

The Tests of True Christian Religion (James 1:26-27)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on August 23, 2009

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James 1 (NASB95) ²⁶ *If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.* ²⁷ *Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

Would you consider yourself religious? What religion are you? Those are questions you may be asked from time to time, verbally or in some written survey or in some setting, and those are also the questions the apostle James wanted his original readers to answer in today's text, James 1:26-27. But James is not asking you to check a box like Judaism / Catholicism / Hinduism / Buddhism, etc., and he doesn't have a second check box to indicate whether you participate by attending services or doing a religion's rituals (synagogue, rosary, mass, praying to Mecca 5x a day, etc.). James is writing in the first century to those whose faith is in Jesus as Lord (2:1) instead of the distorted work-based religion of their time. James writes to those who profess the *right religion*; but not all of those possess *real religion*, true pure religion, even among those who **not only profess** the right *religion* but who even practice the right *disciplines*; prayer (1:5-8), reading the Bible / hearing it (22-24), attending the assembly with God's people (2:2). This is the context and audience James writes, not the nominal CE Christians who may or may not describe themselves as religious on a survey (CE = Christmas and Easter). He writes to knowledgeable Christian churchgoers who *would* consider themselves religious.

The word "religion/religious" appears 3x in 2 verses and is clearly the focus of this text – v. 26 describes those who think they have it and v. 27 describes what those who truly have it are like. James is not talking to those in our day who say they have no interest or use for "organized religion." Tim Thompson, a chaplain in our county we support, has shared his response to that comment: "Well, good, because I'm about as disorganized as they get, so let's just talk."

James is not writing to the many in our day who may think they have a religion but would describe themselves as "non-practicing." We all know people who think they have a religion because they were born into a religion (by ethnicity in general or parents in particular or by what country they grew up in): "I was born one..." Or maybe they were personally as a child baptized, catechized, sanitized with special water, etc. But the ones James speaks of in v. 26 are in the present tense thinking themselves to be religious still, a word emphasizing the practice of, especially the outward religious actions that the religion calls for. They think they're religious not because of something that was done many years ago but because of what they are doing now.

James has no check-box for "non-practicing Christian" because he has no such category (read chapter 2). Even of those who are practicing certain Christian activities, not all are true Christians. Unlike a written survey you may receive with multiple checkboxes for your religion, there's really only 2 choices in v. 26-27: true religion or all else (what James calls "worthless, deceptive," i.e., false). If the term "religion" throws you, substitute *Christianity*. Within those who consider themselves in Christianity, there is true Christianity and false.

There is “pure and undefiled” Christianity “unstained by the world” and there is worldly defiled deception that is not pure or pleasing to God or worth anything in His sight.

God’s inspired Word presents the tests of true religion/Christianity in this text. For those who checked the boxes that they consider themselves religious Christians, there’s another question: With a goal of pleasing the Father, by the grace of Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit’s power, do you seek to:

- A. Control your tongue?
- B. Care for others?
- C. Keep yourself pure?

True Christians with true religion in God’s sight can answer “D” (all of the above) and they can do so humbly because it is from God, through God, and to God, all glory to God and none to us. The confidence that we are pleasing God by our true religion/Christianity doesn’t come from what *we do on our own*, but from what *God did on His own* in regenerating us and His continual work in us. I know I’m saved, not from any perfect work of my own, but by the perfect work of Christ on the cross applied in my life. The evidence God is within me is not perfection but rather my response to my imperfections now (cf. v. 25 repent and change, unlike the person in v.24). We know we are Christians not because we always do what’s right and never sin, but because our new heart wants to do what’s right and hates it when we sin (like Paul said of even himself).

