

Widows and Orphans (James 1:27)

Context: The letter of James was written to encourage poor Christians who were being mistreated by the rich (1:9-11; 2:5-7; 5:1-6) to persevere in their trials (1:2-4, 8; 5:7-11). In light of their situation, the readers needed to be warned against blaming God for temptation (1:13-18), against quarreling, anger, and negative speech (1:19-21, 26; 3:1-4:12), and against putting their hope in riches (1:9-11; 2:1-26; 4:13-5:6). Instead the readers needed to focus on acquiring wisdom (1:5-8) and obeying the word (1:19-25), which would lead to pure speech rather than anger (1:26; 3:1-4:12), generosity rather than obtaining wealth (1:27-2:26), and perseverance rather than giving up (5:7-11). At the end of chapter 1, James gives a quick summary of what religion that is obedient to the word consists of. First, true religion bridles the tongue (1:26) and second, true religion is generous toward the needy (1:27). He then develops these further throughout the letter as aspects of wisdom and obedience. But as far as generosity is concerned, James condemns the rich for their lack of it and encourages Christians to be generous toward those in need.

Text: [27] Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit widows and orphans in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Observations:

- "Pure and undefiled" is an idiom for absolute purity, as the words say the same thing in a positive ("pure") and negative ("undefiled") way.
- "Before God, the Father" is a way of saying "in God's eyes" (i.e., this is what God himself sees as pure...). Also, it is appropriate that "Father" is used, as James is about to mention the fatherless and husbandless, those without an earthly provider, protector, or helper.
- "To visit... in their affliction" essentially means to help out of hardship by taking care of tangible needs.
- Widows and orphans were two standout categories of persons in the first century who were most often in need. But since these two classes of people range from the eldest in society to the youngest, it is likely that James does not merely think "pure religion" *only* helps these two groups, but would help anyone who is needy (e.g., the poor).
- To care for the needy in society (widows, orphans, the poor, the stranger, etc.) is a common command throughout Scripture (see the following for examples of OT widow/orphan texts: Exodus 22:21-24; Deut 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17-21; 26:12-13; 27:19; Ps 68:5; 94:1-7; Prov 15:25; Isa 1:17, 23; 10:1-3; Jer 7:5-7; 22:1-5; 49:11; Ezek 22:6-7; Hos 14:3; Zech 7:8-10; Mal 3:5). In many of these passages, caring for widows and orphans is associated with "doing justice."
- Purity is often thought of exclusively in terms of performing certain ritualistic activity or keeping away from certain behaviors, but here James combines personal holiness ("keeping oneself unstained from the world") with social activism ("visiting widows and orphans") in the concept of religious purity.
- In the context of James, caring for the needy must involve liberal generosity.

Main point(s): If our religiousness does not include caring for the needy among us then we are not really religious at all. And/or if we are not caring for the needy then we are not really pure.

Application to the abortion issue:

- Abortion attacks the most helpless and vulnerable in our society, unborn children.
- If pure religion consists in actively caring for the needy and helpless among us, then we have a responsibility to care both for those vulnerable to abortion and needy woman who are pregnant.
- Preceding James 1:27 Christians are told not merely to be hearers of the word, but doers (1:22). It is not enough to merely hear and agree that abortion is a great injustice, we must also do something

about it.

- We can actively care for abortion-vulnerable children and their mothers by educating people about abortion, by generously providing resources to help women care for their babies both inside and outside the womb, by generously giving to pro-life ministries, by lovingly and compassionately persuading woman to opt against abortion, and by adopting children who are “unwanted.”