

Be Chosen: A Child Sponsorship Project

Pure Religion (James 1:26-27)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on December 4, 2022

Introduction

- ❖ Last week, we kicked off our *Chosen* project. We're partnering with World Vision to promote child sponsorship. We want to give you the opportunity to pair with a child across the globe. A child you can bless with both financial support and relational connection.
 - We're serving the Muong people of Northwest Viet Nam. They're an ethnic minority group located in an impoverished, mountainous region of Viet Nam. **Last week, we explained how World Vision has taken the longstanding ministry of child sponsorship and turned it on its head.** They recognized that these children live such disenfranchised lives where they lack power and privilege. They're not accustomed to making choices for themselves. Decisions are always being made for them.

- ❖ So World Vision had this brilliant idea. What if – instead of sponsors always having the power to choose the child – **what if we gave up our right to choose and put that power in the hands of the child?** What if the child chose the sponsor? How would that change the dynamic? What would that do for the child?
 - **On one level, it would go a long way in restoring dignity to that child.** Giving them this power to choose may seem like a small thing to us. But to a child in that context, this simple choice can be a life-changing choice.

- ❖ **But, last week, we talked a lot about how this new approach affords a new opportunity for us to demonstrate the gracious love of God.** We looked at Ephesians 1 and how it says God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Before we even existed. Which is meant to stress the grace he showed in choosing us. He didn't choose to enter into relationship with us because we deserve it – because we're worth it.
 - **No, he chose us without consideration of any qualities in us.** If you're a Christian, the reason why you're in a relationship with God is because he made a choice, before the world began, to love you. He loves you because he loves you.

- ❖ **And now, as a chosen child of God, you have a chance to choose to love a sponsor child without consideration of any quality in that child.** It's not because you saw a photo of a kid that looked so cute. It's not because she reminds you of your niece. It's obviously not – because you're not even picking the child. The child is picking you.
 - But that doesn't mean you don't have any choice to make. You still have to choose to get involved in the first place – to begin a sponsoring relationship. But do you see? **Now your choice to enter into a sponsoring relationship can be based solely on grace – just like the gracious, sovereign love of God.** That's what's so fascinating about being the one who is chosen by a child.

- ❖ Now, today, I want to continue our emphasis on this project because you still have time to make a choice to get involved. **So I want to talk about how ministries of compassion like child sponsorship – they're natural extensions of true religion.** These type of ministries can be (and should be) found wherever you find a congregation of religious people.

- ❖ Now I know some people don't like calling Christianity a religion. **They'll say Christianity is not a religion. It's a relationship.** Religion sounds stiff and stodgy. They want to distinguish a superficial approach to faith – where you go through the motions of religion – from a real faith that brings you into real relationship with God.
- ❖ **But I think we have to be careful *not* to treat religion as a byword, as a pejorative, as something negative.** Because Christianity is described as a religion in our text. When James speaks of religion – of pure religion – he doesn't have in mind a superficial conformity to ritualistic practices. He has in mind a renovation of the heart that manifests itself outwardly.
 - **Just as a good tree naturally produces good fruit, pure religion supernaturally produces good fruit in your life.** James has three fruits in mind. It's not an exhaustive list. He's not saying this is all that true religion produces in a person. But any religion that fails to produce, at least, these three fruits would be highly suspect.
- ❖ So in this message, I want us to, first, think about what a truly religious person looks like. Let's consider what pure religion produces in you individually. And then, second, let's consider what pure religion looks like among us corporately as a church. And we'll put greater emphasis on the fruit of pure religion that specifically relates to our *Chosen* project.

What Pure Religion Produces in You

- ❖ So let's consider what pure religion produces in you individually. If you're a true Christian who's been genuinely converted by God – if you're a good tree – then what good fruit will you inevitably produce? **James identifies three in particular: (1) Control over the tongue, (2) a concern for holiness, and (3) a care for the helpless.** Look at vv26-27, “*26If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*”
- ❖ The first fruit James mentions is **control over your tongue**. **If anyone thinks he's religious, then he should be able to bridle his tongue – to keep a tight reign on it.** The image of a bridle is a metaphor for control. You use a bridle to control a horse. Wherever you turn the bridle, the rest of the horse follows. **James's point is that if your religion is the real thing, then your faith will manifest itself in the exercise of self-control over your speech.**
 - So if you can't control your speech – if you show no restraint – then you're probably deceiving yourself to think you have true religion. And whatever you do have is worthless. “*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.*”
- ❖ **Friends, the worse kind of deception is self-deception.** It hurts to have a friend deceive you or to have a spouse or child lie to you. But at least, in those situations, you have a chance to confront the deception and get at the truth. But if you end up deceiving yourself – and if you're successful at convincing others – then you're really in trouble. You can't confront the deception that you don't see. You might get stuck in a self-constructed web of lies.