I worded each part of that test question carefully and deliberately:

- “with a goal of pleasing the Father” - v. 27 *“in the sight of our God and Father”*; NIV has *“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this ...”*
- “by the grace of Jesus” -2:1 presupposes brethren who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus; it is impossible to please God without faith in Jesus, without His grace, not only in salvation but in anything. 2:1 calls Jesus “glorious” or *“Lord of glory”* – the religious actions in the verse before must be not only by His grace but also for His glory)
- “through the Holy Spirit’s power” - the self-control required in v. 26, *“bridles his own tongue,”* presupposes the power of *“the fruit of the Spirit ... self control”* (Gal. 5:22-23). Spirit-control is the key to self-control in general and to speech-control in that verse. A man and mouth with no control can be an indicator of a man with no Holy Spirit.
- “do you seek to” – not “do you always and never fail,” but is this your pattern, purpose and pursuit with God’s help?
 - To Control your tongue (v. 26)
 - To Care for others (v. 27)
 - To Keep yourself pure (v. 27b)

James (along with Jesus) argues that what is inside you will show itself on the outside in some way. And neither taught man’s works themselves can save anyone (being in a monastery or convent does not earn salvation), but for those who (v. 17) have looked upward to God and to God alone for the unearned gift of salvation, who’ve (v. 18) received new life by God’s will and work alone, that inner gospel transformation manifests itself outwardly in true religion:

- v. 19b *“slow to speak”* (control of tongue, v. 26)
- v. 19a *“quick to listen”* (care for others, v. 27)
- v. 21 *“laying aside all filthiness”* (keep self pure, v. 27b)

God transforms us inside-out and James says this is how it looks:

1. Controlling what's inside you, especially in your speech
2. Caring for those outside you, especially those in need
3. Keeping outside worldliness from corrupting you inside

Or to summarize the 3 tests in 3 words: Speech, Mercy, Purity

Or to summarize the 3 parts of our person: Tongue, Hands, Heart

Your Tongue - hold it under control

Your Hands – get them dirty helping the needy

Your Heart – keep it clean from worldliness

These 3 key themes dominate the rest of the book of James:

Controlling the tongue – 3:1-12, 4:11-12

Caring for the helpless – James 2:1-13, 15-16, 5:1-6

Keeping Separate from Worldliness – James 4:4-10

Sometimes we say “Christianity is a relationship, not a religion,” but James speaks of religion positively, and it positively impacts all our relationships: true religion *from true relationship with God*. The idea that true inner religion is manifested outwardly actively is in some sense the theme that the entire rest of the book expounds.

1. Control Your Tongue (v. 26 “*bridles his tongue*”)

When a doctor does a physical exam or checkup of you, he may ask you first to stick out your tongue, because the tongue can be a quick indicator of your health. Our Lord the Great Physician starts here as well in this passage, in the first part of His test. This exam doesn't start with an X-ray of your heart, God says let's look at your tongue as the first indicator of your spiritual health (or lack). Let's do a little “check-up from the neck up” – how's your tongue? And this actually is a good indicator of the heart, because our Lord said “*from the abundance/overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks*”

Spurgeon: “That which is in the well will come up in the bucket, and that which is in the heart will come up on the tongue. An unbridled tongue denotes an unrenewed heart. Oh, that God would ever give us grace in our heart to move our tongue aright! Then, as the water guides the whole ship, our tongue will guide our whole body, and the whole of our [person] will be under ... control.”¹

If we could play back the tape of your speech this past week, what would we hear? If the doctor interviewed the people you live with to try and gauge your spiritual health by how you speak with them, what would he find out? The best test is not what you say on the Lord's Day around the Lord's family, but how you speak to your own family. Not your Sunday best, but your Monday worst. Not public spirituality, but private speech. Not the outer, but the inner. Unlike what most think, the true test of a man's spirituality is not his ability to speak, but rather his ability to restrain his speech.

Kent Hughes said it well: ‘The tongue will inevitably reveal what is on the inside. This is especially true under stress, when the tongue is compulsively revealing. A preacher with hammer in hand, doing some work on a church workday, noticed that one of the men seemed to be following him around. Finally the preacher asked why. The man answered, “I just want to hear what you say when you hit your thumb.” The curious [man] understood that would be the existential moment of truth. The same could be said of the domestic stresses of the home, where the mouth unfailingly trumpets one’s essence.

