



"There are no traffic jams along the extra mile."
—Roger Staubach

06-Dec-19

The Widow and the Fatherless (Part One)

History knows the apostle James, half-brother of [Jesus Christ](#), as a humble man. After Christ's death and resurrection, he oversaw the headquarters church in Jerusalem. In his epistle, he is quite clear about how God's way of life should be lived. About thirty years after [the crucifixion](#), he corrects some of the abuses of justification by [faith](#), writing that "faith without works is dead" ([James 2:17](#), 26). He is so unambiguous on this that, centuries later, Martin Luther tried to have the book of James removed from the biblical canon, famously describing it as "an epistle of straw" because of James' insistence on law and works—not what Luther wanted to hear.

The book of James contains a balanced approach to Christian life. The apostle's advice is wise and practical. He writes about how to handle trials, express humility, be patient, and live obediently. He tells us not to [gossip](#). He encourages us to persevere and instructs us on many other subjects. How can a Christian go wrong if he follows such [wisdom](#)?

Unlike Luther's claim, James does not dismiss faith, not at all. He writes in [James 2:24](#), "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." The two halves make a whole, the physical and the spiritual.

We can sum up this epistle with one verse, [James 1:27](#): "Pure and undefiled religion before [God](#) and the Father is this: to [visit orphans and widows in their trouble](#), and to keep oneself unspotted from [the world](#)." We must change our lives when we come out of [sin](#). We must both serve God and man through acts of [kindness](#) as well as remove the spots, the blemishes, from our character, those things that only we and God know about. It is balanced instruction.

The Greek words translated as "pure religion" mean "worship free from everything false." It speaks of a sincere and genuine way of life, unencumbered with hypocritical seeking after glory or praise. Our response to God's involvement in our lives is between Him and us. We are not to make a show of our efforts, as many Pharisees did, but diligently plod forward, doing good where we can without fanfare. We are to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" ([James 1:22](#)).

James grew up watching his Elder Brother and His interactions with others, especially family members, co-workers, and the poor and downtrodden. Jesus kept God's law, but He also *lived* it! As He says in [Luke 22:27](#), He came as a servant. He "went about doing good" ([Acts 10:38](#)).

We often take what James says about the widow and the fatherless as a generality, an admonition for treating everyone fairly. We are to show kindness to all, but he singles out those weaker ones for special attention. What James tells us here is not new; it was so from the beginning. Deuteronomy 10 contains Moses' recounting of how he received the second pair of tablets (verses 1-11). The rest of the chapter deals with what that law is all about:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to [love](#) Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it. The LORD delighted only in your fathers, to love them; and He chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as it is this day. Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be

stiff-necked no longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name. ([Deuteronomy 10:12-20](#))

So, what is the essence of the law? We can distill it into two parts:

1. "Fear the LORD" (verses 12, 20), "keep the commandments" (verse 13), and recognize that the One who owns everything has blessed us with His calling (verses 14-15). Moses' bookending these verses with "fear the LORD" suggests that this command encompasses the spiritual part of our lives. God requires that we "fear the LORD . . . walk in all His ways . . . love Him, [and] serve [Him] with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul." He pretty much lays it all out right there! In verse 20, he again admonishes us to "fear the LORD . . . serve Him, [and] hold fast." Martin Luther would be upset at [Moses](#) too!
2. "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer" and follow His example in dealing with the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger (verses 16-19). This is precisely what the apostle James tells us in [James 1:27](#), just in reverse order.

What does Moses mean by this? Perhaps we can get a better sense of it if we see verse 16 in the *Contemporary English Version*: "Remember your agreement with the LORD and stop being so stubborn." We made a covenant with God at [baptism](#), agreeing to yield to Him, to His will, to His way of living. Yet, as the apostle Paul says, we are the "foolish" and "weak" of this world ([1 Corinthians 1:27](#)), so we tend to forget this. Our pride swells, and we think more of ourselves than we ought.

After cautioning us about this human tendency, Moses shares how we might avoid it. In [Deuteronomy 10:17](#), he reminds us of God's magnificence: The God we serve is "God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome," not one of the puny gods of this world. Our God shows no

partiality, calling us from all walks of life, from all nations and races. He is no respecter of persons but accepts those who fear and obey Him (see [Acts 10:34-35](#)).

Notice how the *Good News Bible* translates [Deuteronomy 10:18](#): "He makes sure that orphans and widows are treated fairly; he loves the foreigners who live with our people, and gives them food and clothes." Is this not what James writes in [James 1:27](#)? Can we do any less?

Spiritually, we cannot afford to be puffed up and vain because God has called and chosen us. Instead, we are to serve with humility, not just the widows and fatherless among us, but also "strangers." We should not leave our families and rush off to help far off victims of earthquakes and hurricanes, although that can be a fine thing to do, but rather, we should be doing what we can, within our means. It may be "only" to pray. Maybe we can help by cleaning the gutters on the home of a widow. If we can manage it, perhaps we can give a financial gift. We do not need to give extravagantly. We just need to provide aid where we see a genuine need.

Next time, we will consider how the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah echoed James' instruction regarding widows and orphans.

- Mike Ford

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Life Is Service \(Part One\)](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The substitutes for religion, such as money, power, fame, success, etc., cannot answer real life questions (e.g., Why am I here? Is there life after death? Is there a God?). Most of the world's inhabitants end their lives in despair, chaos, and stress, with no hope at the end of life's journey. People want false immortality, being remembered in politics, charity, science, or art, with a name chiseled on a piece of granite. The entire world is still laboring under Adam's curse, leading lives of quiet desperation, resignation, and

despair. When God calls us, it is a light out of the darkness, rescuing us from bondage to sin and transferring us to servants of righteousness, the most satisfying job description ever created. Christ called us to bear fruit; our fruit is evidence that we serve Him. We must live in such a way that we please God, remaining free from sin, producing fruit, and offering our reasonable service. Though the American mindset does not feel inclined to serve, outgoing service to others yields the maximum joy and fulfillment one can possibly attain. Jesus Christ was God the Father's Servant; Abraham, Jacob, and Moses were all servants of Christ. The angels who watch over us do so in a spirit of satisfaction and fulfillment. We should approach our God-given responsibilities by realizing that there is no higher calling than that of a servant.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Servant Leadership: Practical Meekness](#)

by David F. Maas

Much has been said and written about leadership in the church in the past several years. David Maas writes that godly leadership is an outworking of the virtue of meekness.

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