



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

James 1:19-27

James

“Pure Religion”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we thank you for the opportunity that we have again this evening to come together in this place and open our bibles to the book of James and to receive instruction from him, and we pray that as we do that, as we read through our text and as we consider its meaning together, that you would bless us. We are thankful to you that we are not left to ourselves to seek to gain the meaning, the understanding of the text, but we have a divine teacher. The third person of the Trinity is within us. He does guide us and direct us, and so I pray that we would begin by being receptive to Him and that He would open our hearts to receive the truth, but that we would think correctly, that we would be discerning in our thoughts and we would measure what is said and seek to weigh it and understand it well. We commit that to you. We pray you bless us in this hour, bless our time of study, bless our time of prayer afterwards, and we pray that you would bless the young people as they meet this evening, as well, and you would instruct them and edify them. May they have good fellowship together. Make them strong. They face a very difficult, challenging, tempting world, as we all do. We pray that through the ministry of the Word they would be strengthened, and that we, too, would be strengthened, as well. We look to you to bless us. We thank you for the time together again. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] Our text is James 1. We're going to finish up the chapter this evening with verse 19 where James writes, “This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror, for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 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. 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.”

It goes without saying, it would seem, that where there is life there is action, there is activity, there is evidence of life, but what is obvious in the physical realm is not always quite so clear, so obvious in the spiritual realm, and so one of the great themes of James is that genuine faith, saving faith, is active faith, obedient faith; it behaves in a certain way. That's very much the subject of the remaining verses of chapter 1, and the standard and guide of Christian behavior is God's Word, which James describes in three ways. He describes it first as a seed, at least that seems to be the idea in the description, verse 21, the word “implanted.” He describes it as a mirror in verse 23, and describes it as the law of liberty in verse 25, and then he calls throughout this whole section for a response to the instruction of God's Word. First, in verses 19-21, he tells his readers to be hearers of the word, so _____ respond in that way, and then, in verses 22-25, he tells them to be doers of the word, and, thirdly, in verses 26 and 27, he tells them how to have pure religion, true religion, a proper walk with God, that which is really pleasing with God and ones relationship with Him.

James had confidence that the people to whom he was writing would do that. They had spiritual life, and so they had ability. They had unusual ability, unnatural ability, ability that the natural man doesn't have. They're new creatures, and he has just emphasized that, just explained that in the previous verse, in verse 19, or rather verse 18, where he states that God sovereignly gives new birth through the preaching of His Word, through the Word of God, verse 18, “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures,” and then he begins our section, verse 19, by acknowledging that they know this. They know that that's true. They understand grace. They know that they are what he describes here, the first fruits of God that is His possession. “This you know, my beloved brethren. But,” he adds, and that word

“but” gives us a contrast of what went before, so there’s a suggestion here by that statement “but,” that word “but” that suggests that to know these things is not enough. They must also act upon them, and so he gives three responses to the word, or three duties that are theirs. He says, “Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”

Now, taken at face value, that statement that he makes about the tongue, about speech is sound advice and the kind of advice that we would see taught throughout the book of Proverbs. We see it, for example, in Proverbs 10:19, “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable. But he who restrains his lips is wise,” or Proverbs 17:28, “Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise.” In fact, the subject of the tongue and proper speech and improper speech is a major subject throughout the book of Proverbs. We find that generally, though. This is a general kind of advice that we can find in other places besides the Bible. The rabbis spoke about the tongue, and they called silence a fence for wisdom. In other words, they recognized the great wisdom in being silent and not abusing the tongue, and bridling the tongue. Even the pagans recognized this.

William Barclay in his commentary cited the philosopher Zeno as saying, “We have two ears but only one mouth that we may hear more and speak less.” Well, that’s wise counsel. That’s counsel that you find in the book of Proverbs, you find it among the rabbis, you can find it among the pagans. Men generally recognize that that’s true. It’s wise for a person to listen before he or she speaks and then measure his words and restrain his or her anger. That should be particularly true of the Christian, the person who has the character of Christ. So, to take it that way is to take it in a way that is correct, but I don’t think that that’s James’ point. I don’t think that he’s giving us general advice, like we would find in the Proverbs or among the rabbis or anyone else. But, rather, this is something more specific, and this is referring to the response of God’s people to God’s Word as it is proclaimed or taught in the church rather than how a person responds to conversation on the street. That fits, at least, the context of these last verses.