James does not mean that those who sometimes fall into this sin have a worthless religion, for all are guilty at times. Rather, he is saying that if anyone’s tongue is habitually unbridled [that’s the sense of the Greek verb], though his church attendance be impeccable, his Bible knowledge envied, his prayers many, his [giving to offerings] exemplary, and though he “considers himself religious ... he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”²

We know James does not mean Christians are perfect and never stumble in speech, not only from the verb tense but what he says in James 3:2-3: *For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.*

The point of the bridle image in both places is that control of the mouth affects the whole being and direction of life. True Christians still have sin in their heart but they can and must control it before it comes out verbally, by God’s controlling Spirit.

R. C. Sproul wrote: ‘a true Christian keeps a tight rein on the tongue. James will have much more to say about the tongue later on [James 3], but here he seems to refer to people who continually prattle. They say whatever pops into their head, without listening to or caring about what others are telling them. They are too full of their own self-important ideas. Such people are not open to the Word of God. They are not open to those God has appointed as teachers in his church. We must read the Scriptures ourselves, but we must also listen to teachers, or the Bible will come to simply mirror our preconceived ideas [rather than the mirror of what God thinks and demands of us in v. 23-25]. The test of submission to the Word is openness to what is taught’³ [and obeying like v. 22]

Psalm 141:3 *Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips.*

2. Care for the Needy (James 1:27)

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress ...

The word translated “pure” here is the Greek word we get the word “catharsis” from (cleansing of mind / emotions) or “cathartic” (any substance used to induce purging or to cleanse a wound or infected area in order to make it pure). The second word “undefiled” means without contamination, unpolluted, untainted, unsoiled, unstained. The Jews who originally read this letter from James of Jerusalem grew up in a society with a different visual of pure and undefiled religion in the sight of man (the Pharisees), which James explains is not the same as pure and undefiled religion in the sight of God.

A Pharisee practiced ceremonial washings and cleansings and was a walking “Mr. Clean” commercial spiritually, the pure religionist undefiled by the world, not only striving to keep the Law of Moses purely but adding their own laws for bonus points. They did a good job showing off super-religious squeaky-clean externalism (long robes, tassels, prayers; trumpeting their giving), but man’s most fastidious legalism cannot clean up an inwardly depraved heart.

James says “don’t go by religion in man’s sight, let me tell you what is pure and undefiled true religion that is pleasing in God the Father’s sight: visiting orphans and widows in their distress.” It’s no coincidence that God is described as “Father” in this same verse that mentions the fatherless orphans, which to the original Jewish readers who knew their OT would recognize, highlights God’s very nature that is often repeated “*father of the fatherless*.” The self-righteous religionists may not care for orphans, but the Father in heaven does and so will those who have His nature within them.

Psalms 10 says of God: “*The unfortunate commits himself to You; You have been the helper of the orphan ... To vindicate the orphan and the oppressed*” (v. 14, 18).

And to people who won’t, God has strong rebuke: Jeremiah 5:28-29 “*They do not plead the cause, The cause of the orphan, that they may prosper; And they do not defend the rights of the poor.*”²⁹ “*Shall I not punish these people?*” declares the LORD, “*On a nation such as this Shall I not avenge Myself?*”

Prov. 23:10-11 says don’t “*go into the fields of the fatherless, For their Redeemer is strong; He will plead their case against you.*”

God is Defender of the defenseless, Helper of the helpless, Father to the fatherless (Heb. *orphan* can mean no father or any parents). He provided for them primarily through His law and through His people in an ancient world, where outside Israel, unwanted kids were often abandoned to die. There was a form of abortion in ancient times but perhaps more commonly they were discarded after birth in NT times. The early Christians were known for rescuing babies and bringing them into their family, I’ve read. Orphans were rarely cared for by the state or private foundations and without family or at least without father, on their own, they were certainly in distress as v. 27 says, desperation, vulnerability.

