

PURE RELIGION

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Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

James 1:27 NRSV

Religious sects and denominations historically rise and fall over issues surrounding doctrinal correctness. Many, like the present conflict between Islamic Shi'ites and Sunnis, arise over perceived differences in truths that to some would seem relatively insignificant. But they get transferred into life and death issues by proponents willing to fight to the death over these differences.

But for Christians it's relatively simple: Do what God says! Unfortunately, many of us get caught up in creeds, doctrines, structures, programs, strategies, and even buildings to the point where we begin to think they are the reasons for our existence. These "supports" to mission are important if we never forget our first call of ministering to people and their many needs. But when we forget that essential truth we become narrowed in outlook and limited in effectiveness. We struggle over small differences in doctrine and argue over budgets and programs as if they were the entirety of existence.

The apostle James puts it plainly: Pure religion is to care for vulnerable people and to keep oneself unsoiled from the world. This is not a long list of desired behaviors or venial sins. Nor is a list of prescribed doctrinal beliefs. It is simply a statement of what God thinks is of primary importance.

What is the

biblical principle behind visiting orphans and widows? From the very beginnings of recorded history widows and their children have been considered vulnerable because they lacked an adult male family member to support and protect them. Hence they were to be respected and protected by society and the religious institutions formed to carry the culture forward. So the basic principle is care for vulnerable members of society. Today we might add the poverty-stricken, unemployed, handicapped, ill, aged, and many ethnic minorities to this list. It's simple: If they are vulnerable then God demands that we protect and care for them as the essential part of our Christian witness and ministry.

What is the biblical principle behind James's admonition to "keep oneself unspotted from the world"? This is a bit more difficult to comprehend. Most Christians would define the "world" as that portion of human existence tending to pull us away from God through excessive search for pleasure in addiction, sex, possessions, power, influence, entertainment, gluttony, pride, sloth and so on. But God adds some other things that define the world of evil, like support for the powerful domination systems that originate and carry out injustice and oppression.

We become "spotted by the world," not when we enjoy the beauties of nature or the wonders of life and love, but when we include in our value systems and begin to love the "lusts of the eyes" and the "pride of life" as the apostle John says in his well-known but seldom heeded admonition: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15 NKJV).

John goes on to say that "the world is passing away, and the lust of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever." So when we cling to the world's values we become part of a system limited in scope and destined ultimately to fail.

Some Christians get these values all mixed up. They support, sometimes quietly and other times vociferously, the literal rape of the earth by uncontrolled resource extraction and unlimited pollution, while accepting thankfully the very things condemned by John--lust for money, power, control, possessions, and unlimited personal liberties without responsibility or accountability.

As the apostle James said in condemning the two-faced behavior evidenced in attempting to serve both sides, "My brethren, these things ought not to be so." Let's stop having one foot in God's camp and the other in that of the world. Let's through God's grace get on the side of pure religion, and stay there.

