

## Lesson 5

# Visit Orphans & Widows

My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for human anger does not accomplish God's righteousness. Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like someone looking at his own face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of person he was. But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who works—this person will be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, his religion is useless and he deceives himself. Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world, James 1.19-27.

## Introduction

James 1.19-27 is an immensely practical section of Scripture that serves as a strong warning against half-hearted Christianity that listens and appears interested in divine truth but fails to act on them. As we will see, the practice of Christianity is very practical and demonstrates itself by applying what we know through external obedience. It is not enough to hear the word. Until we have put the word into practice we have not truly listened, Matthew 7.24-27. A proper response to Him will always be demonstrated by an obedient lifestyle that proves we have heeded His teaching. Your spiritual life is to be characterized by long-term obedience. You must *continue in the word*, John 8.31.

James 1.19-27 contains a set of imperatives that must be followed. These are a natural result of the transforming power of the Spirit who works on the inside of us every day. He is working to ensure we have a greater and greater conformity to the image of Christ. The qualities James speaks of here should be growing into a regular part of our daily living.

There is a progression of thought that can be seen from verse 19 to the end of chapter 1. Each one of these main points lead into the next:

- 1.19 – *be quick to listen*, **which means you must...**
- 1.21 – *humbly receive the implanted word*, **which is proven by:**
- 1.22 – (being) *a doer of the word*, **which is exemplified by:**
  - 1.26 – (controlling) *your tongue*.
  - 1.27 – (looking) *after orphans and widows in their distress*.
  - 1.27 – (keeping) *yourself unstained from the world*.

*Humbly receiving the implanted word* of 1.21 amplifies the command of being *quick to listen* in 1.19. Being *a doer of the word*, 1.22, spells out what it means to receive it. We have not “received” it when we only listen to it; we demonstrate we have “received” it in our day-by-day practice. The action word of 1.22 stresses continual, on-going activity. The true reason for the study of God's word is for our entire person to be changed *in every area* of life. This covers our entire self – mind, body, spirit, and emotions. In other words, obedience to the word becomes a matter of *who we are* vs. just something we do.

The principle for following through is seen throughout the New Testament. Grant Osborne's writing is an excellent summation:<sup>25</sup>

- Matthew 7.26 - Jesus says any person who listens without obeying is a fool.
- Matthew 28.20 – the Great Commission also involves teaching those who come to Christ to *observe everything I have commanded you*.
- John 14.15-24 – loving Jesus will always result in doing what He says.
- Romans 2.13 – those who obey will be declared righteous.
- 2 Corinthians 10.5 – we must take every thought captive to obey Christ.
- 2 Timothy 3.15-16 – all Scripture has been given for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.

James 1.23-24 vividly illustrates the preposterousness of listening without heeding by describing a person who looks in a mirror, sees things that need to be fixed, and then just walks away *immediately forgetting* what they looked like.

Now, James 1.25 presents us with the application. God's word (*the perfect law of freedom*) serves as a spiritual mirror for us. How we are to look into the mirror of Scripture is very important. We are to look *intently*, i.e., with intensity. Looking reveals two things: our own sin *and* the sinless Savior and Lord. In other words, our careful study and meditation on the meaning of the text helps us see our sin for what it is and the *perfect* model to imitate. Then we must *persevere in it*.

Will we allow it to impact our decisions?

Following through is what enables us to be *doers who work*. Are we eager to act on what we learn in the Word, working on improving our walk? Those who do so will be blessed. God's blessing comes from our obedience, both now and in the future. This principle is seen in the Old Testament:

This book of instruction must not depart from your mouth; you are to meditate on it day and night so that you may carefully observe everything written in it. For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do, Joshua 1.8.

In Romans 2.10, Paul speaks of *glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does what is good*. When we follow through in compliance to the will of God, His blessings will shower down upon us.

What are some of the blessings you have received in this life because of your obedience to the Word of God?

## Pure and undefiled Religion

### *What it is not*

James 1.26-27 completes the progression that began with the command to be *quick to listen* in 1.19. Verse 26 describes what true religion is not. A person who observes all the outward aspects of *religion but*

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<sup>25</sup> Osborne, Grant R. *James: Verse by Verse*. Osborne New Testament Commentaries. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019, p. 54.

cannot bridle his tongue reveals that the Word has yet to penetrate his heart. *For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart*, Matthew 12.34. A person who fails to control his tongue is likely to have spiritual heart disease. People can gossip, speak angry words, or malign the character of others. James insists that the person whose life is characterized by these habits has a worthless religion. Pretty serious stuff.

An internet search reveals that the average person speaks around 7000 words each day, with many speaking much more than that, some estimates being as high as 13,000 words. This is enough to produce a 40-50 page book, which over the course of a year would accumulate to as many as 18,250 pages! Could you imagine a series of books being written containing the things you speak? How much of what you talk about glorifies God?

