According to the account in **Job 42** in the LXX, Job was a grandson of Esau (who in turn was a grandson of Abraham). Therefore, this book predates **Genesis**, which was written by Moses, by hundreds of years.]
 - b. Read **Job 1:1**, from the LXX
 - i. Job is described here as being "true, blameless, *righteous* and God-fearing".
 1. This is the same Greek word for "righteous / just" (*dikaïos* / δίκαιος) that we find in **Matthew 5** and elsewhere in the New Testament.
 - ii. The Lord tells Satan that there is no one on earth like him (**Job 1:8**).
 - c. Later, Job defends himself by explaining his righteous way of life.
 - i. He explains that he was not guilty of sins of the flesh (including: lusting after other women, deceit, putting his trust in wealth, idolatry, rejoicing at the fall of his enemies).
 - ii. He also shows how he took care of widows, orphans, servants, those in debt to him, and anyone in need.
 1. Read **Job 29:7-16**.

- a. "For I saved the poor from the hand of the oppressor, and helped the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the perishing man came upon me, and the widow's mouth blessed me. I put on *righteousness*..."
- b. "I was the eye of the blind and the foot of the lame. I was the father of the weak..." (**Job 29:12-14**, LXX, OSB)

2. Read **Job 31:13-23**.

- a. "But the weak did not miss whatever they happened to need, and I did not cause the eyes of the widow to fail.
- b. "If I ate my morsel by myself and did not share it with the orphan (But from my youth I nourished them as a father, and from my mother's womb I guided the widow)...." (**Job 31:16-18**, LXX, OSB)

3. Read **Job 31:31-37**.

- a. He showed kindness and hospitality, giving food and shelter to the stranger, the handmaiden and the poor man.

3. Righteousness defined by the prophet Ezekiel.

a. Read **Ezekiel 18:1-9**.

- i. Here again, we see *righteousness* being defined by a way of life having *two aspects*, BOTH
 - 1. Avoiding sins of the flesh (idolatry, lust, stealing, etc.), AND
 - 2. Doing good to those in need (giving bread to the hungry, clothing the naked, etc.)

- a. This is putting into practice the “Second Greatest Commandment” in the Law of Moses, from **Leviticus 19:18**, to “love your neighbor as yourself”.
- 4. Righteousness defined by the prophet Isaiah.
 - a. Read **Isaiah 58:7-10**.
 - i. [This passage is in the context of a discussion on ineffective fasting (*without* righteousness) vs. *effective* fasting (*with* righteousness).]
 - ii. If you give your bread to the hungry, bring the homeless and poor into your house, if you clothe the naked man...then your righteousness shall go before you, and the Lord will quickly heed your prayers.
 - iii. In the Sermon on the Mount, in **Matthew 6**, Jesus taught *how we should give alms*, how we should pray and how we should fast.
 - 1. He did not teach his listeners *that they needed to pray*. They already knew that. The same is true regarding almsgiving and fasting.
 - a. These things were understood as baseline expectations for someone pursuing righteousness.
 - 2. He thought that in giving alms in secret, their Heavenly Father would reward them openly. (**Matthew 6:1-4**)
 - iv. In **Matthew 24-25**, Jesus explains what He will be looking for from his faithful disciples at His return.
 - 1. **Hint:** It is not a perfect score on a theology quiz.
 - a. “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.
 - b. “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, *to give them food in due season*? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins *to beat his fellow servants, and to*

eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (**Matthew 24:44–51**, NKJV)

- i. This is a warning to Christians.
 - ii. When Jesus returns, He will be checking to see whether His servants have been faithful to the responsibility and instructions He left them with.
 - iii. The faithful servants will be found feeding and taking care of their fellow servants when the master returns.
 - iv. The unfaithful servants will be eating and drinking with drunkards (giving in to worldly sins of the flesh) and abusing their fellow-servants (instead of taking care of them).
 1. They will be sent to the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.
2. Jesus reinforces this teaching (about what will happen to His servants when He returns, and how they should be prepared) by telling three stories or parables.
 - a. Parable of the Ten Virgins (**Matthew 25:1-13**)
 - i. Five were wise, and five were foolish.
 - b. Parable of the Talents (**Matthew 25:14-30**)
 - i. Two servants were found to be faithful upon the master’s return.
 - ii. However, a third servant was unfaithful. He makes excuses and is rebuked for being wicked and lazy.
 - c. Story of the Sheep and the Goats (**Matthew 25:31-46**)
 - i. This is a story about the Day of Judgment, when Jesus will judge everyone at the end.
 1. “...Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed,

into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.'

