



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of Dan Duncan

James 1: 19-27

Summer 2021

"Pure Religion"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Joe, and that is a good introduction, (that Scripture from Romans), for our lesson this morning about, 'Not being conformed to the world'. (Rom 12:2).

Our text is James chapter 1, verses 19 through 27. We're going through a series in the Book of James, and we're going to complete the first chapter this morning, beginning with verse 19,

"This you **know**", (*Now let me just make a comment here because I'm not going to speak too much about it in the lesson itself, but I think James is referring to what they "know" is what he just said in verse 18 where he spoke about the Word of God. Where he said, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth..." In other words, through the Gospel we were brought forth into this new life. We were born again through the preaching of the Gospel. The Word of God is alive and powerful, it is active, it is instrumental in changing us.*)

And so he says in verse 19, "This you know my beloved brethren." (*or, 'You know this about the word of God'. And then he adds this, as a kind of caveat), "But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger." (There's a right way to respond to this great Word of God that is very effective in a person's life. And first of all, he's saying, 'Be quick to hear it, and then slow to speak and slow to anger')*).

So now again starting at verse 19,

¹⁹ *This* you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. ²² But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³ 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; ²⁴ for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 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.

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. 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. (*In other words, 'not being conformed to this world but being transformed. And that happens through the Word of God by the power of the Spirit.'*)

James 1: 19-27

Well, may the Word of God bless each and everyone of us and may the Spirit of God work within our heart this morning.

(*Message*) People my age know the name Bud Wilkinson. He was the head coach at the University of Oklahoma in the 1950s and early '60s and one of football's greatest coaches. (Darrell Royal was great too, I know, but I'm talking about Bud.) [*Laughter*] In 1963 he served on the President's Council on Physical Fitness and in that capacity, he popularized a description of football, "It is 22 boys on the field badly in need of rest—and 40,000 people in the stands badly in need of exercise." [*Laughter*] Well if James had

been around to hear that, he might have said, 'Well, Christianity and football have a lot in common, for to many, it is a spectator sport. We need to be on the field.'

That's really his lesson in our passage in James chapter 1, verses 19 through 27, "...prove yourselves doers of the word..." (vs22). James lays great stress on that—great stress on active obedience. He ends the passage by saying that this is "pure religion."

Now having said that, there's something to be said for being a spectator. I doubt that too many athletes began playing a game; football or baseball or tennis or golf, without first watching it and learning about it; and then desiring to play it: 'Gee, it would be great to hit a ball over a fence like that!' So there is much to be said about being a spectator.

And that's true in the Christian faith and life. We first must learn. We must receive the Word; then we practice it. But we can't do the Word unless we first receive the Word and know the Word—which is to know the Scriptures. And that's how the passage begins in verse 19 with a call for a response to the instruction of the Word of God. Learn first—and speak second. Listen before you act. "*This* you know, my beloved brother. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger." (vs19).

Now at first glance, that might seem to be a statement that's given in isolation, a new subject that James is taking up. But in fact, it is related to what just was stated in verse 18 where James spoke of the power of the Word, (I mentioned this in the reading of the text.) It is through the preaching of the Word; it is through the proclamation of the Gospel that regeneration occurs—that the new birth occurs. The LORD "...brought us forth..." (spiritually) James said, "by the word of truth." It's through the Gospel that the Holy Spirit plants in us seeds of life that produce faith. The Word of God is essential for that—vital for the spiritual life.

In verse 19 James says, 'You know this.' They knew that God's Word, (that the Scriptures), produce change in the person's life. But, he said, knowing that is true, they needed to let the Word of God continue its work in their lives; "But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger." It is vitally important to know the value

of the Word of God. That's the first step. It is God's revelation and it carries the seeds of life and of spiritual growth.

But that's not enough. It's not enough to *know* that. We must listen to the Word as well. We must be quick to hear and slow to speak. If we don't, we'll never learn—and we'll never really grow. We, in fact, will retard the growth that should occur in our lives. 'Don't be quick to speak about things that you don't fully understand' is what he's saying.

I remember reading some of the statements by Archibald Alexander, who was one of the founders of Princeton Seminary, (so this goes way back, almost 200 years.) And some of the counsel he gave to young preachers is, 'Don't preach what you don't know.' And that's easy to do: To begin to talk about science; or the legal profession; or whatever; that we really don't know that much about. Or even texts of Scripture. Be careful about getting into too deep an issue with things you don't know. I think that's really what James is talking about here in regard to the Word of God. Don't be quick to speak when you're not quite educated enough in that particular passage or doctrine because that can spill over into anger.

