

Pure Religion and undefiled before God
James 1:27

James 1:27 reads, “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.”

As we have previously noted, **James 1:26-27** presents a clear contrast between a faulty religious life that is lacking in spiritual substance and a faithful religious life that is rooted in spiritual substance. This contrast is seen in that **verse 26** closes with the statement, “This man’s religious is vain;” whereas **verse 27** opens with the statement, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this.” Even so, **verse 26** presents the case of a religious life that is vain, being spiritually profitless; whereas **verse 27** presents the case of a religious life that is valuable, being spiritually pure. Therefore, as we focus our attention upon **verse 27**, we observe more closely the case of a religious life that is valuable, being spiritually pure – “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this.”

Grammatically, this verse can be divided into three parts. First, there is the declaration of God’s classification for pure religion – “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this.” Second, there is the description of loving compassion in pure religion – “To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction.” Third, there is the description of separated character in pure religion – “And to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

I. The Substance of Acceptable Religion

In the opening four words, **James 1:27** begins with a declaration concerning the spiritual substance of acceptable religion. Thereby we learn that an acceptable religion is a spiritually “pure religion and undefiled.” As we have noted, in this context the word “religion” refers specifically to a diligent observance and dedicated performance of religious activities, duties, and services. Thus an acceptable religious life, an acceptable observance and performance of religious activities, duties, and services, must be rooted in a spiritually pure and undefiled substance of character. These two descriptive words “pure” and “undefiled” are synonyms, the first giving the description from the positive perspective and the second giving the description from the negative perspective. The combination of these two synonyms strongly emphasizes that necessity for a religious life that is rooted in the spiritual substance of a godly character. To be acceptable, our religious life must be rooted in the Spirit-filled purity of a heart that is truly in righteous fellowship with the Lord. To be acceptable, our religious life must be undefiled by any selfish motivations and hypocrisies of the flesh.

II. The Standard for Acceptable Religion

As that opening line of **James 1:27** continues, it presents a declaration concerning the spiritual standard for acceptable religion. “Pure religion and undefiled” is that which is viewed as such “before God and the Father.” It is not our own view concerning the spiritually pure and undefiled character of our religious life that matters. It is the view of God

our heavenly Father that truly matters. If He does not approve of our religious life, then it really does not matter if we ourselves or anyone else approves thereof. Indeed, our religious life may appear pure and undefiled outwardly before others. Yet the Lord our God examines the true substance of our character and motivation. His standard is THE standard. Thus to be truly acceptable, our religious life must be rooted in a character and motivation of heart that pleases Him. As our Creator God, He is the authoritative Judge of our heart character and of our religious life. As our Heavenly Father, He is the gracious Savior who is ever worthy of our righteous priority in heart and of our pure religion in worship.

III. The System in Acceptable Religion

The opening portion of **James 1:27** declares, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this.” Herein the phrase “is this” introduces the system in acceptable religion. Now, this verse does not present an exhaustive list of the activities, duties, and services in “pure religion and undefiled before God.” Yet it does present two of the essential elements in “pure religion and undefiled before God.” Indeed, these two elements are often neglected. Yet these essential elements are so characteristic of “pure religion and undefiled before God” that without them there can be no genuine claim to such a pure and undefiled religious life.

The first essential element of pure and undefiled religion presented in **James 1:27** concerns the principle of loving compassion toward the needy. “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction.” Being the two categories of individuals who were the most likely to experience the greatest level of affliction and need in that day, the “fatherless [orphans] and widows” are presented herein as a representative for any and all who are needy and helpless in affliction. In this context, the word “visit” means more than just making a social call to see such needy individuals and to speak a word of comfort unto them. Rather, it means going forth to help such individuals “in their affliction.” Indeed, it means going forth with a personally active and practically beneficial involvement to help relieve their need. In addition, it means helping them although it is very likely that they shall never be in a position to return the favor. As such, this element of pure and undefiled religion deals with our spirit of loving, sacrificial compassion toward others in their need. Even so, in **1 John 3:16-18** the instruction is given, “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.” Now, such loving compassion toward the needy is an essential element of “pure religion and undefiled before God,” and without it there can be no genuine claim to such a pure and undefiled religious life.

The second essential element of pure and undefiled religion presented in **James 1:27** concerns the principle of separated character from the world. “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.” Herein the word “world” refers to the evil sys-

tem of this world in its ungodly philosophies, priorities, practices, and pursuits. It is a system of ungodliness that pervades every aspect of the human culture around us and that is governed by “the prince of the world,” the devil himself. (**John 14:30**) As such, this present evil world is utterly selfish in its foundational essence and is completely contrary to the Lord our God and His way of righteousness. Even so, **1 John 2:16** reveals the truth, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” In addition, **James 4:4** pronounces the rebuke, “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” Certainly we believers dwell in this world physically. Yet we are not to be of this world spiritually. We are never to be conformed unto the ungodliness of this world’s evil system. (**Romans 12:2**) Rather, we are faithfully and fervently to guard ourselves, in both our attitudes and our actions, against this world’s ungodly pollution. We are to be holy “in all manner of conversation,” in every aspect of our character and our conduct. (**1 Peter 1:15**) We are to be “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts” and to “live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.” (**Titus 2:12**) Yea, keeping ourselves “unspotted” by any of this world’s ungodly pollution is our constant, continual responsibility before the Lord our God. Indeed, it is the responsibility of each believer to keep his own self “unspotted from the world.” Therefore, we must be constantly, consistently, continually, and carefully vigilant to guard ourselves spiritually; for this present evil world is constantly, consistently, continually, and characteristically seeking to corrupt us spiritually. Furthermore, whenever we do become “spotted” with the selfish, sinful pollution of this world, we must quickly cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. (**James 4:8**) Yea, we must be cleansed through the humble confession of broken-hearted repentance; for “if we confess our sins, he [God our heavenly Father] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (**1 John 1:9**) Now, such separated character from the world is an essential element of “pure religion and undefiled before God,” and without it there can be no genuine claim to such a pure and undefiled religious life.