

The Widow And The Fatherless

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The apostle James, brother of Jesus Christ, was known as a humble man. After Christ's death and resurrection, he oversaw the church in Jerusalem, the headquarters church, you might say. In his epistle, he is very clear about this way of life. Written about thirty years after the crucifixion, James corrects some of the abuses of justification by faith. He says, "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:17 and 26) He is so clear on this that centuries later, Martin Luther tried to have the book of James removed from the biblical canon. He famously described it as an epistle of straw because James speaks of law *and* works. This is not what Martin Luther wanted to hear.

I rather think the book of James is a very balanced approach to Christian life. The advice is wise and practical. How to handle trials, have humility, be obedient, do not gossip, be patient, persevere, and so on. How can you go wrong if you follow this wisdom? James does not dismiss faith either. He says in James 2:24, "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." The two halves make a whole—the physical and the spiritual.

Let us 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 via acts of kindness, and also remove the spots from our character, those things that only we and God know about. It is a very balanced admonition.

The Greek words translated pure religion mean, "Worship free from everything else. It is sincere and genuine, not seeking glory or praise." It is between you and God. We are not making a show of our efforts as the

Pharisees, but diligently plodding forward, doing good where we can without fanfare. As James says in chapter 1, verse 22, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only."

James was able to grow up watching his older brother: how He interacted with others, His family, His co-workers, the poor, the downtrodden. Christ kept the law, but He also *lived* it. As Christ said in Luke 22:27, He came as a servant.

Now we usually think of what James says about the widows and the fatherless as something of a generality, an admonition for treating everyone fairly, and there is nothing wrong with that. We are to show kindness to all. But he does single out those weaker ones for special attention. What James tells us here is nothing new. It was so from the beginning. Go back to Deuteronomy 10. Moses starts off in the first eleven verses, recounting how he received the second pair of tablets. Now let us go to verse 12 and we will go down to verse 20. My New King James has this heading for the rest of this section: "The Essence of the Law."

Deuteronomy 10:12-20 "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, to love Him, and 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 this day 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 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."

So what exactly is this essence of the law? Well, we can distill it down into two parts. First of all, fear of the Lord, verses 12 and 20; keeping His commandments, verse 13; recognizing that everything belongs to Him and He has blessed us with His calling, verses 14-15.

Moses bookends these verses with "fear of the Lord." So I think this encompasses the spiritual part of our lives. He asked in verse 12, "What does the Lord your God require of you?" And then he answers, "Fear the Lord." "Walk in all His ways." "Love Him." "Serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." That is a powerful verse right there. In verse 20 he admonishes us to fear the Lord your God, serve Him, and hold fast. Seems like Martin Luther would be upset at Moses as well.

We are to be obedient to God but along with that, secondly, we are to "circumcise the foreskin of your heart, be stiff-necked no longer," and follow His example in regards to the fatherless and the widow and the stranger. That is verses 16-19. This is exactly what the apostle James told us in James 1:27, it is just in reverse order.

What does Moses mean by circumcise the foreskin of your heart and be stiff-necked no more? Well, now we get into the physical aspects of this life. Let me read verse 16 from the *Contemporary English Version*.

Deuteronomy 10:16 (CEV) Remember your agreement with the Lord and stop being so stubborn.

We made a covenant with God at baptism. We agreed to yield to Him, to His will, to this way of life. We know we are the foolish and weak of the world. That is in I Corinthians 1:27. But we forget this sometimes. Our pride swells. We think more of ourselves than we ought. After admonishing us in this, Moses shares how we are to do this. In verse 17, he lays out the magnificence of God, "He is God of gods, Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome." This is who we serve, not the puny gods of this world. And this mighty and awesome God shows no partiality. In other words, He has called us from all walks of life, from all nations, all races. Those that fear and obey are acceptable to Him. He is not a respecter of persons, as Peter phrased it in Acts 10:34, and he is quoting this verse.