This sounds like wisdom from the Proverbs. Like Proverbs chapter 10, verse 19, "When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise." Or Proverbs 17, verse 28, "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise." Rabbis spoke of silence being, 'A fence of wisdom.' It protected wisdom. Now that's good general counsel, what we read from the Proverbs. And James will deal with that later in chapter 3, where he has a lot to say about the use of the tongue.

But here, I think James is being more specific in his advice and is referring to our response to God's Word rather than to people in everyday conversations. Christians are to be, first of all, hearers of God's Word. We're to pay close attention to the Scriptures when it is taught—think about it and not react hastily.

That fits the context of the early church and that may be what James has in mind. The meeting of the church is described in 1 Corinthians 14, verse 24. I think you all are familiar with that. It's what we are practicing now in minutes after this service ends and

we go into the time when we take the LORD's Supper, but also a time when gifted men can stand and speak, and that's the way it was in the early church.

You see that very clearly in 1 Corinthians 14, verse 26. It was loosely structured, allowing gifted men, as I said, to speak. And perhaps there may have been some interaction with them in the service with people asking questions. That's not clear, but Charles Hodge described it well, I think, when he said, "It was a lively service." Well sometimes it was too lively, and there were problems. Paul concluded that passage in chapter 14, verse 40, by saying, "All things must be done properly and in an orderly manner." They had been unorderly in Corinth and James had likely seen the same problem in the church in Jerusalem; or he heard about problems in these Jewish churches to which he had written this letter. So he was counseling against a hasty reaction before having a clear understanding of doctrine or a text of Scripture.

Now that requires humility. An argumentative attitude is not favorable for learning. It exposes ignorance of the truth and it exposes a lack of grace. In 1 Corinthians 15, verse 10, Paul wrote, (and this is an apostle writing), "By the grace of God I am what I am." You see anything to admire in Paul, the apostle—it's only by the sovereign grace of God. Knowing that should give us humility and a readiness to learn. So we're to be "quick to hear" God's Word. "Slow to speak and slow to anger." (vs19).

One commentator, D. Edmund Heibert, who's written a very good commentary on the Book of James wrote, "Furious reactions to the views of others were a discredit to the cause of Christ." And in verse 20, James gives that as the reason for his counsel here, "...for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God."

Well, you might think, 'Well, what about Jesus, and what about the apostle Paul? They showed some anger. Wasn't that right? I mean, Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites!' In fact, on one occasion, the disciples questioned what He did. 'You're making them angry when you talk to them like that.' So He talked to them in some pretty strong language. 'You're hypocrites', He said.

And then of course, twice He cleansed the temple; turned over tables, drove out the money changers, scattered their coins on the floor of the temple, and drove out the merchant and the animals. In fact, He made scourge out of a cord and did it.

I heard a priest on the radio, (oh not all that long ago), explain that incident in the temple as, "The LORD being human. He was frustrated by the lack of response to His ministry and He lost it. He became angry, like we all do." Well, I appreciated him stressing the humanity of Christ—that He was a genuine man. But no! He didn't lose it. Jesus couldn't lose it. He is impeccable. He is incapable of sin. He was always in complete control of His thoughts and emotions and actions. That was righteous indignation that He displayed there, and all through the Gospels.

There is a place for anger. Psalm 97, verse 10, "Hate evil, you who love the LORD." We're to hate evil. Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 4, verse 26, "Be angry, *and* do not sin." So there you've got both together. Paul got angry with the heretics. We saw that as we were going through the Book of Galatians. But his anger and the LORD's anger with the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders, was controlled anger. He saw Israel as sheep without a shepherd. And those shepherds that they had were eating the sheep. It made him angry, righteously angry. We cannot help but be vexed by evil and error; and those who propagate it.

What James corrected is what is far more common among us, and that is pride driven anger—what occurs in arguments that easily turn heated. Anger usually doesn't sell well; and that's to say it's a bad testimony. That kind of behavior doesn't reflect the character of God. It presents a false image of the LORD to the world; presents a false image of the LORD to one another, among us, among the believers. But it undermines the goals of righteousness.

The LORD has told us how to act in Micah chapter 6, in verse 8. Beautiful text of Scripture. Very simple; "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Well, that's what James is encouraging here in verse 20.

