

James 1:27

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Date: 05 June 2011

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[0 : 00] My favorite round on a question of sport, for those of you who are acquainted with that long-standing TV quiz program, well my favorite round before they started meddling with a tried and tested formula was what happened next.

Sometimes, and this is shocking, they no longer have that round. But for those of us who are of a certain age, you'll remember that that was very much a feature of that program.

What happened next? There would be some sporting footage shown, it would be cut at a certain point, and the contestants had to determine what happened next.

Well, I want us to play that game tonight, and the way we're going to do it is I'm going to read an item from today's intimation sheet, and I want you to imagine what happens next.

So I'm simply opening today's intimation sheet, and I read as follows. Sunday School Coffee Morning and Sale. The Sunday School will be hosting a coffee morning and nearly new sale on Saturday, the 18th of June, from 10 a.m. till 12 p.m. to raise funds for Dwelling Places in Kampala, Uganda.

[1 : 16] Dwelling Places is a Christ-centered organization that exists to provide an escape from poverty for street children, abandoned babies, and high-risk slum families. We'd like to welcome you all to come along and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee and home baking and to bring a friend.

If you have any good quality second-hand toys, books, DVDs that you would like to donate, please hand them to Judy Lang. We would also welcome any donations of home baking. Thank you.

So what happens next? Well, there are possibilities. Some will listen to that. Some of you have already read it. And one possibility is for you to imagine in your mind, well, that's nice.

That's nice. It's good to see the children involved in something so worthy. Isn't that nice that the Sunday School are doing that? Maybe some of you would respond by thinking, well, I hope they get on really well.

I hope the event is a success and that all goes as they would hope. Another possibility of what happens next is that you might think in your mind, well, I might go along to that if I've got time and if there isn't something else on that prevents me from doing so.

[2 : 29] Maybe another possibility is for you to determine, having read what is going on, to say, I'm definitely going. I'm definitely going to support that initiative.

Or perhaps taking things a little further. Some might say, well, having read that, having been presented with this information, what I need to do now is go home and to see what I could donate for this event.

I'll identify one or two things that would be suitable as I've been asked to do. Well, there's lots of possibilities. In answer to the question, what happens next?

Now, this initiative of the Sunday School to support dwelling places is, as we've read, a means whereby we can be involved in supporting children in desperate need.

Abandoned children, many of them, not all, but many of them orphans, all in desperate need. Many, I imagine, abused.

[3 : 31] Most, if not all, malnourished. Certainly all starved of love and affection. But why should we support dwelling places?

Or to put it another way, is it something that we must do? I think we'd all agree that it is a good thing to do. And you don't need to be a Christian to give your assent to it being a good thing to help something like dwelling places.

I'm sure if we ask folk here in Aberdeen of many faiths or none, their response largely would be, yes, that is a good thing to do. So to consider it a good thing to do isn't particularly radical.

It doesn't distinguish us from others. But the question I want us to consider this evening is, is this something that we ought to do? Is it essential for us as Christians to be involved in supporting work of this kind?

Now, it wouldn't, of course, have to be this particular organization. In our case, in God's providence, we've given the opportunity to know about and support this particular initiative.

[4 : 47] But, of course, it could be other similar initiatives. Well, in answering to the question if this is essential to our identity as Christians, we believe that the Word of God is our only rule of faith and conduct.

So our question must be, or to where we must turn, is to the Word of God. What does God's Word say on this matter? And I invite you to open your Bibles in the New Testament in the book of James and chapter 1.

We are going to consider, we're going to read two verses, but then are going to proceed to consider part of one verse. The verses, I think, are familiar to many, if not all of us.

And on this occasion, we're going to focus our attention very specifically on one part. Even of this short portion, the two verses we're going to read, we are then going to focus in on one very small part or one small part of these two verses.

But let's read the two verses. We're doing so to help us respond to the question, is it actually something that we must do to support orphans and abandoned children, those in desperate need of one kind or another as Christians?

[6 : 10] Is this part of our essential identity as Christians? Well, what does James say? What does God say through James in this letter? Verses 26 and 27 of the first chapter.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself, and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

This is the word of God. In these two verses, James presents three marks of true religion or true Christianity, where the word religion is to be understood as those outward practices or behavior that reveal the inward spiritual reality.

That is the meaning of the word religion here. The word religion isn't a word we find often in the Bible, but it is found here, it is used here, and it has that idea or that meaning.

Those outward practices, that outward behavior that reveals, that evidences an inward reality, or indeed the lack of that inward reality in some cases.

