

The Sanctity of Life

Lesson 10: Pure Religion: Caring for the Orphan and the Fatherless -- James 1:27

If someone asked you to define true religion in a single sentence, what would you say? Most of us would reach for words about belief, or worship, or right doctrine, all good and necessary things. But when the Holy Spirit, through James, gives us a one-sentence picture of “religion that is pure and undefiled before God,” He points somewhere we might not expect: to a fatherless child and a grieving widow, and to a believer who goes to them in their affliction. That, James says, is what pure religion looks like.

It is a deliberately humbling definition. In James’ world, as in ours, orphans and widows were among the most defenseless people alive. They had lost the person who provided for and protected them, and they could offer little in return to anyone who helped them. They were precisely the people a self-interested world steps over. And God says: there, in how you treat them, is the truest measure of whether your religion is real.

This is the sanctity of life come all the way home. We have spoken of the worth of every life, the dignity of the unborn, the call to defend the weak. James makes it unmistakably practical and personal. He does not ask whether we have visited the orphan in our hearts. He uses a word that means to go, to show up, to care, to enter into another person’s affliction and not leave them there alone. Pure religion has feet.

And it flows from the very heart of God. Psalm 68 calls Him “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows,” the God who “settles the solitary in a home.” When we move toward the lonely and the defenseless, we are not doing something foreign to God; we are doing the most God-like thing imaginable. We are reflecting the Father who drew us in when we were spiritual orphans, and who now invites us to extend that same welcome to others. This lesson asks us to let our faith grow feet, and to go.

Group Discussion: Why do you think God chose care for the orphan and widow as His picture of pure religion, rather than something more obviously religious? What does this tell us about what He values most?

Personal Reflection: If your religion were measured by James’ definition this week, by how you actually move toward the afflicted, what would that measure reveal? Where is God inviting you to let your faith become more active?

Read James 1:27

Study Questions

1. Read James 1:27. James defines “religion that is pure and undefiled before God” as visiting “orphans and widows in their affliction” and keeping “oneself unstained from the world.” Why does James choose care for the orphan and widow as the very picture of pure religion?
2. When you think of what it means to be a devoted Christian, what comes first to mind? How does James’ definition of pure religion challenge or enlarge your own sense of what truly pleases God?
3. James joins active compassion (“visit orphans and widows”) with personal holiness (“keep oneself unstained from the world”). Why does true religion require both, and what happens when we separate them?
4. Where might your own faith have become more about words, knowledge, or appearances than about active care for those in need? What would it look like to let your faith express itself in compassion this week?
5. Read Psalm 68:5–6: God is “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows,” who “settles the solitary in a home.” How does God’s own care for the fatherless and the lonely set the pattern for His people?
6. Is there someone lonely, fatherless, or without family within your reach, a child, an elderly person, a struggling single parent? How might God be inviting you to reflect His heart by drawing them in?
7. James says pure religion is to “visit” orphans and widows in their affliction, a word that means to go to them and care for them, not merely to feel sympathy from a distance. How does this challenge a faith that is content with good intentions but slow to act?
8. What keeps you from moving toward the vulnerable with practical care, the messiness, the cost, the inconvenience? How does the gospel free and empower you to move toward people in their affliction?
9. Trace how care for the orphan, the widow, and the fatherless expresses the heart of the sanctity of life. Why is it significant that God measures the purity of our religion not only by our doctrine and worship but by our care for the most defenseless, and how does this guard the church from a hollow or self-serving faith?
10. Look back over James 1:27 and Psalm 68:5–6. Name one specific way God is calling you to practice pure religion toward the orphan, the widow, the lonely, or the vulnerable, and one concrete step you will take this week to move toward someone in their affliction.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 68:5–6, Father of the fatherless and protector of widows; Deuteronomy 10:18, He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow and loves the sojourner; Isaiah 1:17, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause; Matthew 25:35–

40, I was a stranger and you welcomed me; 1 John 3:17-18, let us love not in word but in deed and in truth.

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