The clear connotation of this word is used by Jesus when He says to His disciples: “*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you*” (Jn 14:18 NIV). In other words, orphans without a protector and provider are in an extremely desperate state and in great need. Hosea 14:9 says of the Lord “*in you the orphan finds mercy.*” And if we are truly in Christ, there will be mercy in our heart as well.

When James says “*visit ... in distress,*” the term *visit* includes care and concern and compassion within as well as Christlike outward actions, mercy that manifests and helps a brother or sister if it can.

The test James lays down moves from your mouth to your mercy. How’s your mouth? How’s your mercy?

“Orphans and widows” aren’t the only types of people to show the mercy of Christ, but I don’t want to just generalize the principle and ignore the specific examples James gives here, because both are such a frequent example that God explicitly speaks of and uses to manifest His very nature toward. Orphans were taken care of and taken in by God’s people in the OT to look after (the word “visit” in v. 27 literally meant look to) - sometimes it was within their own family as was the case of Esther who had no father or mother but Mordecai took care of her like his own daughter. One of the most beautiful pictures in the OT is Mephibosheth, who was not in King David’s biological family (in fact he was from his enemies’ family and former dynasty!) but had no parents and was crippled, disabled – a visible picture of the distress James speaks of

And David said to him, “Do not fear, for I will show you kindness [mercy] ... you shall eat at my table always.” ... So Mephibosheth ate at David’s table, like one of the king’s sons ... So Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, for he ate always at the king’s table [accepted into his family]. Now he was lame in both his feet. (2 Sam. 9:7-13)

There’s no natural explanation for that; it’s a supernatural work in the heart of a man after God’s heart, a God merciful to the needy.

When I was visiting a friend in central California earlier this year I met an amazing Christian family at their church, a couple in their 50’s or 60’s that had adopted 11-13 children with special needs, many of whom were severely disabled, and they are choosing to spend the rest of their life serving the most needy. It’s hard to even think of them without goosebumps on my arms or tears in my eyes or amazement to my mind. The world can’t understand that sort of thing. Most Christians can barely fathom or relate to their mindset. But God can and is the only explanation for that, and we can praise God because the only explanation as to why we’re saved and can be a part of the table of our Lord is that His mercy rescued us as even more needy and helpless spiritually and He adopted us! He brings us into His own family as sons and daughters as children of the King and has a place there for us in life and in all eternity! Praise the Lord for His amazing adopting grace!

Not everyone is called to do what that couple did, not all of us are gifted for the same ministry, not all will adopt, though maybe some of you will, but all of us can apply v. 27 in some way:

- Craig and Jennifer VanderStoep are still pursuing adoption from Asia, open to a special needs child, and we can help them, pray for them, support them, and others to adopt if we cannot. Christians are not just pro-life but pro-adoption.
- Another practical way we can help the most helpless and unwanted fatherless children I think applies to before birth. Our church has had connection with Pregnancy Counseling Svcs in Placerville, which is a Christian-based ministry that helps women with unplanned pregnancies where there is often no father in the picture and where others would counsel her to get an abortion. Some of you may be led to help them in some way
- Ruth and Paul Ortiz are Philippines missionaries w/ a group called Action (I think James would have liked that ministry name). They spoke here earlier this summer, working with orphanage and place for pregnant women, birthing home, gospel-centered in all
- Pastor Naha Nayak from India who spoke on Feb. 22 here (can listen to audio online). John Hamm, whose parents attend here, saw first-hand in India recently many widows and orphans whose Christian dads martyred.

George Mueller and Charles Spurgeon in England practiced what they preached about the doctrines of grace, God's sovereign mercy to the utterly helpless spiritually, and in opening orphanages of mercy to the physically helpless, their religion was pure and undefiled in God's sight (though not as showy as the Pharisees).