So, first of all, “Everyone,” as he says, all without exception are to pay attention, close attention to the Scriptures when the Scriptures are taught. We are to learn from God’s Word when it is preached. Before we say anything about it, we’re to sit and we’re to listen, we’re to consider it before we make any judgments on it, so when we hear something taught, when we hear instruction given, we are to give time for thoughtful reflection, thoughtful evaluation, and not react hastily to it. Now, I think the instruction that James

gives here is to be understood in the particular context of the **First Century Church**, and the First Century Church didn't meet like most churches meet today, and you know that if you've been here long enough and you've heard people speak about the church and why we do things the way we do at Believers Chapel, but the early church followed the pattern that is set forth in 1 Corinthians 14:26. It was a rather loosely structured meeting. That doesn't mean it didn't have any structure, it did have structure.

It had principals that governed it, it had a purpose for meeting, and there was structure but it was rather loosely structured and allowed for gifted men to stand, to speak, and to give instruction, to give **exaltation**, to pray, to offer a hymn and various things that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 14:26, and it would be very likely it seems that in that kind of meeting that there would be some interaction. Perhaps one man speaks and another man answers what has been spoken, and so James was counseling against hasty reaction on the part of those who were there, or an overly zealous response or defense of what was held to be the truth. You can imagine how that might happen. Someone stands and speaks, and someone hears something that he doesn't think is correct, and so he stands and he speaks, and there might be some anger that is exchanged between them, something of a debate, an argument that breaks out.

Well, arguments usually don't advance the truth. Reckless speech wounds, it doesn't help. Anger really only betrays an ignorance of grace. We might get upset with someone who doesn't teach the doctrines that we believe are correct, and we can get angry over that. But, when we do that, when we express ourselves in that way, we really betray a fundamental truth about grace. Everything we have is a gift. Paul made that very clear in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “By the grace of God, I am what I am.” That's true of every one of us. By the grace of God, I know what I know, and a knowledge of that principle, a real knowledge of grace would give us patience with others when they don't understand things the way we do, and we would understand that we haven't arrived yet, either, and we need to be patient with others, so he's counseling against this kind of hasty response. As one commentator put it, “Furious reactions to the views of others were a discredit to the cause of Christ,” so, evidently, there was some of that going on in the church to which James was writing.

Now, having said that, it's not to say that anger is always wrong. It's impossible not to be angry with evil. Jesus reacted in anger to the hypocrisy and to the abuses of His own day. He cleansed the Temple twice. You see that at the beginning of the Gospel of

John in chapter 2, and at the end of the _____ gospels. He cleansed it again. He turned the tables over, he drove out the moneychangers, he reacted with some violence. What that was was righteous indignation. They were abusing the Temple, they were using it for selfish gain; they had turned it into a den of thieves He said. Paul got angry with the heretics, and you get a sense of his anger in the book of Galatians, particularly in the very beginning of it. So, anger is not in itself wrong, but what we see in our Lord's case and what we see with the apostles is controlled anger. It's righteous indignation. What James was concerned with was anger that was out of control and that was produced from pride, something like that.

In verse 20, he gives the reason for his concern. He says, “For the anger of men does not achieve the righteousness of God.” Christians can get very angry over things that perhaps should make us angry, but they can get militant for morality, for upright, Godly behavior, but that kind of approach, that kind of attitude, that kind of behavior won't establish what we want to establish when people try to respond or rather remove evil institutions and establish righteousness by shouting, by demonstrating. They tend more to polarize people than do good, and block the goal of righteousness. That kind of behavior doesn't really reflect the person or the character of God, and, in fact, can give a false impression, a false view of who and what God is and what He's like to the world, and undermine the goals of righteousness.

The Lord has told us the way we're to be. In fact, we can cite verses throughout the New Testament, but one in the Old Testament is particularly to the point, I think. It's Micah 6:8, where the Lord says that we are to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. Well, we can't love or do justice by breaking the law. We can't love kindness by being rude, by being assertive, by being forceful. We can't walk humbly with our God in that way, either. This is the standard that's been set for us, and that's really what James is counseling in their behavior and their conduct with one another.

Now, from his warning against anger, James draws an inference in verse 21. He writes, “Therefore,” or for this reason, that is because anger undermines righteousness, they are to take action against it. That suggests that there were probably some people in the congregation or congregations to which James was writing that had a problem with anger, that they were angry in their operations or their conduct with one another, and so to counter that and to establish righteousness, they were to do two things. Negatively, they were to remove sins from their lives, and, positively, they were to receive the Word of God into

their lives. First, they were to lay aside all filthiness and wickedness, just like someone would strip off themselves filthy garments. In fact, that may be the very picture that James has in mind here, because this word, laying aside, is used in that way.