2. "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, *inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.*' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (**Matthew 25:41-46**, NKJV)

- ii. "The least of these" certainly would include widows and orphans in need.
- iii. This is what Jesus will be looking for in us, on the Day of Judgment (as well as a commitment to holiness and obeying all of His other teachings).

III. Conclusion, and Challenges for Us

- a. **Recap:** "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**, NKJV)
 - i. Both things are necessary for pure, true Christian religion. We must BOTH:
 1. Keep ourselves from being corrupted and contaminated spiritually by the world around us, AND
 2. Look out to show compassion toward those in need (typified by widows and orphans).
 - ii. This is a beautiful figure of the Christian way of life, the way of righteousness.
- b. We can't just focus on keeping ourselves separate from worldly influences, preferring to look only at the one side of the Christian spiritual life we are more comfortable viewing!

- i. For most of us, this second area has been relatively neglected (hence the focus on it in today's message).
- c. Let's get practical.
 - i. We can't just hear the word and deceive ourselves. We need to do what it says.
 - ii. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." (**James 1:22-25**, NKJV)
 - iii. Do what He says. Be prepared on the Day of Judgment.
 - 1. Show love for others, as we love ourselves.
- d. **Common Objections I Have Heard to This Challenge:**
 - i. **Objection No. 1:** "This sounds like you are teaching 'works salvation'. Isn't salvation a *free gift from God* that we simply receive?"
 - 1. **My Reply:** Please consider what Jesus taught in **Matthew 25**, in the story of the Sheep and Goats.
 - a. "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death." (**Revelation 20:11-14**, NKJV)
 - 2. Also consider what Paul taught regarding final judgment being on the basis of our works (what we do).
 - a. "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will

render to each one according to his works:" (**Romans 2:5-6**, ESV)

ii. **Objection No. 2:** "But if our salvation is impacted by how we treat the poor, how can I ever be secure in my salvation? How will I ever know if I have given *enough*?"

1. **My Reply:** This is about loving your neighbor as yourself. You can't have an attitude of: "What is the bare minimum I need to give in order to be saved, so that I can use the rest of my wealth to live for pleasure here?"

iii. **Objection No. 3:** "But living in Boston (or whatever high-cost area you may happen to live in) is *so expensive*..."

1. **My Reply:** When I taught these Biblical principles in a large church in the Boston area, I challenged those present to (mentally) compare what they spent on their own pleasures (eating out, expenses beyond what was necessary to meet our basic needs, vacations, etc.) versus what they spent over the past year to help those in need.

2. This was to help them 'get a grip' on how little most of them were actually doing (versus *what they could have done*) to help the "widows and orphans," and others in need.

iv. **Objection No. 4:** "But I don't know any orphans or widows in financial need. Besides, we have robust tax-funded government systems of financial support here in the U.S. And if I want to send money elsewhere (such as to help those in poorer countries), how can I know who to trust to use the money wisely?"

1. **My Reply:** Jesus said (speaking figuratively) that we give the money we have been entrusted with to "the bankers" and let them invest it. See this as the investment that it is, in something that pays greater returns for us, in the end, than a 'normal' bank account! There are vast unmet needs in poorer countries all over the world, providing opportunities for us to help destitute orphans, widows, the disabled, the elderly, those with medical needs, the unemployed, etc.

a. "So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest." (**Matthew 25:27**, NKJV)

b. "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may

receive you into an everlasting home.” (Luke 16:9, NKJV)