Orphans aren't the only ones in need of mercy, of course. It may be helpful not to think of organizations and formal ministries when you read in v. 27 about visiting the needy. We have a couple in our church who have been doing visitation and calls to check in with visitors and people who might be in need for years, not as an official duty (not as deacon/deaconess) and not because pastor told them to, but they volunteered that to leadership as their way to serve Christ, and if you would like to learn from them by example, I'd be happy to tell you ways you can come alongside them or our deacons or deaconesses (in fact, pictures of servants/staff are in the foyer and you can contact them directly to make yourself available to serve in some way, or there's a sign-up sheet in the foyer for those interested in helping with meals, visitation of ladies)

We have a deacon fund you can give to, called a Benevolence Fund, which is not to replace your regular giving to the church as our monthly financial needs are still tight in this economy, but if you're led to go above and beyond your giving to also contribute to a fund that deacons use to confidentially help ones in our body in temporal need (meals, food, gas, etc.) there's a benevolence fund.

Alexander Strauch's excellent book *Deacons: Ministers of Mercy*, develops how the church leaders established recognized servants in Acts 6 to care for the practical needs of people so the apostles/elders could devote themselves to prayer and ministry of the word – those servants were later called deacons who are to make sure such needs are met). But I don't get the impression from James that true religion requires a deacon or pastor or a program to initiate – it is the response of your heart to a need you can meet. And don't just think of financial or long-distance help, think of emotional or spiritual encouragement in person or by phone call or by card (certainly included in the word "visit" in v. 27). The Greek word *visit* was especially used of personal contact and care to needy as Matt 27:35 shows: *I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; ³⁶naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.*'

One way to learn of needs in this body is to have your home email address added to the prayer hotline, who's in hospital, etc. Cards and calls and prayers and care for others in need you know is pure religion as much or more than what any pastor does. And if you have no care for the needy, like the supposedly pure undefiled Pharisees who walked around the needy man in the road in the Good Samaritan story, that's what James would call "worthless religion."

In Luke 11 we see another interchange with Pharisees on this. Jesus gets right to the heart of their problem which was a problem with their heart. They were clean religiously to outside observers but they were corrupt inside, and didn't care for the helpless and needy or others outside of their clean comfortable sanctified circles

Luke 11 ³⁷ ... a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined at the table. ³⁸ When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that [Jesus] had not first ceremonially washed before the meal. ³⁹ But the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees **clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness.** ⁴⁰ "You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ "But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are **clean [same word as James 1:27 "pure"]** for you. ⁴² "But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and **yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done** without neglecting the others. ⁴³ "Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. ⁴⁴ "Woe to you! For **you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over them are unaware of it.** ⁴⁵ One of the lawyers said to Him in reply, "Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too." ⁴⁶ But He said, "Woe to you lawyers as well! ...

In a similar passage in Matthew 23:23, Jesus rebukes the supposed "religious" leaders for *neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy ...* (NKJV). It's not that other religious duties are unimportant or unnecessary, but as one translation puts it "*more important matters of the law [are] justice and mercy...*" (NIV). If they had read Micah 6:8 they would know this is what God always wanted in the OT as well: "*What does the Lord require of thee? But to do justly and to love mercy ...*" The OT often expresses that Godlike true religion in *justice to widows and mercy to orphans.*

In Luke 21 Jesus makes an object lesson of a widow: ¹ *He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury* ² *And He saw a poor widow putting in two small copper coins.* ³ *And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; ⁴ for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on."*

Widows were poor in those days, as v. 2 says. The end of v. 4 says she was in poverty and had hardly anything to live on, and her last 2 coins she threw in (equivalent to less than 1 cent in US currency). Now how many of you have heard sermons from this story about sacrificial giving and how this widow is a pattern for our giving?