Now from his warning against anger, James draws an inference in verse 21, "Therefore", (or for this reason)—Because anger undermines righteousness—act against it! And then he gives two ways that we can do that, one negative, and the other positive. First, put away everything that's bad. Second, receive the Word of God.

So first they were to "...lay aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness..." There's still wickedness in the life of the believer; lay it aside just like they were stripping off from themselves filthy clothes. In fact, that may be the picture that James has in mind here because this word that is used here, "laying aside", or "putting aside", is used in Acts chapter 7, verse 58 of, "laying aside their robes"—taking them off.

Similar instruction is given in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1, "...let us lay aside every encumbrance and sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run the race..." The picture there is of a runner stripping down for the race; removing every piece of clothing that may get in the way and slow him down or cause him to trip. In fact, in the Greek games, they ran without anything on—and that may be the picture that's given here. Like the runner who takes all of the clothing off that can be a hindrance, we are to remove sin from ourselves.

When we enter the Christian life we enter it fully accepted by God; forgiven of everything and justified—declared righteous with God and right with His Law. Everything has been forgiven that we have done, are doing, or will ever do. And we are considered by God to be as righteous as Christ is righteous for He has imputed that righteousness to us—the perfect life of Christ.

But, we still have sin. Sin's still in us. It's like a 'law that works within us', Paul said in Romans 7, (vs25). And that's the reality.

So the reformers had a way of describing that, 'We are righteous sinners, still sinners, but God considers us righteous.' He deals with us in that way. The Spirit of God lives within us because everything's been forgiven. But in living in us, the Spirit of God is also sanctifying us and dealing with that sin that's there. And so, in the meantime, we are to be active as well; and we are to 'lay it aside'. And we're always to be doing that. It's a constant activity. It's continual because we will never have sin removed from us—

we will never be out of its presence or its temptation until the day we leave this world. As long as we are here we will have that struggle—the struggle with sin.

Now James doesn't tell us how we're to do that, but certainly it begins with recognizing sin as sin—calling sin, 'sin'. Not trying to justify it or explain it away or excuse it in some way but facing up to what it is. It's detrimental to us. It's not our friend. It may be pleasurable—but it's destructive.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis imagined sin as, (I think here he's speaking of a 'besetting' sin; he speaks of it as), a little red lizard on a man's shoulder—and it's always there. It's always talking to him. It's just jabbering in his ear. And it's embarrassing to him—but he couldn't part with it. And yet he's told he must part with it; it has to be killed.

The great Puritan, John Owen wrote of the "mortification of sin", putting sin to death. And he famously said, "Be always at it whilst you live. Be killing sin or it will be killing you." And that's true.

But that's not enough. We can't do that in our own strength. And if we try, in our own strength, we will fail. We need supernatural help—and that comes through the Word of God. It is alive, and powerful, and active, and swifter "than any two-edged sword." Just as regeneration, the new birth, comes through the preaching of the Gospel, so too, sanctification, the purifying of the soul and the strengthening of a person in his new, or her new, relationship with God as a new creature in Christ, that also comes through the Scriptures. So, that's his second instruction, the positive advice that James gives. The putting aside of sin is not going to occur until we do this: In humility, receive the Word implanted which is able to save your souls.

There are vivid word pictures here in James' counsel and here he moves from the image of clothing to that of farming. Stripping off sin is like clearing a field so that the seed of God's Word that is planted in the heart can grow and produce fruit. This word "received", (vs21b), is used of the Bereans in Acts 17, verse 11. Luke called them "noble-

minded." They were said to have "...received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily."

I remember Dr. Johnson speaking about the Bereans; 'There's not much said about them—just right there. There's no letter to the Bereans. And why is that? They're noble-minded people. Well, it's because they didn't need a letter. The Corinthians had two letters, actually four letters sent to them, because they had so many needs, or so many troubles and problems there. Evidently they didn't have those in Berea because they examined the Scriptures daily, with great eagerness.'

Well, James could have said that here but he chose another way to describe the way the Word is to be received—and that's with humility as the right frame of mind in receiving God's Word. In receiving instruction there must be humility. And we do that by not instructing the Word; explaining it, or explaining it away, by our prejudices. (So often we interpret the Word by our prejudices; what we want it to mean and what we think it should mean). But rather, letting the Word put away our prejudices by letting it speak to us and then submitting to its instruction—by letting God be God and His Word true.