### ***What it is***

While certainly not a comprehensive listing, James identifies the practice of true religious acts that are acceptable before God:

- Looking after orphans and widows in their distress, 1.27a.
- Keeping ourselves unstained from the world, 1.27b.

True religion involves practical behavior. For example, Paul speaks of the need to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, 2 Timothy 2.22. Peter wrote about showing *sincere brotherly love for each other, from a pure heart love one another constantly*, 1 Peter 1.22. Religious observance without the practice of these things is nothing. It is empty, meaningless, and just a waste of time.

## **Looking After Orphans and Widows**

Many of us have heard and read a great deal of preaching and teaching on James 1.27, but mainly from the perspective of what it does not teach. We may have focused so much on the negative that in many cases we may simply wind up doing nothing, *all the while feeling justified about our inaction!* This totally goes against the spirit inside the context of this part of James.

To “look after” or “visit” orphans and widows comes from the same root word<sup>26</sup> used to describe the actions of an “overseer” or “bishop”. So this is something more than a Sunday afternoon visit ... *looking after* orphans and widows involves exercising care and oversight on their behalf. We are to “take care of or see to” their needs. It involves the implication of continuous responsibility.<sup>27</sup> Another writer says it involves coming to their aid and paying close attention to their needs.<sup>28</sup>

Widows and orphans were often the neediest in first century society. The loss of a husband in ancient times was usually a tragic occurrence both socially and economically. Among her friends and acquaintances, the widow would have quickly become associated with a person dwelling in extreme

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<sup>26</sup> See Acts 20.28; Philippians 1.1; 1 Timothy 3.2; Titus 1.7; and 1 Peter 2.25.

<sup>27</sup> Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1996, Vol. 1, p. 462.

<sup>28</sup> This is the way God “visited” His people, delivering them from oppression, Genesis 50.24; Exodus 3.16; Ruth 1.6. See Osborne, p. 60.

poverty, living on a marginal existence. While today Americans have a built-in safety net of social security survivor benefits, life insurance, and government assistance, none of that was available for them during that time. Similar conditions to the first century still exist in many third world countries today. During the first century, widows were especially vulnerable as they had no male protector. If there was an inheritance it went to the firstborn son. Care for the widow fell back on her parental family, who often ignored her needs.

Orphans were also destitute because they had no family. Typically, those in society cared little for their plight. Widows and orphans would have been in the deepest need of those inside the church.

Taking Scripture as a whole, we see God's special awareness and concern for orphans and widows, commanding His people to demonstrate love and care for them. *You must not mistreat any widow or fatherless child*, Exodus 22.22. *The one who denies justice to a resident alien, a fatherless child, or a widow is cursed*, Deuteronomy 27.19. Here are a few other notable Old Testament passages. We must defend their rights and never oppress them:

- Isaiah 1:17: *Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause.*
- Jeremiah 7:6: *if you no longer oppress the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow and no longer shed innocent blood in this place or follow other gods, bringing harm on yourselves,*
- Ezekiel 22:7: *Father and mother are treated with contempt, and the resident alien is exploited within you. The fatherless and widow are oppressed in you.*
- Zechariah 7:10: *Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the resident alien or the poor, and do not plot evil in your hearts against one another.*

### ***Loving, selfless service***

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God is to serve others with love and compassion. Paul commanded that Christians *support widows who are genuinely in need*, 1 Timothy 5.3. If they need financial assistance or have any other concerns, those are to be met. This is certainly an application of John's teaching:

- 1 John 2.10-11: *The one who loves his brother or sister remains in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother or sister is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and doesn't know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.*
- 1 John 3.10b-11: *Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother or sister. For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another...*
- 1 John 3.14: *We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death.*
- 1 John 3.16-18: *This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow*

*believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.*

### **The most visible trait of our salvation**

*By this all will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another, John 13.35.* True Christianity is demonstrated by how we love and care for those in need. All persons. Not just those we prefer or who are like us or are in our close circle of friends and acquaintances. It should be our desire to help, strengthen, and encourage them. We help orphans and widows and people in distress.

### **Who Can You Serve?**

Today would be a great day to go through your church directory and make a listing of all the widows and widowers. First you might be amazed at how many there are. Now, pick out one or two. How can you pray for them in a specific way? Would they appreciate a card or phone call or even better ... a visit? Could you prepare them a meal? What might be an event that you could invite them to go along with you? The possibilities on what you can do to serve are as plentiful as can be.

While many congregations today have no orphans among them, there are several good organizations connected with brethren that are committed to meeting their needs. They could always use your donations. Pick one of these and find a way to help. You'll be glad you did.

Pure and genuine love always expresses itself in word and deed.

### **For Thought and Reflection**

1. What can we do to look into the mirror of Scripture more effectively and actively persevere in making the appropriate changes?
2. What are some of the blessings you have received in this life because of your obedience to the Word?
3. How much of what you talk about glorifies God?
4. Who are some widows/widowers you can serve in your congregation?
5. What are some needs they have that you can meet?