[7 : 35] Now, in identifying these marks, these three marks that we're going to notice in a moment, James is not saying, just to be very clear as we enter into considering this matter, James is not saying, do these things and you will be a Christian.

That somehow this is the way in which you can become a Christian, by doing these things. Rather, he is saying that the genuineness of your Christian profession will be evidenced in these ways.

We stand firm, as James does also, on the rock of the truth that we are justified by faith alone. We're not justified by doing these things.

We are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone. This is what James is recognizing. This is all about, as he has been dealing or touching on in previous verses in the chapter, about doing the Word.

Not only hearing it, but doing it. And it is illustrated by James in this particular way. What are the three marks that James identifies?

[8 : 48] Well, he identifies a controlled tongue as being one mark of genuine Christianity. He identifies helping those in need as another mark.

And he identifies a pure or a holy life as a third mark of genuine Christian profession. Each of these is important. We can't pick and choose.

We can't say, well, I have this mark, but I don't have the other. The three of them are to be found. And it is a good thing for us to, just for a moment, to examine ourselves and say, well, are these marks found in my life?

And if we don't find them, then we ought to ask ourselves the question, well, where do I stand before God? Am I a Christian? That is a reasonable question to ask if these marks are absent in our lives.

We need all three. In fact, I would go further and would suggest that James here is not intending to present an exhaustive list of marks of true faith.

[9 : 57] He mentions three, three very important ones, three that in a way you might say cover a considerable ground, but no doubt others could also be identified.

However, this evening, in the time that we have available, we are going to limit ourselves to considering just one of the three marks that James touches on in these two verses.

And the one that we want to think about is found there in verse 27, to look after orphans and widows in their distress. Now, the reason why we have honed in on this particular mark is because we want to encourage you to come on board, as it were, in this one-off, we might say, initiative with regard to supporting dwelling places.

Of course, the applications as we consider this part of the verse, we will discover, I hope, are much more far-reaching. But that is our starting point, as it were, or in any case, this is what has brought us to consider this matter.

So we want to think about this one mark, to look after orphans and widows in their distress. And the manner in which we're going to do it is by posing four questions to the text that, as we answer them, will help us tease out what God is saying through James on this matter.

[11 : 29] Now, the first question that we pose to the text is this, who are we to look after? To use the language of the verse, we have to look after.

Well, who are we to look after? Well, that is not a very difficult question. It's a very easy question. The answer is before us. We are to look after orphans and widows.

Why are they presented as deserving of particular attention? Well, there's nothing novel here in what James is saying. We hear, as we read the verse, the clear echo of the repeated call of God to His people in the Old Testament to look after.

Orphans and widows and aliens or foreigners. These really are ordinarily the three groups that are particularly highlighted in the Old Testament.

Here, two of the three are mentioned. It is maybe of some interest at the level of curiosity to speculate as to why James speaks of orphans and widows and omits to mention aliens or foreigners, I think would be a more helpful word to use.

[12 : 47] And I don't think there's maybe great significance in the fact that he mentions two of the classical three categories of the needy, particularly from an Old Testament background.

It's been suggested, and I leave this with you for you to do with as you please, that the reason James doesn't mention foreigners is simply a reflection of who he is writing to.

Notice at the very beginning of the letter, in verse 1, we are told who are being addressed. And James speaks of this letter being addressed to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

So he is addressing very particularly the Jewish diaspora, the Christian diaspora. Now, you can imagine, these are those who have left their own nation, left their home and are living as foreigners elsewhere.

And so for them, the matter of helping foreigners is almost not relevant because of their circumstances. There is a particular onus on those who live at home, as it were, to help those who come from elsewhere.

[14 : 00] But if you yourself are one of the foreigners, then this would be less relevant. I'm not suggesting that that is the answer, but I leave it with you as a curious, possible explanation.

But back to the question that is of more concern to us. Who are we to look after? Well, we are to look after orphans and widows. But this reference by James to orphans and widows can be, and I would say should be understood, in two ways.

Firstly, simply at face value, we do have a call to care for actual orphans. Children, babies, young people who are actually orphans, who don't have a mother or father.

And, of course, actual widows, those who have been left without a means of support. But I think it is also the case that when James speaks of the imperative of looking after orphans and widows, we can legitimately understand orphans and widows as representing all who suffer distress and oppression.

The weak, the marginalized, and the voiceless. Now, in broadening the scope of what is required, I think legitimately, we do have to be careful not to then forget about the orphans and the widows, which is the primary concern and explicitly stated by James.

