

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Getting Your Hands Dirty

James 1:17-27

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James 1:27, from our reading this morning, is one of those verses that clarifies Christian life. Any sentence that begins like this has to be, right? "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:" When you hear that, you know the speaker is done clearing his throat and is about to say something important.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

So, yeah, just those things. Pure and undefiled. Pure and undefiled draw on the Old Testament language of clean and unclean, things ready to come into God's presence and things that need to be cleansed to come into God's presence. So, religion that is pure and undefiled is a life that can come without pause, confidently and humbly, into the presence of the holy God.

For James, it comes down to what Christians do and what Christians don't do. What do Christians do? They care for orphans and widows. The concern for orphans and widows is front and center in Old Testament ethics. In every culture, the emotional traumas and pain associated with becoming widowed or becoming orphaned is easily imagined. Some of you for sure don't have to imagine it. You've lived it. You're living it. Losing a spouse, losing parents, losing loved ones is at the heart of the hard part of life. In ancient society, there was also a profound social and economic suffering. Orphans and widows were generally the most vulnerable people in your society, along with sojourners in the land. Christians care for orphans and widows. That's what they do.

The word for *care* is sometimes translated *visit*, which I think has the meaning of put your eyeballs on. Personal relationship. Personal interaction. The Christian community is a place of incarnational love. It's one thing to be concerned about the plight of the poor as a category of society and wring your hands about it. It's another thing to care about the suffering of a poor person and to get involved to alleviate their suffering, to minister in their pain. It's another thing still to work to change the systems of society that ensure some people are trapped in cycles of poverty. In our own community, for example, I confess I'm not sorry at all to see that old Oak Motor Lodge motel torn down downtown on 11th Street. I'm glad for it. That place is terrible. Over the years, we've taken some food and some money to people living there who've called asking for help but I've wanted to keep a pretty wide berth. It's just a pitiful situation. I'm not sorry to see it go and see something else rise in its place. Yet, I've been so impressed and humbled by the care and concern that certain members of our community have shown for the current residents of that place. Where will they go? Where will they live? What is the responsibility of the owners of that place and of the city and community to assist those

brothers and sisters, those mamas and children, those orphans and widows to have a place to live? They're on the knife edge of existence already and didn't ask for this. Real world riches and poverty are much the backdrop of our whole lives and the backdrop of the whole book of James from the opening verses.

Incarnational care for the most vulnerable in your community is the difference between hearing the word and then forgetting it and hearing the word and letting it change you. Not being hearers only, but doers of the word.

Be doers of the word, not just hearers, who hear it and then forget it. For James, theology is a verb. In this book, there is a great emphasis on our works as an expression of our faith. Without doing your faith, believing your faith is worthless. Without living your faith, talking about your faith is as useless as a screen door on a submarine.

It is for Jesus, too. How many times do we see Jesus putting eyeballs on the sick, the suffering, the poor, outcasts, lepers? How many times? Not just putting his eyeballs, but reaching out and touching, putting his hands on the heads of lepers, his hands on the eyes of the blind, his hands on the ears of the deaf, talking with foreigners, breaking bread with sinners. He and his disciples spent their days in close company with all kinds of people who were orphans, widows, sojourners, sick, outcasts. In religious language: unclean.

Jesus and his disciples ate with *them*, they travelled with *them*, they listened to *them*. It was hard a lot of times to tell the difference between *they* and *them*. It was as if the lines blurred into nothing, as if Jesus had come to fully identify with the poor, with servants, with those in need, with, it was even whispered, with sinners.

And that gets into what Christians don't do, perhaps.

What Christians do is care for orphans and widows. What they don't do is become stained by the world. What Christians don't do is become stained by the world in which orphans and widows live. Maybe. I guess. As Kurt Kaiser used to say with a smirk, "Lots of luck with that." Lots of luck at being unstained by the world.

It was after one of those line-blurring days that the Pharisees, the religious leaders always keeping a close eye on Jesus, couldn't help but notice that Jesus and his disciples came straight from a day with the poor and huddled masses to the dinner table without properly washing their hands. They didn't properly wash the stank of the masses off their hands. Gross. But theirs wasn't a hygiene complaint. It was a moral complaint. The hands they folded to pray before supper were hands stained with the world of sinners.

The religious question was: Can you pray to holy God with uplifted hands that bear the stains of the world?