Deuteronomy 10:18 (GNB) 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 said in James 1:27? Should we do any less? We cannot afford to be puffed up and vain. Stiff-necked, as Moses said. But we have been called and chosen. It is not just the widows and fatherless among us, we are to have compassion on strangers as well. Now I am not advocating that we leave our families and rush off to help victims of earthquakes and hurricanes around the world, although that is a fine thing. But rather, doing what we can, whatever is reasonable. That might be only prayer. It might be going to the home of a widow, cleaning the gutters on her house. It could be a financial gift if you can manage it, and I do not want to get off subject here, but third tithe does come to mind. God put a program into effect to care for those in need.

The mindset of people today is the government has become god. What can we get from our government? Well, let us see, food, housing, medical care, phones, and now, in some places, guaranteed income! The apostle Paul said in II Thessalonians 3:10, if a man does not work, he should not eat. Why is socialism rising in popularity? It promises something for nothing. No effort on your part? Not a problem. We will take care of you. The opposite of what God is saying.

Now God stresses the widows and the fatherless, the weakest among us, the stranger in our midst. Those that are able to work, of course, should do so. But sometimes circumstances are such—illness, infirmities of one sort or another, the death of a loved one can throw you for a loop. Whatever put you in a bind, then a Christian is to help.

Psalms 68:5 A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation.

Jeremiah 49:11 Leave your fatherless children, I will preserve them alive; and let your widows trust in Me.

God Himself looks out for the rights of the widows and the fatherless.

This emphasis on the widows does not diminish the role of women and mothers at all. God is once again letting us know that everyone has a role to play. We all have positions to fill. We all have God- given responsibilities. Satan has been very successful at removing men from the lives of their families. We see the end result of this all around us.

Let us go to Jeremiah 7. I want to read the first eleven verses, but before I do, I want to read some background on this section of Jeremiah from *Barnes' Notes*.

In Jeremiah chapters 7 through 10, he addresses the people as they flocked into Jerusalem from the country to attend the solemn services in the temple upon a fast day. Jehoiachim had just ascended the throne and was so incensed at this sermon that he would have put Jeremiah to death but for the influence of Ahaikim. With the accession of Jehoiachim, all hope of averting the ruin of the country had passed away. He represented the reverse of his father's policy [His father was Josiah, one of the best kings Judah ever had.] and belonged to that faction who placed their sole hope of deliverance in a close alliance with Pharaoh Neco. [That would be of Egypt. And that would be basically aligning with the world.] As this party rejected the distinctive principles of the theocracy and the king was personally an irreligious man, the maintenance of the worship of Yahweh was no longer an object of the public care. At this time, upon a public fast day appointed probably because of the calamities under which the nation was laboring, Jeremiah was commanded by Yahweh to stand at the gate of the temple and address the people as they entered words of solemn warning. The whole sermon divides itself into three parts. Part number one is Jeremiah 7:2—8:3. It points out the folly of the superstitious confidence placed by the people in the temple while they neglect the sole sure foundation of a nation's hope. A sanctuary long polluted by immorality must inevitably be destroyed. Second part, Jeremiah 8:4—9:24. Complaints follow of a more general character in which the growing wickedness of the nation, and especially of

the leaders, is pointed out. And then part three, Jeremiah 9:25—10:25. Lastly, the prophet shows the possibility of averting the evils impending upon the nation.

With that in mind, let us now go to Jeremiah 7, the first eleven verses. I am going to read this from the *Contemporary English Version*. It really paints a clear picture. You might want to just listen and keep in mind while I am reading this, this is God speaking through His prophet to His people.

Jeremiah 7:1-11 (CEV) The Lord told me to stand by the gate of the temple and tell the people who are going in that the Lord All-Powerful, the God of Israel, had said: Pay attention, people of Judah! Change your ways and start living right, then I will let you keep on living in your own country. Don't fool yourselves! My temple is here in Jerusalem, but that doesn't mean I will protect you. I will keep you safe only if you change your ways and are fair and honest with each other. Stop taking advantage of foreigners, orphans, and widows. Don't kill innocent people. And stop worshipping other gods. Then I will let you enjoy a long life in this land I gave your ancestors. But just look at what is happening! You put your trust in worthless lies. You steal and murder; you lie in court and are unfaithful in marriage. You worship idols and offer incense to Baal, when those gods have never done anything for you. And then you come into my temple and worship me! Do you think I will protect you so that you can go on sinning? You are thieves, and you have made my temple your hideout. But I've seen everything you have done.