It's used in Acts 7:58 of the men who stoned Stephen. They laid aside their garments, their robes, and then they stoned him, and so it is used of laying robes or garments aside, and the picture may be of having filthy garments and stripping them off, taking them off, and we're to deal with our sins in that way. We have the same words used in Hebrews 12:1, a well known text where the author of Hebrews writes, "Let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run the race." Well, that picture is a beautiful picture of the way we're to live. Just like a runner strips in order to run unencumbered, we're to get rid of the sins that do entangle us, the variety of sins that we face, so that we can run the race that God set before us, so that we can walk humbly with our God.

When we enter the Christian life, we enter the Christian life fully and forever, accepted by God. We don't need to do anything more in order to gain God's acceptance. At the moment of faith, we are justified, we are declared righteous, we are accepted fully and completely by God, then and forever. But, justification is not the actual removal of sin from our lives, that's sanctification, and so we come into the Christian life fully justified, righteous in God's sight, clothed in Christ, but with our sins, and so we are encumbered, and we must lay them aside. We must do that now. We will always be doing that. We'll never come to a point, and James isn't suggesting that we can with this action that he's describing, of being sinless, of stripping it all off and being perfect. That will never happen. This is a lifelong process that we will be engaged in. We will always be dealing with that.

But we must be doing that, we must be dealing with personal sins so that we can give ourselves completely to the second and positive act that he instructs us to engage in here, and that is receiving God's Word. "In humility," he writes, "Receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls," so James here seems to move from the image of clothing to that of farming, stripping off our sins is like clearing a field so that the seed which has been planted can grow unhindered and produce fruit. This word "received" is used in Acts 17:11 of the Bereans, and there Luke describes them as people who receive the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily. Well, James doesn't describe that as what is necessary. That certainly is what he would have them to do. He

would desire that his readers receive the Word of God with eagerness and examining it every day, and that would have been what he would have desired.

But what he tells them to do here is to receive it with humility. That’s the frame of mind with which they are to receive it. Really, we could put both together. We’re to do all of this. We’re to receive it eagerly, we’re to receive it with humility, but it’s humility that James emphasizes here. They’ve already received the word in terms of salvation. These are people who have received the gospel. These are born-again people. But now, they must welcome the ethical implications of the gospel that they have received. They’re to receive that now, and they’re to do that _____ humility. That is, they are to submit to the Word of God. They are to live in submission to this. The Word of God is powerful, and it has a transforming effect. He says here that it is able to save your souls.

Now, again, that’s not save your souls in the sense of save their souls from damnation that’s occurred. These are believing people, he’s addressed them as beloved brethren, and so what he’s speaking of here is salvation presently from the effects of sin, the damage of sin, the consequences of sin; we’re to be obedient to God’s Word in order to be delivered from that. Now, that doesn’t just happen. Because we’ve believed, we don’t simply become passive individuals and the Word of God that’s been implanted _____ takes over apart from any activity, any effort on our own part. We are to receive it. We’re to welcome it. If that word is to expand and take root within us and have its transforming effect, then we must respond to it, we must appropriate it, we must give attention to it, or we will not grow in the faith. That becomes a problem.

That was a problem with the Corinthian Church. The author of Hebrews describes that as a major problem with those to whom he’s writing – they should have been teachers by now, they weren’t. They needed milk. If we don’t give attention to the Word of God, if we don’t receive it in the sense of welcoming it, it will not grow. It won’t advance in the faith. But, as we do that, as we give attention to the word, as we appropriate the Word of God, then it does take root in the soil of our hearts and it transforms us. That’s what James is urging, but that’s not all. Receiving the word must result in obeying the word. The Christian life is a life to be lived. It is a life of activity. That’s one of James’ major themes, and so James now urges the right response in verse 22 with correct behavior, “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” In other words, always be doers of the word. Never stop being doers of the word.

That word “doer” is important to James. It’s used, I think, six times in the New Testament, and of the six times, James uses it four times, so this is one of the great themes of the book James, doing, obeying God’s Word. It is necessary to be a hearer, also. It doesn’t exclude that. We shouldn’t camp on one word to the exclusion of the other. A person will never grow unless he or she is a hearer of the word, gives attention to the word, sits down and listens to what is being taught, and hearer is emphasized in the book of James because in the first century and among the ancient, the first century and earlier, education and learning was basically done orally. People listened. They would come to a philosopher in Athens, and they would gather there in the market place and they would sit at his feet, and they would listen to Plato or Aristotle teach.