They've already received the Word of God, the Gospel for salvation, but now they must receive or welcome its meaning, welcome its doctrine and its ethical implications, and to willingly submit to it—willingly submit to the Scriptures. That's humility.

And it's wisdom because the Word is unique. There's nothing like it. It is divine revelation. This is the only book, or the only collection of 66 books, that is supernatural. And it is that. It has real power in it. And that power is transforming. That's the effect that it has upon us. It "is able to save your souls", (vs21b), he says. It saves the lost from eternal judgment.

But I think here, since James is writing to believing people, (he calls them "beloved brethren"), that what he means here is being saved, not eternally, (they've received that, that's happened), but saved from the damage or consequences of sin.

Now that doesn't just happen without effort. The Word must be received. It must be welcomed. If we do not give attention to it and appropriate it as God's Word—believe

that this is the revelation of God—then we will not grow. But if we do that, it takes root in the soil of our hearts and it transforms us. That's what James urges. The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to change us. And change will come for the man, the woman, the child that gives himself or herself to the Word of God. But as we do it, it takes root, and that's the confidence we can have. So it's essential that we receive God's Word, that we believe the Scriptures to be true, to be sufficient for all our needs. And not only that, we must reflect deeply upon it. Receive it as God's Word, believe it's God's Word, then reflect deeply on it.

But even that is not the end of the process. Receiving the Word must result in obeying the Word. The Christian life is a life to be lived. So James now urges the right response, in verse 22, with right behavior, to “prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” In other words, always be “doers of the word”; never stop.

That word *doer* is important to James. It's used six times in the New Testament, and four of them by James. That's one of the great themes of this book, “Doing”—Obeying God's Word.

Again, it's necessary to be a hearer of the Word. A person will never grow unless he or she is first of all a hearer of God's Word. But if that's all that he or she is, then ‘They're self-deceived’, is what James is saying. A person like that may come to church every Sunday morning. They come every Wednesday night. They may listen with interest. But if that's where it stops, then they learn nothing and it does them no good.

Back in the mid '70s, when jogging was becoming popular, I had a friend who thought he might take it up. And he was a bright guy. He was a good student. He was a very natural student. He liked to read, he liked to study things, and so he bought all the books on jogging. And I was sitting with him one evening. He was telling me about all the books and what he'd been learning; and how interesting it was and the aerobic benefits of jogging...and there's even ‘a spiritual benefit’, (one of the writers had all of that).

And he's explaining all of this...but as far as I remember, he never jogged.

[Laughter] He just was interested in reading about it. And I thought it was interesting, too, but I never read a book; yet I did some jogging. Well, books don't do us much good if we're not going to act upon what we learn.

And spiritually, James said they, "delude themselves", (vs22b), because they think it's enough that they are living the Christian life by studying it and being at a particular place. —But it's not. The Christian life is not passive only. Now it's passive in that we don't give birth to ourselves, we're born again. And sanctification is the work of God in our heart—but it's also our work. It's not only passive; we, too, must be engaged in it. And that's what James is saying here.

And on the opposite side, James illustrates his point in verses 23 and 24 where he compares the reading or the "hearing" of Scripture, or being taught the Scriptures, to looking in a mirror. Verse 23, "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."

Now what happens when we look in a mirror? And why do we look in a mirror? Well, some people like to just look what's there. "That's admirable", they think. But most of us, what we do is we look in a mirror to see the defects. We want to put things in order, we want to fix things. And so we say, "Oh, I need to wash my face," or, "Need to brush my hair. I need to straighten my tie." We put our lives in order by looking in a mirror.

But this man looks in a mirror. He sees his flaws. But instead of doing something, he does nothing. He walks away, forgets what he saw, and goes out in public with some embarrassing smudge on his face. As foolish as that is, the man who is a hearer and not a doer is like that. He hears from Scripture what is wrong and what must be done to correct it—but does nothing. He goes away unchanged, unaffected, and soon forgets everything.

The Word of God does such a person little good. That's not real religion. It's not Christianity. In verse 25 James gives the opposite picture of a man who acts on what he, or a woman acts on what she sees. The figure of the mirror is still, I think, in his mind but James speaks of it plainly in terms of God's Word, God's law. He says, "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.", (vs25). He looks intently. He is a student. He or she reads the Word of God carefully, listens closely. That is the person who receives or welcomes God's Word.

