

## True Church (8): A People Who Serve Others

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(James 1:27)

### I. Introduction

- A. I think I've mentioned at some point about the first time I went into a bar
1. Mom told me to—our car broke down and we needed water for radiator
    - a. We were on the way to Suffolk to my first formal theological debate
    - b. Three things stand out in my mind about the whole debate experience
      - 1) **First**, I remember how mean-spirited the two disputants seemed
      - 2) **Second**, they were debating helping orphans (homes). Seemed silly
      - 3) **Third**, they both kept quoting **James 1:27**... louder and louder
    - c. This was a real issue; my 4 great uncle preachers split 2-to-2 on the issue
  2. The issues that were debated were largely theoretical and philosophical
    - a. It was an issue of hermeneutics; how do we handle silence of scripture?
      - 1) If God doesn't say how, then are we free to use any effective method
      - 2) Or is silence always prohibitive; doesn't say "*orphans home*" so...
    - b. **Problem**: Despite the debate, few ever got around to caring for orphans
      - 1) Those believing it was scriptural to support orphans homes rarely did
      - 2) Those who insist orphans be cared for in private homes **rarely** did
    - c. We ended up talking a lot more about orphans than we cared for orphans
- B. **Point**: In all the debate on hermeneutics, we missed the message of **James 1:27**
1. Pure religion is about people; haggling over the **issues** makes us miss that
    - a. For the record, God has always been **FOR** widows and orphans (**medley**)
    - b. James wants us to know that the people of God will care for them too
  2. We've been asking the question, "*What does it mean to be a true church?*"
    - a. In the past, we have tended to stress institutional markers of the church
    - b. But what we have found are more relational markers (**list of past lessons**)
  3. Today we add one more marker—true church is a people who serve others
    - a. Sure, we must serve in keeping with God's word (*giving wine to homeless*)
    - b. But debating hermeneutics and refusing to serve is not a true church.
    - c. James says true religion is **holiness** (*earlier lesson*) and **servicing** (*today's*)

## II. Pure Religion (James 1:27)

A. **Context:** James begins with a call to listen to God's word ([Jam 1:19](#))

1. James is practical; one study calls it "*What Christian Living Is All About?*"
  - a. And this is practical counsel—we should listen more (others and God)
  - b. James tells us that we shouldn't be so quick to speak and to show anger
  - c. If we listen more, we will "*humbly accept the word planted in you*" ([1:21](#))
2. James doesn't want us to **just** accept the word, we are to act on it ([1:22-24](#))
  - a. **Nike Commercial:** "*Just do it!*" Don't just listen to God... ACT!
  - b. Listen without obeying is looking in mirror and forgetting what look like
3. James says only hearing the word without obeying it *deceives us*. *How?*
  - a. Because it lets you think you're following God when you aren't not
    - 1) Old saying, "*When all is said done, much more said than done*"
    - 2) We can go to church and listen to sermons without really hearing
  - b. James warns us that hearing without following is way to deceive yourself
    - 1) Someone told me about family member going on the *Slim Fast* diet.
    - 2) They had shake for breakfast and for lunch and didn't lose weight
    - 3) Turns out, they were drinking the shake with a burger and fries!
  - c. Going to church without following what you hear is about that effective

B. OK, so what does all of this have to do with widows and orphans? ([1:26-27](#))

1. James here applies what he just said about doing, not just hearing the word
  - a. You are DOING religion when you keep a tight reign on your speech
  - b. You are DOING religion when you take care of widows and orphans
  - c. You are DOING religion in "*refusing to let the world corrupt you*" (NLT)
2. So caring for widows and orphans is HOW we put religion into practice
  - a. What do we mean when we speak of a "*religious practice*" ... usually?
    - 1) Doesn't that usually have to do with liturgy or worship at church?
    - 2) Not for James. Pure (unmixed) religion is caring for those in need
  - b. That is the consistent with what is said in the rest of the Bible
    - 1) Old Testament demanded care for poor ([Deut 15:7](#), [Isa 10:2](#))
    - 2) New Testament says same thing ([Eph 4:28](#), [Gal 6:10](#), [Heb 13:16](#))