They didn’t have books like we do, they couldn’t afford that, and in the first century in the synagogue, they didn’t carry their bibles to synagogue, and, in the churches that followed, they didn’t carry those, either. They perhaps had one in the synagogue and people might go there and read it, but generally learning was by listening, by hearing someone teach, and so this is the emphasis in the book, but we could apply it to our own day and say, “Reading, giving attention to the Scripture.” But, principally, he’s talking about the **meeting of** the church and how it’s to be conducted, and how we’re to conduct ourselves; we must hearers. But, hearing itself is not enough, though people might think it is. People might come on a Sunday morning regularly, even come on a Wednesday night regularly and think, “Well, that’s really quite enough. I sit, I listen, I enjoy hearing the Bible taught, and that’s all I need to do.” I don’t know that anybody would actually say that, but that might be the attitude, that might become the frame of mind, and, let’s face it, we all can become like that.

I don’t want to say it’s easy to come and listen to the Scriptures because lots of people don’t do it. They evidently find it difficult in the day and age in which we live, and yet one can find it a little easier to sit and listen than it is to act upon what he or she has heard. We can think, “Well, it’s quite enough to just be here and be a part of the assembly, and be a listener and really think, and I enjoy hearing what’s said and I like those things.” But James says if that’s ones attitude, if one simply comes and hears, then he or she is deluding himself or herself because they think that that’s enough, and that living the Christian life is simply a matter of listening and taking things in and doing no more than that. The Christian life is not only passive, it’s active, and James illustrates his point in verses 23 and 24 where he compares reading the Bible or listening to the Word of God

taught to that of looking in a mirror. “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror, for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.”

Well, what do we do when we look in a mirror? Well, we see all of our defects, and we see that our hair is not combed correctly or we’ve got a spot on our face or something like that, and so we correct it. We wash our face or we shave, or we put some makeup on if we’re a female, maybe not a lot of makeup but some. We do that before we go out because we see things aren’t right and we want to put things in order, so we wash our face, we comb our hair, we straighten our tie. I’ve done that a couple times tonight, done everything so that I look presentable so that I’m in good shape.

Well, the man who James is imagining here looks in a mirror, he sees his flaws, but, instead of doing something, does nothing. He sees the smudge on his face, walks away, walks out into the public, and he’s got a smudge on his face or his hair is messed up, and you think, “Well, that’s foolish.” It’s a foolish way to respond to ones reflection and to the defects, the flaws that one sees, and yet that’s exactly what the man or the woman is like that James is describing here who hears but is not a doer of what he or she hears; hears from the Scripture what is wrong and what is to be done to correct that, but does nothing, and so he then goes away unchanged and soon forgets everything that he heard, everything that he or she learned about him or herself.

In verse 25, James gives the opposite picture of a man who acts on what he sees. The figure of the mirror still seems to be in his mind, but he doesn’t describe a mirror or doesn’t use that description. He speaks plainly. He speaks of God’s Law. He says in verse 25, “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.” He looks intently, that is he is a hearer, he is a student; he receives or welcomes the Word of God. That word “looks intently” has the idea of bending over to look. It used, for example, in John 20, verses 5 and 11, of Mary going to the tomb of our Lord, the empty tomb, and stooping down to look in, so there’s a sense of looking very carefully, of an intense, penetrating look. She’s straining to see what is in there and see that there’s nothing in there.

This is how the person who James describes as being blessed, or will be blessed, receives the Word of God: not casually, not carelessly, but carefully, seriously. It’s God’s Word, it’s God’s Law. Now, the word “law” is without the article in the original text. I

think that suggests that this is not the law of Moses that James is describing but it is law. A Christian is not under the law of Moses, not under the 613 commandments. That was given to the nation Israel. The church is under what James will describe here as the law of liberty, or what Paul identifies in 1 Corinthians 9:21 as the law of Christ, so we are not under the law but we are not without law. We are not without principles of conduct, without principles that guide us in our thinking and in our actions. We have the New Testament with the example and the instruction of the Lord and the apostles.