The word here, *look*, has the idea of bending over to look, to really peer into something. It's used, for example, in John 20 of Mary on the morning of the resurrection, 'stooping down to look into the tomb and see that it's empty', (vs5). So it has to do with an intense, or penetrating, look. This is how a person who will be blessed receives the Word of God, not casually, but carefully, seriously. It is God's Word. It's His law.

Now the word *law* is without the article. In the Greek text it's not 'the Law' but simply *law*. It's not the Law of Moses that James is describing here, but it is *law*. Christians are not under the Law of Moses. That was given to the nation Israel. That was the nation Israel's constitution.

The church is under the law of liberty. Or what Paul identifies in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 21, as "the law of Christ". So we're not under the Law. But we are not without law, without principles of conduct. And we have those in the New Testament with the instruction and the example of Christ and the apostles, and Luke and James, and those who wrote the New Testament. There were temporal aspects of the Law of Moses that have fallen away, so to speak, that are no longer binding.

Now we still learn from them. They're still the Word of God, they're still Scripture and they teach us righteousness and correct behavior. But we're not bound to obey them in our diet or our kind of clothing, or the structure of the week and the months and the year. And there were eternal aspects of that law that were binding before the

Law was given at Mt. Sinai, from the very beginning. You have, long before that Law was given, a code of Hammurabi, in which you see certain rules set down, and things that were improper: murder, theft, all of this. And there were penalties attached to that. That comes from the image of God that we are in. We naturally have a sense of 'ought', and 'what we should be doing'.

But the Law of Moses clarified things and put them in stone. But there were rules before that was given. And those, those eternal aspects of the Law were taken up into the New Testament, and they're binding on us.

Now James describes the law that governs us in two ways. First, it is "perfect", he said. That is, it's complete. It embodies the complete revelation of God in Christ. And it can't be improved on by us. It is *perfect*.

Second, it is a "law of liberty", he says. Peter said that the Law of Moses was "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" He said that at the counsel of Jerusalem in Acts 15, verse 10. And James agreed with him.

The yoke of Christ, His law, He said in Matthew 11, verse 30, "is easy" to bear. And the reason is because He enables us to bear it. He enables us to do it. We live obediently in His power, not in our own. That was the promise that was given in Jeremiah 31, verse 33, when he prophesied the New Covenant that Israel would be under; and we by application of it are under it. God would put His law within us, "on our hearts", making it part of us and our desires.

Ezekiel elaborates on that in a different way. He says, he's going to take 'the heart of stone out' and put in you "a heart of flesh", (Eze 11:19), a living heart, one that can do these things, because you're going to become a new creation. And not only are you going to have the faculties to do these things, you're going to have the power of the Holy Spirit to enable you to do them. And as you hear the Word of God and respond; you realize you are able to respond as you act in faith.

So those in Christ are able to do what God has commanded us to do, voluntarily, and not under compulsion as with a code of external rules imposed from without. We

are not free from obligation to God's revealed will. The Christian life is not a carefree existence. It is one of intensity. It is one of discipline. It is one of sacrifice.

There are not two kinds of Christian life; the casual life, and the careful life. There is only one; the careful, obedient life. And all of that arises most purely from an inner compulsion—not an outer sense of obligation. We have obligation. We're obligated to be obedient to God. But the way that is most pleasing to God, and the proper way, the right way, to obey is out of an inner compulsion, a desire to do that.

And we're now free to obey willingly because of the new life that we have, because we have that new life—and the Holy Spirit within us as well, who gives us a new affection, new understanding and ability. People are free when they want to do what they ought to do. The Spirit of God gives that through the Word of God—not apart from it.

And so James says, this person “who looks intently” into God's Word and is an “effectual doer...will be blessed in what he does.” (vs25). Blessed in the eternal future, for certain. There'll be great reward for the obedient Christian, eternal reward. But also blessed in the immediate future, blessed now. His or her life will be an orderly life in which flaws are corrected and the destructive consequences of sin are avoided.

In the last verses, James gives some aspects of the life of a hearer and doer of the Word. It involves discipline, helpfulness, and unworldliness. (I don't know if that's a word, unworldliness, but I've made it a word. Not being worldly.)