- But that’s why a verse like James 1:26 is so helpful. Because it helps you cut through that web of self-deception. **It offers a real test that you can apply through a self-examination of your own heart.**

- ❖ **Now I think it’ll help to clarify what kind of speech James wants us to restrain.** He elaborates in chapter 3:1-12. He has in mind, at least, false teaching (3:1) and cursing (3:9). By cursing, he’s not referring to cuss words but to sinfully wishing harm on someone out of spite. Wishing God to damn that person or at least to make their life a living hell.
 - In chapter 4:11, James says not to speak evil against one another. Not to slander others. Hold back your tongue. **A bridled and tamed tongue is able to restrain itself from spewing forth hurtful words, corrupting talk, or filthy speech.**

- ❖ We often assume that the true test of faith is your ability to speak. To preach a sermon; to teach the Bible; to give the right answers; to explain the gospel. **But here it says that the true test of faith is not your ability to speak but your ability to *not* speak.** To hold back. To restrain yourself. To reign in your tongue from speech that’s intended to cut people down rather than build them up. A faith that does that is a religion worth having.

- ❖ That’s the first fruit mentioned. The second is in v27. It’s **a concern for holiness.** *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction [we’ll consider that as a third fruit], and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”*
 - **The second fruit of pure and undefiled religion is the desire and ability to keep yourself unstained from the world.** You avoid worldliness because you’re concerned for holiness. This is about your inner life – your heart.
 - And the heart matters so much because as Jesus said, *“For out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.”* (Mt 12:33-34) So if you’re concerned with your speech – with bridling your tongue – then Jesus says you should be even more concerned with your heart and what it’s being exposed to.

- ❖ James goes on to warn, in chapter 4:4, that *“friendship with the world is enmity with God. . . Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”* By the ‘world’, he’s referring to all the forces in this fallen world that stand in opposition to God.
 - **You see, pure religion is not just about what you say or what you do – but fundamentally about who you are on the inside.** Which is why we’re exhorted throughout Scripture to be watchful of what’s shaping our inner life. And James is warning us of the various corrupting influences in this world. **If we’re not careful, the things of this world will contaminate our hearts.**

- ❖ If you consume social media all day, you’ll fill your heart with greater anxiety or self-image issues. If you saturate yourself in today’s political discourse, your heart will likely be filled with anger or despair. If you continue imbibing depraved entertainment or exposing yourself to pornography or any sexually immoral content, your heart will be polluted and stained. Don’t be naive to think it won’t affect you. Just a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

- ❖ **I hope it's obvious how important it is that we keep ourselves unstained from the world.** Think about it this way. Many of you are doctors. And the rest of us have watched doctors on TV. So we've seen surgeons diligently scrubbing their hands clean before entering the OR. They wouldn't dare operate with dirty hands. There's too much on the line.
 - **So why would a Christian dare to serve the Lord with a dirty heart?** Especially knowing that – when we serve each other or disciple each other – we're dealing with human souls. We must not be indifferent to the state of our hearts.

- ❖ Friends, I know it can be devastating to think about what our hearts have been exposed to. Which is why we should be all the more thankful for the gospel! Thank God for the cleansing blood of Christ. It is so hard to keep our hearts unstained from the world. **If it were not for the forgiveness that freely flows from the cross of Christ, we would be hopeless and helpless, awash in our sin.** So take heart in knowing that if you have faith in Christ – then by the grace of God and the power of his indwelling Spirit – you will develop a growing concern for holiness. That's an inevitable fruit of pure religion.

- ❖ But now let's consider the third fruit: **A care for the helpless** – a compassionate desire to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. Now the reason why James specifies orphans and widows is because, in his day, **orphans and widows were the epitome of the helpless.** There was no better example.
 - Orphans and widows lived in such affliction because there were no independent career opportunities for women in those days. There were no orphanages or state agencies available to help the fatherless. **So if you were a woman or a child in James's day – who had lost her husband or lost their father – you didn't just lose a loved one, you lost your sole source of economic provision.** You now have no means of procuring the most basic of needs. Your only hope is for extended family to take you in – or the family of God, the church.

- ❖ The first-century church provided a social safety net to catch those falling through the cracks. **Those whom society would typically treat as burdens and liabilities, the church treated as blessings and as image bearers of God to be given dignity and support.**
 - These early Christians stood out compared to their contemporaries, but they stood in unity with the OT people of God – in a long tradition of showing compassion to the helpless. In **Exodus 22:22**, the Lord commanded Israel saying, *“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.”* That was important to him because, in **Psalms 68:5**, God describes himself as a *“Father of the fatherless and protector of widows.”*

- ❖ In **Isaiah 1:10-17**, the Lord tells his people that he will no longer accept their worship until they, *“seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.”* So the right worship of the Lord is intimately connected with the right attitude and right actions directed towards the helpless in our world.