There were temporal aspects to the Mosaic Law that have fallen away, so to speak. They're no longer binding upon us. They're still useful for us, we can still learn much from the ceremonial aspects of the law, but those temporal aspects of the law which were just for Israel, have fallen away, and there were eternal aspects of the law of Moses that were binding on people before the law was ever given at Mount Sinai, and those were taken up into the New Testament and they are binding upon us. Now, James describes the law that he's speaking of here, the principles, as I would take this, of the New Testament in two ways. He described it first as perfect, that is it's complete. It embodies the complete revelation of God and Jesus Christ, and it can't be improved on, it is perfect, and, secondly, he says it is a law of liberty.

Peter said, you'll remember in Acts as we studied it just a few weeks ago, in Acts 15:10, speaking of the law, the law of Moses, he said, "It was a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear." It was a heavy yoke. It was a burdensome yoke. It was intended to be that. It was designed to be that. It was to weigh people down. That was its effect, its intended effect. The yoke of Christ, His law, is easy to bear. He said it was easy to bear in Matthew 11:30. Now, the reason is because He enables us to bear it. We don't bear it in our own strength. We live obediently in His power. That was the promise that was given in Jeremiah 31:33, that God would put His law within us, He would put it on the hearts of His people, and so those in Christ are able to do what God has commanded us to do voluntarily, gladly; not under compulsion, so to speak, not the kind of compulsion that one might sense with a code that is external, a list of rules and regulations that are imposed on us from **without**. We do it because we're not free from obligation, from God's revealed will. He has made His will known.

So, we must do things, and we're not free to live without any kind of guidance and any obedience to God's will. The Christian life is not, as I've said, a carefree kind of existence. It is a life of intensity, it's a life of discipline, it's a life of sacrifice. But all of

that, that response, that discipline, that obedience, that sacrifice, it arises from an inner desire, an inner compulsion, and not an outer sense of obligation, and that's because of the work of God within us, the _____ we have, the spirit of God within us. We are now free to obey willingly because of the new life that we have because, also, we understand that obedience makes us free. We're not free by being disobedient. There's no freedom in that at all. There's freedom in being obedient and being what we were intended to be, and people are free when they want to do what they ought to do. We are free when we are able to do and be what God intended us to do and be. The perfect law of liberty gives us insight into that. The perfect law of liberty, as James describes it, gives us direction in that way, direction into a life of freedom, a life of being what we were intended to be.

This law is the Scriptures, rightly understood, that God uses, God the Holy Spirit, uses to transform us, to change us. It's His instrument, His means of change, like a mirror. It shows us where we need correction, and He gives us the ability to act upon that and to change it. Well, that's power. There is power with the Word of God, and there is freedom, there is liberty in power, and so James says that this person he's describing here who looks intently into God's Word and is an effectual doer, will be blessed in what he does. To be obedient brings blessing, blessing in the eternal future. James has already described that in the previous passage, that there is a crown for those who are enduring and living in a way that pleases God, there's reward for that. But there's also blessing in the immediate future. The person who lives like this, the person who receives God's Word, lives an orderly life, he or she sees the flaws, corrects them and, in so doing, also avoids the destructive consequences of sin, avoids a harmful life.

Well, in these last verses, James gives some special aspects of this life that's a blessing, and the life that the hearer and the doer of God's Word will live. It involves discipline, it involves helpfulness, and it involves a life that is not worldly or an unworldly life. He begins with the negative in verse 26 by rebuking a person who does religion but whose practice is outward and inward. In other words, he condemns hypocrisy, he condemns religiosity. Verse 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." This word "religion" is a rare word in the New Testament, and here it describes a person who is engaged in the performance of duties or worship that he feels fulfill God's demands, or the demands of God's Word, so he thinks he's living out a life of obedience, one that's in conformance to the Scriptures.

But he is self-deceived, because while he considers himself religious, and he’s probably the kind of person that others would consider very religious, his religion is **vain**, it’s worthless, as James says, because it lacks reality. It lacks inner purity. He can’t bridle his tongue. That’s how he’s described. Now, what he says isn’t given. We don’t know how he’s using his tongue in an improper way. Some, like Calvin, identify the problem as slander, that is this is a man who destroys the character of others under the pretext of religion, and that way he can make himself look good as he talks down about other people and slanders them. That’s a good guess, and that may be just what James is referring to, but I think it could probably be any number of abuses of speech.