Very powerful. Jeremiah continues in this vein, listing the sins of the nation and then in the latter part of chapter 10, he condemns the leadership. You can see why the new king, Jehoiachin, was so upset with him.

Let us go back and look at verse 5. Jeremiah tells the people God will keep them safe *if* they change their ways. That would be specifically verse 6: Stop taking advantage of foreigners, orphans, and widows. Right after that, they are admonished to not kill, or worship other gods. And if they do these

things, they will live and enjoy a long life in that land. Looking out for the widows and the fatherless, taking care of strangers in the land comes in ahead of murder.

Now, as I mentioned a little earlier, God protects the weak. He looks out for them. You might say He is partial to them. Again, He set up the third tithe for these people. It is not that different than James 1:27. I will read that one again.

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.

James does not specifically mention the stranger and the foreigner but Moses and Jeremiah did. We are to be hospitable to those we do not know because we were once strangers in a foreign land, as Moses put it. We were once in the world before our calling. The Parable of the Good Samaritan comes to mind in this regard. I am not really going to go into it, but it brings to mind a story my grandkids are always asking me. Grandpa, tell us a story about when you were little. Alright, kids, listen up. Here is the story.

When I was between the ages of 6 and 12, my mom began to listen to the broadcast, and one of the first things she learned was clean and unclean. I do not know why, that is just the way it went. All I know is that out of the blue, breakfast ham, sausage, and bacon disappeared. My dad, born on a farm in the South, he did not know what to do without a couple of pounds of pig in him each morning. He was just left with coffee and cigarettes. But my mom began to search for the church, and so she began to take us a little five ducklings around, and again in the South, every corner had a Baptist church, and we seemed to visit them all over a period of about six years. If I heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan in a sermon once, I heard it 100 times. That is a favorite. That is the go-to parable of all Baptist churches. And the irony of it is, of course, they preach the "all grace/no works," but then they stressed the Good Samaritan.

It does not make the parable any less relevant. I am not going to go into it here. I will say it is a great instructor on how to treat our fellow man.

Jeremiah says, "Stop taking advantage of foreigners, orphans, and widows," followed by, "Don't kill innocent people and stop worshipping other gods." Quite close to what the apostle James calls pure religion. Jeremiah goes on to spell out specific sins they were committing, such as stealing, lying, adultery, idol, worship, and so on while putting on a false front. Attending church as if that is all that is needed. That is interesting to me. How we treat a stranger or those in need is at the top of the list in character traits God is looking for.

Let us go now to Isaiah, chapter 1, and we will see yet another prophet God uses to tell us something very, very similar. We learn in verse 1 that God has spoken to Isaiah in a vision. In verse 2, God is upset that His children have forsaken Him. They rebelled against Him. This is physical as well as spiritual. Now these are the nations of Israel as well as the church of God. Judgment is coming, God tells Isaiah, speaking specifically to Judah here, but as with most of the Bible, I think it is really for us today.

Isaiah 1:4 "Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward."

In verse 5, He says the "whole head is sick," again condemning the leadership. In verse 7, "your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire." In verse 10, "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom," again bringing in the leaders. The next few verses, I am not going to read them, but we see there that the people, which you can read as 'the church,' are going to services. They are keeping the holy days. They are keeping the Sabbath. They are offering sacrifices. And yet, verse 15,

Isaiah 1:15 "When you spread out your hands [meaning to pray], I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood."

God does not hear their prayers. They are full of sin. Their hands are full of blood. Abortion comes to mind, to me, reading this.

In these first fifteen verses, God inspires Isaiah to rail against Israel, verse 3, Judah, and by extension, the church. Our rebellion, our sins, our trampling of His laws, Sabbaths, and holy days, our murders. He says He is weary of it; that He will hide His eyes from us. In verse 16, Isaiah tells us what we need to do to make this right.

Isaiah 1:16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil."