Many preach based on this, that our greatest percent or proportion of religious giving is what truly pleases God, or some would say it's not about how much you give but how much you have leftover *after* you give, or it's about how much it costs you or how much self-denial you have or what your heart is like when you give or giving till it hurts and not just giving from the surplus we have like the religious rich but giving in faith, or being willing to give up all.

I'm convinced that none of those are what this text is really mainly about. A better place to go for clear teaching on NT giving would be 2 Corinthians 8-9, but this text in Luke 21 may be one of the most misunderstood and misconstrued teachings of Jesus if we take it out of its context.

Luke 19 ⁴¹ *When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side,*

⁴⁴ *and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.*” ⁴⁵ Jesus entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling, ⁴⁶ saying to them, *“It is written, ‘AND MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER,’ but you have made it a ROBBERS’ DEN.”* ⁴⁷ *And He was teaching daily in the temple; but the chief priests and the scribes and the leading men among the people were trying to destroy Him ...*

Chapter 20 is also set in the temple and is all about Jesus shutting up and shutting down the religious leaders, all of them, with the power of their Scriptures which He inspired. In v. 40, it says no one dared to ask Jesus any questions anymore. Then after His final words to the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, and scribes, Jesus then addresses His disciples in 20:45-46 *“Beware of the scribes ... [v. 47] who devour widows’ houses ... These will receive greater condemnation. And he looked up and saw ...”*

Then right after speaking of the widow’s giving, in 21:5-6 He tells them the entire temple is going to be totally utterly destroyed. So the prior context is false religionists for a whole chapter, the context after this widow is judgment for a whole chapter.

John MacArthur: ‘This is no place to interject, “Oh by the way, a few words on giving.” That sounds like a traditional Baptist sermon, in the middle of everything you always have a few words on giving ... [in] the context before and after, this is all about the condemnation of wicked spiritual leaders and a corrupt religious system that is about to be destroyed ... This little vignette is in the middle of a diatribe against a false religious system and a pronouncement of judgment on that system, judgment that is still going on today ...

[The fact that Jesus says she gave the last of her money makes some assume Jesus was pleased with that, though the text doesn’t actually say so. MacArthur says] ... I think what she did displeased Him immensely. I think it was more than displeasing. I think it angered Him ... how would you feel if you saw a destitute widow who only had two coins left to buy her food for her next meal give those two coins to a ... false religious system? How would you feel if you saw a destitute, impoverished person give to her religion her last hope for life to go home perhaps and die? You’d be sick. You’d feel terrible. You would be repulsed. Any religion that is built on the back of the poor is a false religion. What a sad, misguided, woeful, poor victimized lady. It’s tragic, painful. And I think that’s exactly how Jesus saw it - exactly.

He saw that corrupt system [of the religionists He’s been rebuking the whole prior chapter] taking the last two pennies out of a widow’s pocket. In desperation, hoping that maybe in that legalistic system her two coins would buy some blessing, trying to be dutiful, the rabbis had said with alms you purchase your salvation, trying to buy your way into heaven, trying to buy relief from your desperation, your destitution ...

The system that had developed in Judaism abused poor people [as Matthew 15 shows if you want to study that further] ... this woman was part of a system that took the last two cents out of her hand on the pretense that this was necessary to please God, to purchase her salvation and to bring her blessing. She was manipulated by a religious system that was corrupt. This is not an illustration of heartfelt, sacrificial giving that pleases the Lord, this is not a model for all of us to follow. Jesus never expects that, in fact He told a servant who had very little, “You should have put your money in the bank and earned interest because you need that to meet your own physical needs.”

