



Worship – pure and undefiled

Luther called the Epistle of James "*a right strawy Epistle*" with "*no character of the Gospel in it*". His words may seem to fit in well with a verse like James 1:27: "*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world*". So how do we understand this verse?

Luther's words underline what is to some a very real problem. Asked to define pure religion, would we not speak in a very different way from James? Would we not refer to sin and salvation; to the need of the work of the Spirit in our heart; to the importance of abandoning sin and of resting upon Christ?

But James speaks about controlling the tongue (v.26), visiting the distressed and keeping oneself pure (v.27). We might well ask: doesn't James believe in sin and salvation — faith and forgiveness? How does this fit in with what we know to be central to the gospel?

We can meet this difficulty by considering two factors.

Background

Firstly, have a look at what James has been saying. He has refuted the suggestion that God tempts anyone (v.13): we are tempted by sins which arise from within ourselves (v.14). Evil doesn't come to us from outside; it comes from the human heart itself. In contrast with that, good comes from God (v.17). God, through the Word, is the author of the new birth (v.18).

James, therefore, has already painted the familiar gospel picture. James does know about the sinfulness of the human heart and the need for an inner change. What he says in v.27 is addressed to those who have had that experience. Here isn't the beginning of religion, but the outward expression of it. We don't *become* Christians by caring for the needy; but we do *show ourselves to be Christians* by such actions. There is nothing contrary to the gospel in James' teaching.

Basic meaning

Secondly, we have to reflect on the meaning of the word "religion". In English a few words — like religious, pious, upright, godly, spiritual — all have to do with the same area of experience, though they all have slightly different meanings. So it is in Greek: there are a number of words which describe the religious life, each with its own shade of meaning. The tone of this one may be judged from its use in Colossians 2:18 — the "worshipping" of angels. It has especially to do with the outward form or display of religion; the outward style of religious observances that a Christian engages in.

Trench calls it "*the ceremonial service of religion, the external framework or body of which godliness is the informing soul*".

(Synonyms of the New Testament p. 175)

So from both these points of view we come to the same conclusion. The new birth, the implanting of life by the Spirit, the coming to faith involved in that — these are simply the doorway into the Christian religion. Once through that doorway, this is the style of life that we have to live. This is the pure and unadulterated worship we have to render to God; this is the outward observance of our religion: practical concern for the needy and watchfulness over our own lives.

Those under pressure

Here James mentions as the objects of our care the widow and the orphan. These, along with the immigrant, or the stranger, were the sections of society most at risk from poverty and exploitation. The man was the breadwinner, who could secure his family's material wellbeing — the head of the household who could defend his family from injustice. So the widow and the orphan were not only deprived of an immediate means of material support, but were also exposed to the possibility of exploitation and injustice. They had no one to speak for them so they could be easily ignored. *"Widows and orphans"* therefore stand as representatives both of the poor and of the oppressed.

Indeed, James speaks of them being *"in affliction"*. An "affliction" means something that presses on a person. A similar word is used of the crowds "pressing in" on Jesus, so it corresponds to what we might call "pressure". The pure worship that James speaks of here takes to do with the orphan and the widow because they are pressurized. By extension this refers to all under pressure today.

So to whom would James refer if he were writing to us today? The widow and the orphan are generally better provided for than they used to be, but they still have needs to be met. Who are under pressure? We might well ask. And the answer probably is: who isn't under pressure? But some are notably so: the unmarried mother abandoned to bring up two or three children on her own; the Asian family that feels lonely, unwanted and estranged from the local community; the alcoholic and his family who are under multiple pressures through violence, mistrust, misuse of money and so on; the unemployed, the homeless, the sick, the lonely. Reflect on the question yourselves and you'll be able to think of more.

All these have to be the subjects of our Christian compassion.

More than a visit

These have to be "visited". Immediately we think of the duty of popping in on a bereaved family, some time after their loss, to express our condolences. Even that would be an important and a caring ministry to perform. But we shouldn't take the word "visit" in such a limited way. See how it is used in the Scriptures.

*"What is man that you **visited** him?"* says the Psalmist (Psalm 8). Zechariah sings praise to God on the birth of John the Baptist: *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has **visited** and redeemed his people ... the dayspring from on high has **visited** us"* (Luke 1:68, 78). After one of Jesus' miracles *"they glorified God, saying a prophet is risen up among us and that God has **visited** his people"* (Luke 7:16). Later when the gospel was taken to the Gentiles, James himself said: *"Simon has declared how God did **visit** the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name"* (Acts 15:14).