Now that is Part 1. Very much the same as James telling us to keep unspotted from the world or Jeremiah saying, Pay attention, people of Judah, change your ways and start living right. Obedience to the Word of God, Part 1. That is how we do this. How do we do this, Part 2, is in verse 17.

Isaiah 1:17 "Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."

A better translation of that first part, rather than rebuke the oppressor, would be to "help the oppressed, those in need." Again, it is very interesting that we have the first fifteen verses of Isaiah 1 filled with a laundry list of sins and then two very simple verses on how to correct this: Put away the evil, stop sinning, start doing right. And the doing right encapsulates all of God's laws. But it is distilled down to helping the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow. Really dovetails well with how the Ten Commandments are divided into two parts. The first four dealing with our relationships and dealings with God. The last six with our interaction with man.

In verse 18, he tells us that,

Isaiah 1:18 "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

In other words, we can be forgiven.

Verses 19 and 20 give us the bottom line.

Isaiah 1:19-20 "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword"; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

The *Good News Bible* translates verse 20, "But if you defy me, you are doomed to die. I have the Lord have spoken."

So how do we do this? How do we balance obedience and service? Many mornings of my life have been spent merging from I-20 onto the downtown connector here in Atlanta, just inching along. And almost every morning I see the same man standing on the shoulder with a cardboard sign. (Cody, Cliff, you have seen him.) I have given him money more than once, mainly because I admire his work ethic. He is on the job. He is out there. Do I consider this fulfilling James 1:27? No, not really. I do not know anything about this guy. He is a stranger, yes, but for all I know, he drives to work in a Mercedes and parks it behind the bushes.

I would like to talk just a little bit about some more tangible ways to help the widow, the fatherless, the stranger, and by extension, of course, everyone. These things I am going to mention are basic. They would be helpful for anyone. But do keep in mind what I am keying in on here. In these points, I think there are five of them, I will offer a general thought, followed by something a little more specific. In no particular order:

1. Pray.

It is very simple. I would suggest, and I am sure most of you already do this, that we use the prayer request page on the church's website as a source list, a foundational building block of your prayer list. But of course, that would not be your only source. Each of us know others that need help. We know of problems, big and small, that we should bring before God to seek His help, His guidance, and His relief.

Every so often I have to redo my prayer list. It will have so much white-out or correcting tape on it that I cannot read parts of it. When a prayer is answered and sometimes that might be through death, I use this correcting tape and I blot it out, and then I add a new name. Sometimes when I write a new list, I have to remove a name. I hate to do that, but you know, many times we do not ever get an update on a prayer request, and I do not know what has happened to that person. I, like many of you, have probably prayed for people for years that may already have been dead. I just do not know. (So as an aside, if you do send in a prayer request, please follow it up with letting us know what happened.)

However, specifically the day-to-day difficulties of the widows and the fatherless, many times do not go out as a prayer request. You might need to look a little deeper. Not that we are prying, but more that we have our eyes open, that we are looking. Is the single mom and her kids always running very close to the edge financially? Is the widow fighting loneliness? Can you include them in your plans at the feast for dinner or for an outing? Well, of course you can. And of course we do. Just to be aware of it.

2. Encourage.

This might take the form of a call, a note, an email. Let the person know you are aware and you are available to help. The ability to help might be financially, it might not. If you can give a money gift, and it is doable, and you know the person's situation, and it is legitimate, by all means. But maybe your ability to help is more sending out a card. We all know people that dutifully send out cards. It is always a pleasure to get one. It is always a pleasure to open up your email and see a note from someone letting you know they care—if people still email. More specifically, do not be too quick to tell someone how "I've been in a similar situation." Unless they ask, and the more you deal with them it will come out in time, knowing you have had the same problem or a similar problem does not really do much to solve their problem. Everyone's situation is special to them. It is not 100% like anyone else's. Knowing that another child grew up without a father in the home does not necessarily help this one growing up in a similar situation. But as I say, as time goes on, as you help people, these things will come out. You do not have to start off with that.