- ❖ **James 2:14-17** goes on to say faith without good works is no faith at all. It's dead. *"¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."*
- ❖ **Church, one clear test of pure religion is the degree to which we care for the helpless in our world.** And going beyond thoughts and prayers to extending tangible aid, whether it be our money, our time, our energy. **Is there some pattern or practice in your life that reflects a heart for the helpless?** It could be for widows and orphans; or the refugee family trying to adjust to a new life; or the elderly woman isolated in a care home; or the desperate mother facing an unplanned pregnancy; or the unborn child defenseless in the womb; or the homeless beggar on the side of the street; or the impoverished child in a third-world village.
 - Who we're helping can vary among us. **But what should be in common, for those who have pure religion, is a common care for the helpless. A care that goes beyond words to manifest itself in right actions, in good works.** Otherwise, that faith we claim to have might be a dead faith that cannot save.
 - The gospel is clear that no one is saved by good works (Eph 2:8-9). **We're saved by faith alone in Christ alone – but not by a faith that remains alone.** Saving faith is always accompanied by good works. Pure religion will inevitably produce good fruit in us individually.

What Pure Religion Looks Like Among Us

- ❖ So now let's consider what pure religion looks like among us corporately. A fruitful tree is a beautiful sight. But what would a fruitful orchard look like? What would it be characterized by? Let's go back to these three fruits and consider what they look like when they ripen and blossom among a body of believers.
 - **First, you'll see a community characterized by constructive speech.** Where believers are known for their edifying speech. The word 'edify' originally meant to construct a building. That's why an 'edifice' is another word for a large building. **Edifying speech is speech that seeks – not to tear people down – but to build them up.** To encourage them. To strengthen them.
 - But let's be careful. It's good to want to be constructive and not destructive. But if, at the same time, you struggle with a desire to people please, then you'll probably be hesitant to speak hard truths that a person might not want to hear (but needs to hear for their own good). **In other words, you'll encourage people but you won't correct them.**
- ❖ But I'm sure you've heard of *constructive criticism*. **Edifying speech is broader than just words of encouragement. It also includes words of correction that aim at helping others to either repent before God or to repair relationships with others.** That bridle – that pure religion puts over our tongues – is often meant to turn you away from saying what you shouldn't say (that your flesh wants to say).

- ❖ **But there are times when that bridle is meant to turn you *towards* saying something you know you should say (but your flesh doesn't want because you fear man).** You know yourself best. You know if encouragement comes natural. If that's you, then you'll need to be more intentional to turn that bridle towards correction and to pray for courage to speak up.
 - But for others, you've got no problem correcting people. Criticism comes natural. So you'll need to turn that bridle in the opposite direction to speak more words of encouragement or simply hold your tongue altogether. Either way, pure religion is going to result in controlled and constructive speech or else it's worthless.

- ❖ **Second, when pure religion takes root among us, you'll see a compelling witness.** The holiness that sets the church apart from the world can, at the same time, reveal a compelling witness that gets the world's attention. My point is – our concern for holiness is not just a personal concern. It should be motivated by a concern for the world.
 - As James said, we're not seeking friendship with the world (4:4). But we *are* seeking to change the world with the good news of Jesus Christ! Now it's our common assumption that our gospel proclamation, as the church, takes the form of speaking truth. **What I think we tend to overlook is how the gospel is proclaimed – not just through the church's truth – but its truth, goodness, and beauty.**

- ❖ We know the preached Word is powerful and effective. But we tend to understate the power of our moral goodness expressed in our Christian character and the staggering beauty of a Christian community that manifests gospel unity in the midst of diversity.
 - When seekers hear the *truth* of the gospel explained; and encounter the *goodness* of a life transformed by the gospel; and see the *beauty* of a gospel community unified in love – they are confronted with a compelling witness to the truth, goodness, and beauty of Christ our Savior.

- ❖ **Lastly, when pure religion has gripped a church, you'll see beautiful displays of compassionate service.** A genuine concern for the helpless never stays theoretical. It always gets translated into sacrificial acts of compassion on behalf of the poor and needy.
 - **And that's how a church adorns the gospel. Through our good works of compassionate service.** Think of the gospel as a big beautiful diamond. Even as a loose diamond, sitting on the counter, the gospel shines with stunning brilliance. But imagine if we adorned it. **Our good works are like the studded ring that huge diamond of the gospel is set on.** Or picture our acts of compassion as the gem-encrusted necklace that the gospel hangs from.

- ❖ **Our good works are clearly not as central, and pale in comparison, to the gospel work of Christ in his life, death, and resurrection.** But they certainly can adorn his gospel. And, friends, that's how we're approaching both this *Chosen* project and our ongoing building project that has an eye towards blessing and serving our community with newly expanded and renovated facilities.

- ❖ Let's be clear: **Sponsoring a child or making a pledge to our building project are not gospel works.** They pale in comparison to preaching the gospel and making disciples. **But that doesn't mean they're not important or that they can't play an important role in adoring our gospel work as a church.** So that's why we've organized these projects and we're commending them to you today.