2. There are vast needs overseas that other Christians are meeting. Find trusted, sincere Christians who help people directly and who have a good track record as stewards of financial resources. Ask those you know and trust regarding faithful Christian ministries with a good track record of using donations wisely to help the poor.
3. Some where I know people personally who are directly involved include:
 - a. *Remember the Poor, Inc.* (Rose Ann Howell) A ministry helping the hard-working poor, including street children, in Kenya, Africa.
 - i. <https://www.rememberthepoorinc.org/>
 - b. *Casa de la Esperanza / House of Hope* (Gilbert Sanchez, Ashley Hockenberry), providing a safe home for orphans and abandoned and abused children in Mexico.
 - i. <https://ahouseofhope.com/>
 - c. *Society of the Good Shepherd* (David & Deborah Bercot) Serving the needs of the poor in Honduras, Central America.
 - i. <https://scrollpublishing.com/donations-for-honduras/>
 - d. Others among us know of groups they trust and have worked with. Ask around!
- e. Look to find heroic examples, living or dead, to inspire you in your own spiritual walk, including in this area of meeting the needs of the poor. Be inspired to follow their example. Some who have been an upward call to me include:
 - i. Job, and others in the Scriptures, who showed extraordinary devotion to helping those poor and in need.
 - ii. William Law, an influential 18th-century British Christian who lived on 10% of his income and donated the other 90% to meet the needs of others.

- iii. David Lipscomb, an American preacher and writer in the Restoration Movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who lived out these principles.
- iv. Various modern medical missionaries I have known, who have spent considerable time in third-world countries, meeting the medical and spiritual needs of poor people.
- f. **Closing Challenge:** Open your eyes to see the importance of this in our salvation, in truly loving others as ourselves. This is the heart God is looking for. This is what Jesus has asked us to do until He returns.

IV. Postscript (Additional Thoughts, As Given on 5/31/2026)

- a. This 'postscript' to the lesson given on 5/24/2026 was given one week after the original lesson on **James 1:27**, to include some of the good feedback received from those who heard the original lesson.
- b. Following that message, I received some helpful feedback that I wanted to share with everyone, from three sources. All offered valuable input based on years of experiences striving to put these principles into practice to help widows and orphans (as well as the poor and needy in general).
- c. The three things I wanted to share:
 - i. The first recommendation is from Anabaptists working in third-world situations:
 - 1. Make sure to work closely with trusted locals, *who know the culture and the people*.
 - 2. This is extremely important since it is easy for outsiders, who do not understand the local culture, to misjudge, get fooled, or make mistakes, even if well-intentioned.
 - a. As Jesus said in **Matthew 10:16**, we need to be "*wise as serpents*" as well as "*harmless/innocent as doves*".
 - 3. Therefore, you need to have honest, trusted local people "on the ground" who you can work with and through to make sure that the funds are being used effectively.
 - ii. The second recommendation is from someone who listened to the original lesson remotely, via livestream:
 - 1. They emphasized the importance of not just giving money, but having personal, physical involvement in meeting those needs.

- a. After all, James called us to “visit widows and orphans in their trouble...” in **James 1:27**. This suggests a level of personal, hands-on involvement (rather than simply writing a check from a distance).
 2. Personal involvement, even where overseas benevolence work is in view (in this case, the person making this point has a longstanding practice of working with the poor in Guatemala, and bringing others along from the U.S. to help).
 3. For those interested in learning more about opportunities to participate in this, you are invited to contact Mark Felsher, of the Garner, North Carolina house church. Mark has been involved in this work for 20 years, and usually leads at least one such trip to Guatemala per year. He is looking for Christians who would like to go for a week. (Typical costs are \$1,000-\$1,200 per person for such a one-week trip.) For more information, please contact Mark directly at markfelsher@gmail.com
- iii. The third recommendation was from a Christian who lives in Connecticut:
1. He gave an example of what one group is doing in their local community, here in New England. It might inspire others to start doing something similar in their own communities.
 2. The community organization he pointed to is called “*UR Community Cares*,” which is based on having local volunteers meet the needs of other locals in the Manchester, CT area.
 - a. Website: <https://urcommunitycares.org>
 3. That group is especially focused on the needs of elderly members of the community who are struggling to live independently. This includes those who need some limited regular support, including those over age 70 and people with disabilities. Volunteers offer to do things such as:
 - a. Simple chores
 - b. Driving
 - c. Shopping
 - d. Visiting, talk, phone calls
 - e. Simple yard work and home maintenance

4. This may give some Christians an idea of *what could be done in their own communities*. Allowing people to volunteer and help others as their time and situation permit, and personally looking after others who are isolated and in need.
- d. Please consider these good, practical suggestions offered by others as you seek to heed James' admonition to "visit orphans and widows in their trouble".