[15 : 29] But I think it is legitimate to see them as, in a sense, representing. Indeed, I think in the Old Testament, when there is talk of orphans and widows and foreigners, they also serve to represent, in a sense, those who are weak and needy and distressed, oppressed, marginalized, and we could multiply the adjectives.

So, who are we to look after? We are to look after orphans and widows. And, indeed, we are to look after all those who find themselves, by force of circumstance, distressed, distressed, needy, and unable to respond to the situation they find themselves in.

That's the first question. Then we have a second question. Not only who are we to look after, but when are we to do so? When is this important to do so?

In what circumstances are we to look after such? Well, James gives us the answer to that question as well. He says we are to look after orphans and widows in their distress.

In their distress. Now, the word that James uses here, translated distress, is a Greek word that at its root is, or means, the root, let's put it this way, the root Greek word from which we have, uses here distress, is a verb that means to press or to hem in.

[17 : 03] And I think that that helps us to visualize the idea that James has. The idea that is being portrayed is of suffering that is brought on by the pressure of circumstances.

Now, it's clear for orphans and widows what those circumstances are, that they have lost their parents, they've lost a husband. And of course, very especially in the social context of the Greco-Roman world, such circumstances would almost inevitably be the cause of tremendous hardship and distress.

Now, perhaps for some, that might not be the case. You can, of course, imagine some circumstances where people could find themselves as orphans or widows.

Clearly that in itself is distressing. But nonetheless, because of a wider support network, those willing to support family members, not in the same degree of need as others.

But of course, there would be orphans and widows who, by the very circumstances that they find themselves in, are distressed and in need of help.

[18 : 18] Such must be helped. But as we broaden the scope, as we have done just a moment ago, of this mark of the genuine Christian, by understanding orphans and widows as representing all who suffer distress and oppression, we can appreciate how far-reaching and inescapable this duty is that is laid upon us.

We are, and this is no great social analysis, we are surrounded by so many who suffer distress by the pressure of circumstances, hemmed in by financial trouble, pressurized by family conflict or breakdown, stressed out by health concerns, be that physical health or mental health, burdened by loneliness, trapped by addictions, and the list could go on.

Now, what James is saying is that we, as a reflection of who we are as Christians, as part of our essential identity as Christians, we must look after such.

And if we are to look after such, we have to get to grips with two very practical issues. The first is that we need to know people well.

People can be distressed and be very adept at hiding that. There can be those who don't want other people to know the troubles and the trials they are going through.

[19 : 53] Now, you might say, in a measure, we should respect people's privacy. And I'm not saying we ought not to. But what I am saying as a practical point is that if we don't know people, then we won't know what the troubles that they have.

We won't be able to appreciate what help they might need because we simply don't know them well enough. We won't be aware of their distress if our relationship is so distant.

So that's simply a practical matter. But I think we could extend that a little further in terms of the need for knowledge. And that is we need to know our community. We need to know the society that we form part of well to appreciate where it is hurting, to appreciate what are the pressure points.

I think sometimes we maybe are, if not oblivious, in a measure ignorant of what are the causes of distress in the community where we live.

Just to give an example of something that surprised me and was evidence of my ignorance in this regard, I was speaking just last week to Barry Douglas.

[21 : 03] Some of you know Barry. Barry used to be part of the team at Gilcompton and is now working at King's Community Church on King Street. And he was speaking to me of work that they had involved in there in partnership with a Christian organization called Christians Against Poverty.

And while I don't claim to know in great detail what that organization does, one of the things they do is provide guidance, help to those in debt problems.

Now what struck me in that very brief conversation was that he said that currently, though they have an established work there from their congregation in this regard, if somebody phones them seeking simply an appointment for help in this matter, they have to wait three months before they get an appointment.

Such is the need. Such is this matter a cause of distress in our city for many. Now perhaps some of us, I confess, I was largely oblivious.

I was surprised that, you know, there would be such a long waiting list. You know, sometimes we want to do something or we have an idea of how we might serve the community and the problem is that nobody's interested.

[22 : 23] Maybe nobody wants to participate. Well, here was an interesting example of a pressure point, of an area where people feel hemmed in, pressed in upon.

It's causing distress for them. And what James is saying is, well, this is something where we must respond to help. But if we don't know what's going on, it will, of course, be very difficult to know what to do.

Do we, then, know the community that we are part of? Do we appreciate what are the pressure? How and in what way people are hurting?

Or do we often stand apart, aloof, disconnected, shielded from the harsh realities that dominate the lives of many? Who are we to look after?

When are we to do so? But thirdly, a question we can pose is, what will this involve? What will this involve? Well, again, if we just remind ourselves of what James says.