3. Physical help.

In another century, another lifetime, while in the Worldwide Church of God, I was put in charge of a group of men that were tasked with helping widows to move. The Atlanta church at the time was very large, and we had a lot of single mothers. They were constantly, it seemed to me, changing homes or apartments. My job was to round up "volunteers" to go out on Sundays with our pickup trucks to move these families. For the most part, it was fine. There were times that our efforts were not appreciated. There were times they were abused, but it was a way to serve. It is not that easy to do that now that the church is in a scattered condition.

So what about the stranger? Those not in the church? You might know a neighbor that needs help. People get sick, they cannot do their shopping. They cannot maintain their home or their car or their lawn. It depends on where your talents lie to which area you could help. Maybe they need a meal brought in. The opportunities are there if we choose not to ignore them. And it might be that just to visit personally or over the phone is all that you can offer. But to a lonely person, that is a wonderful gift.

4. Be alert, and as the saying goes, we can always use more alerts.

I mentioned prayer list. That is a good way to track things. But a lot of times, you know, we are just weighed down with our own troubles, and we do not really notice what is going on in other people's lives. Jobs are lost, people get sick, a loved one dies, and we initially I am sure, pray about it or even call or even write a note. But the pain can be there for a very long time. Even, for instance, say someone gets a new job. Well, how long were they out of work? How deep a hole are they trying to get out of? Someone is sick and they get better. What was going on while they were sick? Did they have repairs that they were skipped while they were down, to the house or to the car?

Now I would caution you. The thing about helping those who are not called is that sooner or later religion is going to come up. Why can you not help me on Saturday? Why is it on Sunday? Well, that is easily answered, but remember, we are not out to proselytize but to help. It is God's job to call and

open the minds of those He has chosen. Our job is to live a godly life and be a good example. Now if you are helping someone in the world and you see things headed south, which can happen, just remember Satan and his demons are always around. They are always out to try to trip us up, cause a rift, stir things up. That is what they do. So, as I say, be alert.

5. This one is on the widows. The apostle Paul in I Timothy 5 gives instructions on the responsibility of the church in the care of these widows, and I want to read this section of verse from the *Good News Bible*.

I Timothy 5:3-8 (GNB) Show respect for widows who really are all alone. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, they should learn first to carry out their religious duties towards their own family and in this way repay their parents and grandparents, because that's what pleases God. A widow who is all alone with no one to take care of her, has placed her hope in God and continues to pray and ask him for his help night and day. But a widow who gives herself to pleasure has already died, even though she lives. Give them these instructions, so that no one will find fault with them. But if any do not take care of their relatives, especially the members of their own family, they have denied the faith and are worse than an unbeliever.

He goes on with some more specifics.

I want to key in on the fact that the first responsibility for the care of the widows is to their families. Whenever possible, the children and grandchildren should be taking care of their mom and grandma, not the government, not the church. And when this is not being done or when it needs to be supplemented, then the church steps in. And we are the church—all of us here—we are the church. Yes, we have third tithe assistance that the ministry oversees, but each of us individually should share in this duty. I did not bother to count them, but I did read somewhere that there are 103 verses in the Bible that mention widows.

In line with what Paul is saying here, I am left with the impression that these are older women with perhaps grown children and grandchildren. In my years around the church, especially when we have larger congregations, we

seem to always have the widows in any congregation, and I guess men typically just do not take care of themselves and tend to die earlier.

I remember well in the early days of CGG going up to Fort Mill to speak, and looking out in the audience, and I run the risk of missing a name or two, my apologies. But I would look out at the audience and I remember seeing Frances Demby, Edna Sprouse, Joan Bowling, Annie Durham, Elise Grainger, Nola, Margie Fraser from time to time, and I am sure there were others, and they would have such interested looks on their faces. Now this would be the sermonette, and I would already see people sleeping (and that is probably because it was me speaking), but nonetheless, I would already see people sleeping, but not the widows! They were pulling for you, and I am sure they did this with every speaker there. They were encouraging in everything that they did—in the way that they looked and you could just see in their eyes, they were pulling for you. I felt that I was supposed to take care of them, but I always felt it was the other way around. They were looking out for me.

And that is really all that James is saying. That is all that Moses is saying, Isaiah and Jeremiah, that is all they are talking about. That is what God is telling us. It is very simple. Obey God and look out for one another, and that is pure religion.