He begins with the negative in verse 26, by rebuking a person who does *religion* but whose practice is outward, not inward. It's hypocrisy, religiosity; "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, *religious*, is a rare word in the New Testament. Here it describes a person who is engaged in the performance of duties, ceremonies of worship, that he feels fulfills God's Word—the demands of the Word of God. But he is self-deceived, because while he considers himself religious, (and no doubt would be considered

religious by other people), his religion is vain. It's empty. It's worthless because it lacks reality. It lacks inner purity. He can't bridle his tongue. That's the outer evidence of this vacuous religion of his; he can't bridle his tongue.

What he says isn't stated; James doesn't explain that. So some, like Calvin, have given a definition of what he is saying. He identified it as slander—destroying, or at least, attacking the character of others, under the pretext of religious zeal. Now Calvin experienced a lot of that in his lifetime. Books were written against him and lots of things were said that weren't true. He was attacked continually, so that might be what he, (Calvin), would naturally expect. And I don't doubt that that would fit within what James is saying. But it could be any number of abuses.

And it's not really the tongue that is the issue but what lies behind the tongue—and that's the heart. It's not been transformed. And so the man's religion is worthless because it doesn't please God. There's nothing to his practice but an outward form—just routine.

What pleases God is what James calls, in verse 27, "Pure and undefiled religion." And that is "...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 aspects of the Gospel.

First, it has a genuine social concern. We hear a lot about that kind of thing today; and there is a reality to that. There is to be within the Christian, a social concern. The person whose heart has been changed acts for those in need, takes action to help those in need. And here, those that are helped are described as "orphans and widows." We're to care for them when they're in distress.

After all, if God promises to be, "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows...", (Ps68:5), His people certainly should share in His concern for them. And not just widows and orphans, but for all kinds of people in distress. In fact, this expression, 'widows and orphans', or 'orphans and widows', is a very common expression in the Old Testament. You probably noticed it in the Law. And they were to be cared for because

those were people in particular need. They were the most needy people in ancient society—destitute people. And so they were to be looked after.

But really, it's more like a formula that refers to a wider circle of people; and it's everyone who is in need—we're to help and do what we can. Do what we can when we see something like that here; with prayer, with counsel, with material needs, if we can. If we have an opportunity to do that beyond this place and beyond to different parts of the world, we have ministers that go to those places. And we, as a church, help in that. And not only that, but many of you individually help. It's good work. It's what James is speaking of here. That's pure religion.

But he doesn't stop there. We're also to help ourselves. We're to “keep ourselves unstained by the world”. In other words, we are not to be only concerned with others, but also with ourselves, with our personal purity. That's vital. In fact if we fail there, then what we do for others really becomes tainted, hypocritical. No, this is vital that we give attention to our personal souls and our life before the LORD. That calls for vigilance. That calls for watchfulness. That calls for personal discipline. As I say, the Christian life is not a casual life. It calls for discipline and action.

As James says in chapter 4, verse 4, "...friendship with the world is hostility toward God." So we are to be unworldly people: involved in the world but not conformed to the world. The Christian life, again, is not a casual life. It is a life that calls us to outward looking and inward looking—concern for the welfare of others and concern for ourselves. We will be that by being ‘hearers and doers of the Word’ —but in that order. First hearers, first students, first spectators. If we are really hearers of the Word, then we will be doers. Our new nature will impel us to do that. The heart that you have will compel you to be obedient, and serve one another, and serve the LORD. And that's the nature of God's grace within us. So may He help us to receive these things and apply them to our hearts.

But if you see yourself in this text, and you see yourself in that person who looks in the mirror and walks away unchanged—well maybe that's conviction in your heart

that you've never believed the Gospel of salvation. Now I don't mean that you fail to live up to this perfectly. We all fail. We strive as a Christian to be obedient. That's our desire.

What I mean here, though, is a kind of person for whom the Bible is interesting—but nothing more. That's worthless. Repent. Come to Christ. Believe in Him and you have the assurance of knowing that He receives everyone who does, who comes to Him; and He'll make you a doer as well as a hearer.

Well, may God do that for all of us. Let us pray.

Father, You have given us a vision, You've given us Your Word—the law of liberty. You have shown us much and You do show us much in that. But at the heart of it all is Your Son; He's the great vision we have. And we pray for a clearer and clearer vision of Him and a deeper and greater fellowship with Him. He stands at the door and knocks and wants to come in and have fellowship, to sup with us, and He with us, us with Him.

So LORD, may we invite Him in and have fellowship with Him and become more and more like Him, the perfect Son of God, who gave Himself for us. We thank You for that great sacrifice and for Your continual care for us.

Now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

(End of Audio)