... Something very different is going on here. This is not about Jesus honoring giving, this is about a victim of a corrupt system who is literally made absolutely destitute trying to live up to that system and earn heaven ... [the verse right before, 20:47 says the religious leaders “devour widow’s houses,” i.e., financially, while making long prayers around the temple that was a den of robbers, this is the climax as to why their greater condemnation is coming]

... They do it, says Peter, for filthy lucre. Luke 16:14, Jesus said, “*The scribes and Pharisees were lovers of money.*” We know the Sadducees who ran the temple franchises were lovers of money, because Jesus said you’ve turned My Father’s house a house of prayer into a den of robbers, as they extorted money out of people for sacrifices and coin exchange ... *they devour widows’ houses.* They build their success monetarily on the backs of widows. Wow! Our Lord indicts them for their severe abuse of widows, along with the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the scribes had a system that abused the poor and the defenseless for whom they had only disdain ... because they were widows, they were defenseless and easy prey ... the religious leaders were devouring widows and the more desperate they became, the more they needed, they thought, to buy God’s blessing. Belittled by the establishment because they were thought to be in that state because of divine punishment, second-class women, they were defenseless, easily exploited [and the cost was all this one had] ... literally her life. She’ll go home and die.

... If you saw a widow give her last two cents to some religious organization in the hope that she could purchase salvation or purchase blessing, or buy healing, or buy prosperity, you wouldn’t commend her, you’d want to stop her and you’d want to shut down that religious system that preys on the desperate. This act did not please our Lord. She’s simply been taught and she bought in to a system that destroyed her. No praise is given of her act or her attitude ... Jesus is angry [at the false religionists, not this poor lady who was simply caught up in their bad teaching]. And that’s why He’ll destroy this den of robbers. Judgment came, 70 A.D., and it continues now on that temple, on that city, on that land until Jesus comes again.

... [If Jesus were alive in the 16th century MacArthur suspects He would have said woe to the Catholic religious leader building St. Peter’s in Rome] from the money of the poor, destitute, impoverished people to whom they were selling indulgences to build St. Peter’s, promising the people that for money their sins would be forgiven ... a history of massive unbelievable wealth at the top, out of the pockets of the destitute and the poor trying to buy their way into heaven.

[Dr. MacArthur says if Jesus was speaking to TBN’s “health, wealth, prosperity” preachers today who get most of their money from older and] single women, desperate for healing, desperate for money ... I say, woe to you who sell your miracle water and your miracle cloths that promise to heal the desperate if they send you their money! Woe to you wealthy self-indulgent preachers who become rich on the backs of the lonely poor, disillusioned, diseased and desperate who are told to give you their money as an act of faith so that God is obligated to make them healthy and wealthy! Woe to you who indulge in ten thousand dollar a night hotel rooms, claim revelations from God, spend 112 thousand dollars a month on your private jet with money taken from the most desperate people! Woe to you, you will not escape judgment! ... This is not true religion, never has been.

Listen to James 1:27, “*This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God, to visit orphans and widows in their distress ...*” True religion does not abuse the poor. It ministers generously, graciously to their needs ... of all the little things that could have been the trigger to set off the destruction of the temple, it was one illustration of an abused widow that our Lord puts on the pages of Scripture. Woe to you who abuse women, widows, the distressed, the downcast, the poor, the sick with your lying promises to get their money.’⁴

Jesus is very serious about true vs. false religion, and we need to be as well.

That may be a change for most of you for how you've understood that passage your whole life. But study it in context, be a Berean, and look at the end of Mark 12 that places the exact same teaching in the exact same context with the exact same point, it seems clear. This has changed my own view and understanding of mercy and how important helpless like widows and orphans are to the Lord – so important He says to religion that mistreats them, basically “because of how you take advantage of widows the whole thing is coming down, your temple won't have one stone left on the other!”

I hope you sense the importance of what James 1:27 says ... and I hope you'll come back tonight to hear the rest of this message ...

¹ Cited by www.preceptaustin.org

² Kent Hughes, *James*.

³ R. C. Sproul, *Before the Face of God: Book Four*

⁴ John MacArthur, “Abusing the Poor,” <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/42-251>