Robert Johnston, the Scottish commentator of about a century ago called this a peculiarly excellent test of genuine religion, and it’s an excellent test of genuine religion of a true spiritual life because it indicates the nature of the heart. The tongue really isn’t the issue here. The tongue is the manifestation of the problem. It’s an index of the soul, of the inner man. The tongue is loose, the tongue is unbridled because the heart is not right. There’s something wrong with the inner man. It hasn’t been transformed. That’s why the tongue is being used in the way that he condemns, and so the man’s religion is said to be worthless because it doesn’t please God. There’s nothing to it but outward form. It’s going through motions but there’s no reality to it. What is so bad about religion as an outward service of rituals and regulations is that it can give a person a sense that all is well with his soul when that soul, when that heart is really unchanged, hasn’t been affected at all.

Fundamentally, that is a problem of the heart in a sense that it is the result of self-love, and people, because they love themselves, they don’t want to change, they want to enhance themselves as they are, and they convince themselves and persuade themselves that they are better than they really are. That’s the fundamental problem with this kind of religion, of going through the motions and not being changed. But the danger of that kind of religion, or maybe we can put it this way, the danger of liturgy is that it occasions that kind of idea that, “I’m okay. I’m doing the right things. I’m going to church, I’m going through all these regulations that I’m supposed to go through, I’m doing all these things. I’m okay.” It fosters that. Now, the problem is not so much with the content of most Christian liturgy. That can be really quite good. **It can** be prayers or statements of faith that have been well thought out by godly men.

But what results from that kind of practice can be very bad because the result can be a kind of formalism that occurs with certain readings and rote prayers that people go

through, so we can see a problem there, and we might be able to even cite certain churches that fall under that kind of category. But we're not immune from the problem that James is speaking of, either, because even in a non-liturgical church such as we are, there's the danger of taking the ordinances in that way, and we take the Lord's supper every Sunday night, as we should, as is good, but the problem that can happen in that is it can become merely a routine in our lives and we don't give careful thought to what we're doing. We could even do that Sunday morning. One of the first things we do is we sing the doxology. Do we even know what we're singing when we sing that? I confess, I've done it and I'm not even sure that I remember doing it. We can fall into that pattern. We're not thinking about what we're doing.

God's not pleased that I sang the doxology before I preached a sermon if I didn't think about what I was singing praise to Him for. So, we can fall into these things but, when we do that, when we get into the routine and our religion, so to speak, to use James' word, becomes that, it's worthless to God because it doesn't please God. What pleases God is what James calls in verse 27, "Pure and undefiled religion," then he defines it, "To visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." In other words, pure religion unites both the inner and the outward effects of the gospel in our lives. First, it has a genuine social concern. It acts for those in need, here defined as orphans and widows. We are to care for them in their distress. After all, God has described Himself in Psalm 68 as one who is a father to the fatherless and a judge for the widows. He has great concern for them. If that's the case, then His people ought to share the same concern, have the same character and have the same response toward those same people.

Now, this expression, orphans and widows, is a common expression in the Old Testament of people in need. They were in ancient times the most needy of people, and so they became sort of the standard or almost a formula in the Old Testament for those in need, but they represent a wider circle of need, a greater problem, and so the point is not that you take care of widows and orphans in need and you've done your duty, and you don't need to worry about the married couple in need or the child who's got a father, we are to care for everyone who is in need. Where we see a problem, we're to do what we can to help. That is the first aspect of pure religion, we're to help those in need. We're also to take care of ourselves. We are to keep ourselves unstained by the world. In other words, we are not to only be concerned with those around us but we're to be concerned with our own personal purity. That calls for vigilance, that calls for watchfulness.

James will go on to say in chapter 4 in verse 4, “Friendship with the world is hostility toward God.” He warns us against being conformed to this world. He warns us against worldliness, we’re to guard ourselves from that. The Christian life is not a casual life. It is a life that calls for us to be outward looking and inward looking. We’re to be concerned for the welfare of others, we’re to be concerned for our own personal, spiritual welfare. We will be that and we will do that as we are hearers of the word and doers of the word, and we will be that by God’s grace, and so may God give us the grace to be the kind of people that James exhorts us to be, instructs us to be. May we be men and women who are earnest in our study of the Bible, who give attention to things that are taught and are very careful in that, but also act upon it. Well, as I say, we’ll do that by the grace of God, so let’s close with prayer and ask Him to bless us in that way.

[Prayer] Father, we do pray for that. We ask you to make us hearers and doers of your word, that we might be men and women of, as James would put it, pure and undefiled religion. Ultimately, that’s your work. We know that you will perform it in us, that you will complete the work that you began. We thank you for that in Christ’s name. Amen.