**A Religion of Good Deeds**

**James 1:26-27** says:

*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world* (ESV).

Though I believe **James** is written to Christians whether Jews or Gentiles, it certainly uses Jewish language to portray its point. Thus, as we consider “religion” from a Jewish standpoint, these verses are somewhat shocking. They are iconoclastic, breaking down the molds and mindsets that Jews would have had. The words for “religion” and “religious” do not emphasize spirituality in general but the outward forms and ceremonies of worshipping God. Thus, these two verses make a startling contrast to what the common Jew would have thought.

To a Jew, religion in the sense of ceremony and outward forms would have consisted of traveling to the temple, offering sacrifices, keeping the Sabbath and the feasts, etc. If Christians carried that mindset into their religion, they would picture gathering for their assemblies, taking the Lord’s Supper, singing, and praying. We might picture this as what many Christians commonly call the “five acts of worship.” In fact, many Christians today seem to think that pure and undefiled religion is bound up in accomplishing these five acts properly. Imagine how shocking it was to learn pure and undefiled religion is not really about these kinds of ceremonies at all.

Pure and undefiled religion does not mean making sure to say our prayers or sing hymns. It doesn’t even mean making sure to do these things in pattern approved ways. (Though certainly we want to worship God the way He wants to be worshiped.) Pure and undefiled religion means letting those prayers and hymns be worthwhile because they impact the rest of our lives, letting our speech be good for building up and not for tearing down (**Ephesians 4:29**). We may say the right things “in church,” but if we don’t bridle our tongues as we talk at work or school, what good did our religion do us?

Pure and undefiled religion does not mean merely “going to church” or even going into our private prayer closets to worship and praise God. It means getting our hands dirty in service to those who are in need. James highlighted the two groups God had always used as examples of the ultimate of good deeds—orphans and widows (cf. **Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:17; 26:12; Isaiah 1:17**). We may be getting “church” exactly right, but if we aren’t helping folks in their affliction or time of distress, our religion is impure and defiled. The purpose of religion is not to stand as a measure of how well we keep a set of rules and regulations. Rather, its purpose is to change us to be more like Jesus Christ. Jesus came to serve, not be served. He served us in our affliction. If “going to church” doesn’t change how we interact with the afflicted around us, what good is it?

Pure and undefiled religion does not mean offering sacrifices to atone for sin, but keeping oneself unspotted from the world. Pure and undefiled religion is not about moments in time where we really worship God; it is about a life of service to Him, doing His will, serving His people, and glorifying Him through our every action. It is about growing to be like him by serving those who are in need as He has done for us. It is about thinking differently, behaving differently, acting differently. Sadly, for far too many Christians, the only difference between them and the world is the fact that they go to church. If the only difference between us and someone else is where we spend our Sunday mornings, what good is it?

We need to understand, we don’t get to live how we want and then have a few ceremonies that make everything okay. Pure and undefiled religion is not getting the forms and ceremonies right, it is using those right forms and ceremonies to change who we are every day. That is what God’s religion of good deeds looks like.

—Edwin L. Crozier