[23 : 28] He says, to look after orphans and widows in their distress. The verb that he uses in terms of what we are to do is look after. To look after orphans and widows in their distress.

Some versions translate that verb with visit, to visit orphans and widows in their distress. Now, there is one very clear implication of the verb that James uses that I want to stress.

And perhaps to emphasize it, I will, in answering this question, focus on this one clear implication. And it is this, that to look after or to visit involves necessarily personal, hands-on involvement.

What James is saying must be done cannot be done at a distance. Checkbook compassion doesn't cover this demand. James doesn't say, make a donation.

James doesn't say, support a charity. He says, visit. He says, look after the orphan and the widow in their distress. Now, as I was considering this, this generated not a problem for me, but I have already said that what brought me to consider this and share this with you this evening was with the purpose of encouraging you to support the initiative of the Sunday School with regards to dwelling places.

[24 : 55] Now, let me say that the text does, without doubt, provide a solid foundation and imperative for us to support such an initiative that will be a means of orphans and abandoned children, those in need and distress.

What I'm saying is, as we consider the verb that James uses, is that the text also demands that we do more. By all means, let us do this. By all means, let us do this.

And Marsley, over there in Uganda, by all means. But what James is saying is that that is not enough. We cannot be content simply with helping over there.

What James is saying, and what the verb he uses demands, is that we need to get involved right here. How can we do that? Well, we don't need to look very far to identify those who are in need, those who are in distress.

Indeed, the very categories, if that's the word to use, it sounds a little impersonal, but the categories that James identifies, orphans and widows, certainly there are widows who form part of our own congregation.

[26 : 12] And certainly when we understand these as representing those in multiple forms of need and distress, well, without looking very far, we could see and recognize those who we could support and help, as James requires of us.

But as we look a little further afield, the neighbors that surround us where we live, we think of the community where God has placed us. We think of this particular neighborhood where God has placed us in terms of our building, certainly though many of us don't live here.

There are opportunities. There are many in need. There are many who are distressed. In addition to personal context that we might have, there are more formal ways of responding to this gospel imperative.

We've mentioned in prayer this evening the work of Bethany, and Bethany are ever looking for volunteers who can support them in reaching out to the needy, to the distressed, to those who are hemmed in and pressurized by circumstances.

We've mentioned choices, how it seeks to help, especially young women who have maybe made bad choices and are struggling to know what to do in the circumstances that they find themselves in.

[27 : 33] And no doubt other examples could be given. What will this involve? The verb that James uses requires personal involvement, hands-on involvement, look after, visit, is what is required of us, is what will be involved in fulfilling.

What James is saying is a mark of the genuine Christian. Finally, why are we to do this? Why are we to do this? I want to notice two key reasons that are identified, if not explicitly, certainly implicitly in our text.

The two key reasons are this, who we are and whom we serve. First of all, who we are. We're answering the question, why are we to do this? Why are we to look after orphans and widows in their distress?

And in answering the question, why, the first aspect that I'm suggesting or proposing to you is, who we are. James, in this verse, speaks of that which is acceptable, notice, to God our Father.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this. Why does James so specifically describe God in this way as God our Father?

[28 : 55] Is there significance in this? You know, we might say, well, the verse would read equally well and be equally understandable if it simply read, religion that God accepts as pure and faultless is this.

What would be lost? You know, we know that God is our Father. What does that add to the text? What does it draw to our attention? I think it is significant.

I think what James is doing is reminding his readers concerning their identity. He is reminding his readers that they are sons of God. And as sons of God, they are to be like their Father in heaven.

He is reminding them of their identity. He is saying, because of who you are, because of who your Father is, because you are sons of God, you must behave in this way.

They, we, are to be like the one who describes himself as the father of the fatherless, as we have sung in Psalm 68. We are to be like the one who seeks out the distressed to succor them and comfort them and love them.

[30 : 03] We must show that family likeness. We are to be like our Father. Because of who we are, we must look after orphans and widows in their distress.

It's not just that it's a good thing to do. It's not just about a natural compassion that could be provoked by seeing somebody in need. It is because, fundamentally, of who we are and who our Father is.

But there's another related answer to the question, why are we to do this? Not only who we are, but secondly and finally, whom we serve. Who do we live for?

Whose approbation do we most yearn? Who in love do we long to please? From the lips of whom do we wish to hear the words, well done, good and faithful servant?

Well, we know the answer to these questions. We live and breathe to serve our God. And what does James say? That to look after orphans and widows in their distress is pleasing to this God whom we serve is pleasing to this God.

[31 : 10] We long to... ...