

“Pure Religion”

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In the first chapter of the book of James, the writer by inspiration of the Holy Spirit admonished Christians to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22). To help us understand this concept, James gives an illustration of a person looking into a mirror and without making any change goes away forgetting the kind of person he is. To help us make the application, James discloses that the mirror is the “perfect law of liberty.” When we study the “perfect law of liberty” which is the word of God, the Bible, and do not make the application by becoming “doers of the word,” we deceive ourselves. However, when we take the proper action by becoming doers, James declares that we will be blessed in our deeds.

As we read this illustrious portion of scripture, we can’t help but notice the contrast between vain religion and pure religion. Vain religion is one in which no application to self is made and, thus, no change in one’s life. In contrast, pure religion is one in which application is made, and a change of one’s life is evidenced by his action. To represent both vain and pure religion, the writer gives examples of each. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive. They are intended for us to see examples of vain and pure religion. Also they are intended for us to make the necessary application of the fundamental principle of “be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

The first example is vain religion. James says, “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain” (James 1:26).

Later in the book, James will go into more detail on the topic of the tongue. Its use here is enough to give us an example of vain religion. Everyone should know that Christians should not say just anything. There are words such as profanity and lies that should never go through the lips of one who is following Christ as His disciple. Also in this connection, we must consider gossip. There are times when some words would be appropriate to utter while the same words on another occasion would be utterly inappropriate. Gossip is not easily defined, but it would suffice to say that gossip is words used in such a way as to cause hurt in another. They may even be words that are true but inappropriate for the occasion. A person’s religion is vain if he does not apply biblical principles as in the example of the tongue.

The second example involves pure religion. James instructs, “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” (James 1:27). In this verse, we find two principles used as examples of pure religion.

The first principle is “to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction.” “To visit” does not mean to go to their house and chat with them as in a social call although it could include this. Guy N. Woods in the Gospel Advocate commentary on James makes the following observation:

“It is used figuratively here to designate the assistance which pure and undefiled religion requires of the Lord’s people regarding ‘the fatherless and widows.’ It is quite obviously not limited to a social call; an orphaned or abandoned child would find little solace in such! God ‘visited’ his

people by sending his Son into the world to bless and to save them (Luke 1:68); the ‘fatherless and widows’ are ‘visited’ when we do what we can to comfort and sustain them.”

The point is exceedingly clear. If we are going to have something besides an empty religious belief, we must give attention to others. Remember the passage is not intended to be exhaustive but to give examples of how to have pure and undefined religion. Paul gives a more complete view of benevolence in Galatians 6:10 in which he states, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”

The second principle is “to keep himself unspotted from the world.” In the true Lord’s prayer, John 17, Jesus taught that we are in the world but not of the world. Paul writing concerning unbelievers exhorted, “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:17-18). To believe and be immersed into Christ is just the beginning. That is why it is called the “New Birth.” We must also live as Christ lived, love as Christ loved, and give as Christ gave. That is why we are called “Christians.” To hear the word proclaimed; To obey “from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you” (Romans 6:17); And not to live a holy and distinct life from the world makes one’s religion vain.

Therefore, as we endeavor in life to live “pure and undefiled religion,” let us always remember the principle that James taught — “be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only.” It is the principle by which “pure and undefiled religion” has its basis. Without this fundamental principle, any and all religion is vain, empty, and without meaning.