Jesus changed the question: Can you pray to holy God with uplifted hands that don't bear the stains of the world?

On one hand we better hope so because, with all due respect to James' comment, no one escapes the stains of the world.

Think of a person who has cultivated a life of extraordinary virtue such that in every aspect of personal behavior he or she is blameless and without sin. You're imagining a saint I suppose, or at least what we think of as a saint, someone who does no wrong. But it doesn't take a person who's even minimally self-reflective to realize that personal, individual behavior over which we have some modicum of daily control is only part of the story.

In the TV show *Ted Lasso*, the soccer player Sam was so proud that he'd been selected to star in advertising campaign for team sponsor Dubai Air lines. Only then did he learn that the parent company of Dubai Air, Cerithium Oil, was negligently and actively destroying the environment of Nigeria, Sam's home country. Awakened to his unknowing participation in this Sam searched his heart and protested, and the team cancelled its sponsorship with the airlines, dramatically putting black tape over the name of the airlines on their jerseys. As is expected in *Ted Lasso* world, all ended on a feel-good note. It wasn't messy enough for real life, but then the whole premise of the show is about an American failed football coach coaching a British professional "futbal" team, so real life isn't much at stake.

But it is at stake in our lives, in all the ways our lives connect with the world through the companies we invest in and how they treat the environment, the universities we support and how they protect girls on campus, the politicians we vote for and what they vote for, the wars the empire wages and how it treats our enemies and allies, the food we eat and how the animals are treated where that food comes from, the clothes we wear and who made them. It's a complete fabrication that any of us are islands who live disconnected from the web of relationships of the world. We may or may not be of the world, but be for sure we are definitely in the world. We're all implicated, if you think about it at all. It's hard to see any way out. And only a very self-righteous, self-unaware person would be pious enough to think they have opted out. So, let's opt to go deeper in.

if we were really serious about living, how does James put it, unstained from the world, we'd have to live in a hole in the ground. It's a messy world. It's messy out there. It's beautiful and awful. It's holy and profane. It's hopeful and terrible. Oh, did I say out there, I meant in here. In here. That's where Jesus points. He said, your religious piety is focused on not getting the stain of the world on your hands. Give me a break. Where you should be looking is inside. Inside you is beautiful and awful, holy and profane, hopeful and terrible. That's true for everyone. It's a messy world full of messy lives. Goodness, we need Jesus.

In Jesus, we see that getting your hands dirty isn't just an unfortunate consequence of living in a fallen world from which we can quarantine into religious community; it's also a calling Christians have in the world—to go on, get in there, do the work, the inner spiritual work of digging deep into your being even knowing there's some stuff in there you don't want to deal with but you know you need to. Do that work. And do the work, the work of incarnational love

in a world that often eludes easy answers and neat solutions. Life is not pretty, and Love is not pretty all the time, but it is always beautiful. It's pretty messy a lot of the time and doesn't fit into neat categories. Love at the wedding altar is pretty. Love at the bedside of the hospital ward is beautiful.

Jesus was not timid to get his hands dirty. And neither are we. If you're going to care for orphans, widows, refugees, or the hurting people around you in your household or in your neighborhood, you're gonna get your hands dirty. If you're going to care about issues of justice and injustice and systems and peacemaking and life building, you're gonna get your hands dirty. If you're going to really care about your own redemption, the cleaning of your own soul, you're gonna get your hands dirty. And if they're not, you haven't even started.

James describes our redemption as receiving the implanted word of the Gospel that saves our souls. The root of implanted is plant. Things that are planted are seeds planted in soil. Anyone who works with seeds planted in soil gets their hands dirty, but that dirt is holy, too. It is the soil from which we all were made by the holy hand of God. It is the stuff of true life, of relationship, of incarnation.

Can you pray to holy God with perfectly clean hands uplifted that don't bear the stains of the world? I don't know. Maybe. Maybe if you're a saint. Maybe you'll tell me that you can do this. I certainly hope as we're able we always move toward holiness in all our lives.

Let us also remember this: After his resurrection, the disciples recognized Jesus by his hands as those hands broke bread and blessed them. The hands Jesus raised in blessing were stained with the dirt of a hurting and broken world being redeemed by his compassionate love and his death. They were stained with the tears of the men and women he healed by his touch. And ultimately, they were pierced with the nails of the world.

My brothers and sisters, it is said that you are the body of Christ. And so those are your hands too.

Amen.

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