### III. The People of God and the Social Gospel

A. There is this clear, Biblical mandate for God's people to help the poor

1. Yet, through the years conservative churches often ignore this. *Why?*
  - a. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal theology watered down many Bible doctrines
    - 1) Liberal churches came to doubt a literal reality of Christ and Bible
    - 2) Abandoned emphasis on salvation and stressed sociological reform
  - b. **Social Gospel**: Stress on improving society through social change
2. Conservatives came to equate a stress on helping the poor with liberalism
  - a. Scripture stresses salvation, not sociology— heaven, not here-and-now
  - b. And some of the stress on social change was co-opted by **socialism**
  - c. Social gospel was rejected by conservatives... *as was emphasis on poor*
3. For many today, any stress on social concerns/reform is still social gospel
  - a. I had one person suggest that discourages helping the poor (**Matt 26:11**)
    - 1) Jesus is pointing to coming death, which disciples didn't understand
    - 2) Point here was one of timing—the focus was on the cross, but later...
    - 3) So we now have plenty of time to care for the poor... so are we?
  - b. If you want to know how Jesus feels about the poor, read **Matt 25:31-46**
    - 1) This parable of the endtime has Jesus judge between sheep and goats
    - 2) The basis of His judgment here is a matter of how we care for others

B. If we are to be the true church of God, then we must seek to help the poor

1. Why? God is concerned for the poor, so we must be concerned as well
  - **Ex 22:27**- "*When he [poor] cries out to me, I will hear for I am compassionate*"
  - **Lev 19:10**- "*Leave them [grapes] for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD*"
  - **Prov 14:34**- "*He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker*"
2. All of these texts tell us to care for the poor because God care for them
  - a. **1 John 3:16** reflects the same theme as **John 3:16**... and flips it around
    - 1) How do lay down our lives for others? Not by dying—by living
    - 2) He tells us exactly what he is talking about in next verse (**3:17-18**)
  - b. John and James both tell us that faith plus action = caring for poor

## IV. Conclusion

- A. Does the church *really* have the responsibility to work to make this world better
1. Isn't the real job of the church supposed to be **spiritual** and **evangelistic**?
    - a. The government can feed the poor and care for needy (*doing a great job*)  
(*The first boots on the ground after Katrina were churches; they had a higher calling*)
    - b. Sometimes we've see church, not as the body, but as reproductive organ
    - c. Can the church be so heavenly minded that it is of no earthly good?
  2. Perhaps what God tells Israel through the prophet Jeremiah applies here
    - a. Jeremiah is preparing Judah for the exile in distant land of Babylon
    - b. Babylon wasn't their home; one day they would return home to Canaan.
    - c. Were they to focus on Canaan and ignore needs of Babylon? (**Jer 29:5-7**)
      - 1) They're to "*seek the peace and prosperity of the city.*" Pray for it
      - 2) They were to bless the land that they lived in and make it better!
  3. Heaven is our home, but we are to bless this world and make it better
- B. The people of God must be concerned for the poor because God is concerned
1. We must look for ways to bless the land and the people where we live
    - a. We will avoid the selfishness and materialism that we see around us
    - b. We will share the resources and blessing of God as we have opportunity
  2. We must be responsible—don't scatter money in street from back of van
    - a. We aren't to give indiscriminately or irresponsibly—*that helps no one*
    - b. Sometimes the hardest thing is know how to go about being effective
  3. Denbigh has always been responsive in meeting the needs of a needy world
    - a. Generous gifts continue to go to orphans in Africa, Mexico & Ukraine
    - b. We work with DUCO, PORT, Menchville House, C<sup>of</sup> C Disaster Relief
    - c. MAYBE there is room more aggressively seek to bless people around us
- C. Years ago, someone basted me pretty good for our involvement in DUCO
1. Why work through DUCO so that the church doesn't get the credit
    - a. Jesus had some things to say about not seeking credit (**Matt 6:3-4**)
    - b. Helping the poor isn't a ploy that the church uses to make name for itself
  2. A true church is one that does the right thing because it is the right thing