To visit his people, then, is an act of God. It doesn't just mean that he came to be amongst us. It means that he came to give his grace, to show his power, to make known his mercy in practical terms. When God visits, it is not for a social chat: it is to undertake fully for our needs and supply graciously for them. In such a sense is the word "visit" used here.

So to "visit" the troubled means not just to provide them with companionship for half an hour after suffering some bereavement. It means to feel their sense of desolation with them; to cater for their material needs; to supply them with all the material, moral and spiritual support they require; it means to stand up for their rights and ensure that they are not unjustly treated. To "visit" isn't a light duty but a heavy responsibility; not a one-off occurrence, but a constant preoccupation; not a brief social visit but an ongoing caring ministry.

A whole range of activities is included in this. Some who are under pressure are supplied for materially and it is sympathy and companionship that they want. The lone parent may need practical help or advice with the children. The Asian family may need support in coping with the authorities or advice about official forms that have to be filled in. The family of the alcoholic may need a quiet haven to which they can retreat, or a friend to come round when domestic violence

threatens to erupt. The homeless may not simply need a roof over their heads, but advice about money, and counselling and support to help them cope with whatever trauma led them to be homeless. As we literally and sensitively "visit" those under pressure then we can learn what the needs really are so that we may then "visit" them in the full biblical sense of the word.

In the world, but not of the world

Coupled with this social concern, there has to be personal self-discipline: we must keep ourselves unspotted from the world.

The "world" here doesn't, of course, mean the physical world in which we live, or even the world of people, but the world of sin. It refers to the fact that as the human heart is defiled so human society, composed as it is of defiled people, is necessarily itself also defiled. From the defilement inherent in society we have to keep ourselves clean.

It is not surprising that James says this, because it fits in well with the type of service that he envisages the Christian undertaking. James has not been advocating a monastic approach to life, as if the best course to follow is to stay as far away from sinful people as possible, cutting ourselves off from society like monks in a monastery. Pure religion involves us being where the pressure is felt most intensely. As sin produces its own trauma, pressures are most felt where sin is given free rein. The service of Christians therefore naturally takes them where sin is rampant. It is not surprising then that James assumes that Christians will be exposed to contamination by the world. It cannot be otherwise if Christians are doing their duty.

But, though *in* the world, we are not adversely marked by contact *with* the world. We know the reality of one parent homes and the sin which often has brought them into being, but it doesn't rub off on us, because we take all due precautions to ensure that it doesn't. We see the alcoholism that ruins a family, we are involved with the family, but we guard ourselves strictly from the temptation to overindulge. We meet with sin of different kinds, but we keep ourselves clean from it — by due prior preparation, by prayer, by self-discipline and by the sympathetic, prayerful and practical support of God's people.

Thus will be reversed the laws of nature. Dirt usually rubs off on the clean. But in the case of Christians, surrounded by dirt, we have to maintain our distinctive cleanliness and spread a sanctifying influence.

The challenge

The challenge of this to our easy, introverted lifestyle is obvious. It is made the more challenging when we consider another question about how this fits in to our overall understanding of the Christian life.

We mentioned how this teaching relates to questions of repentance and faith, but how does this relate to our view of worship? We say pure worship consists of this: *"to avoid the use in public worship of uninspired materials of praise as also of instrumental accompaniment"*. But James says that it consists of sanctified service to those under pressure. Who is right? On that question there can be no discussion: the Blue Book always bows to the Bible.

But in fact there is no necessary conflict — as a glimpse at Isaiah 58 will show. Here is a biting indictment of a religion which consists of outward show, unaccompanied with compassion for the needy: *"Is this the kind of fast that I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? ... Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and ... to set the oppressed free?"* (Isaiah 58:5-6). Isaiah is not saying that fasting in itself was frowned upon, but that to make the external ritual of fasting the sum total of religion was obnoxious to God.

Similarly, James is not saying that abstaining from the use of human hymns and inanimate pipe organs is wrong. He is simply saying that it is not enough. Pure worship, he implies, doesn't consist

in something negative and external, like a liturgy that is followed; it consists in sanctified service to those who in trouble.

So God says to us today: Is this the purity of worship that I have chosen, only an act which consists of abstaining from human hymns? Is it only a matter of refusing to play on the organ or to refrain from taking up a guitar? Is that what you call purity of worship? Is not this the kind of purity of worship which I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear.

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