



## **MISSIONARY SUNDAY (MISSION WORK AT HOME)**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, October 4, 2009**

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**Lection – James 1:26-27** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 26) If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this man's religion is vain. (v. 27) Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Any discussion of Missionary Sunday (Mission Work at Home) can be grounded and framed by the metaphor of graduation. Graduation exercises imply that one has completed a particular curriculum; and, as a result, in some sense, been matured by the process of matriculation. Sojourner Truth said, "Religion without humanity is poor

human stuff.”<sup>1</sup> Home missions give each of us the opportunity to express our maturity and affirm, in a spiritual manner, our own humanity.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: James 1:26-27**

### **Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

As I pen this commentary, America is in the grips of one of the worst recessions since the 1930s. The funds for unemployed persons are deteriorating, car companies and financial institutions are models of instability and confusion, state and city governments are facing millions of dollars in shortfall, people are losing their homes and retirements, Wall Street is struggling, Main Street is at the point of panic, and thousands of persons in America are in desperate need of compassion.

There is a cliché that fits this text quite well: “Charity begins at home.” If we are to show compassion, we cannot overlook the pressing needs of home; and, yet, also work in foreign lands.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

James has many reasons for writing this volume. One of the reasons for his undertaking was to clarify what it meant to be a Christian through “faith alone.” While faith alone is sufficient for salvation, it is not sufficient for living out spiritual disciplines or holy habits. We do not labor to be saved; rather, we labor because we are saved. One of the ways in which we can express our Christian work is through compassion. Compassion can be said to be love in **work clothes** and is that essential that requires its fulfillment in one not just pitying another, but getting involved with another. It is James who, in chapter two, denotes that “faith without works is dead.” Religion then, of any kind, which is devoid of compassion, is nothing more than empty non-involvement rhetoric.

James is writing to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. These persons were the Jews who had been scattered in various parts of the world by their captors, the Assyrians and the Babylonians. In this writing, one quickly notes that James is pressing for a more practical understanding and undertaking of Christianity which is grounded in the living out of one’s faith through obedience to the Lord.

The obedience for which James aims is the result of a marked maturity on the part of Jewish believers. One of the struggles with our churches is that persons are not challenged to become spiritually mature. I have often shared with my congregation that, if the Lord tarries, we all will one day grow old, but how many of us will grow up? Most of the problems in churches are caused by spiritual immaturity. This immaturity is seen both in our actions and our inactions. Being obedient to God is not so much up to God, rather it is also comes down to us. We are often guilty of spiritualizing our failure to engage in what should be basic behavior for disciples. Our inactions say a lot about our immaturity, as well. Our lack of commitment and involvement in issues outside of our church walls speaks volumes. Our lack of challenge to a prison industrial complex that is swelling with our children, our lack of resistance to violence in our communities, and

even our lack of compassion for those who may have AIDS and/or some other grave medical concern is telling. James would scream that, if we talk the talk, we must walk the walk.

James helps us see in these focal verses how to make our practices pure before God. James says that our obedience can be reflected in several ways. We have to choose not to be self-deceived by disciplining our speech. If we are not just “hearing” the word, but doing it (v. 22) we will refuse to deceive ourselves and monitor carefully what we say. Just as it was in James’ day, the tongue is still a big problem in today’s church culture. There is an emphasis in James on speech and the tongue (see, 1:19, 2:12; 3:1-3; 14-18, 4:11-12). We must recognize that as goes the tongue goes the body. A great truth is revealed here for believers to ponder. The tongue reveals what is on the inside. So James warns that no matter how consistent our church attendance, how excellent our singing, how beautiful our outfits, if we habitually lose control of our tongues, our level of Christian maturity is questionable at best.

Another facet of the text has us see that religion that is worth something to God looks not only at itself, but at those who need help. Verse 27 both describes and defines this concept, when it exhorts us to remember those who are in a helpless state. What is needed here is more than mere sympathy towards humanity; there must be a reaching toward humanity. “Orphans and widows” were a class of persons who in Jewish culture were in the “least of these” group. They were the most helpless and, usually, under the most pressure as they sought to attain the basic necessities of food and clothing. Nothing has changed as it relates to widows and children. Today, so many widows and children are suffering and too few in the church lift a finger to offer assistance. A few place funds in offering plates for benevolence efforts or other church ministries. Most take an out-of-sight out-of-mind approach, in spite of the fact that these persons are in our own communities, not in some faraway place such as Africa!

As we ponder Missionary Sunday (Mission Work at Home), each of us should be motivated to get involved in the endeavors that can alleviate the suffering of those who cannot help themselves. Can your church do something to assist widows who are lonely, poor, and need medical care? Can your ministry tackle poverty in creative ways through teaching principles of economic empowerment? Can your ministry start parenting classes for young men and women? Let us go forth and offer God ministry that is pure because it seeks to help those most in need.

Lastly, James tells us to remain “unspotted,” unpolluted from the world. We are told that we are to be in the world and not of the world. We must make contact with the world, but we cannot allow ourselves to become contaminated. Pure religion is just that—pure. We cannot love the pleasures, systems and mores of this world more than we love God. Matthew 6:24 tells us that no one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. How often it is that when we get involved with the complexities of the world we get caught up in them to our own detriment. We must take seriously the challenge to be found by Jesus without a

spot or blemish and at peace (2 Peter 3:14). Today, among other things, this surely means not being devoured by our culture of consumerism, individualism and secularism.

### **Challenge**

The challenge of this text is to make sure that our religion is more than concepts and pronouncements of piety. Pure religion includes earthly efforts and human compassion. God's people have to stand up for those in our society who cannot stand for themselves and in doing this we show forth the purity of our religion.

This purity of our religion involves also a commitment to speak as Christ spoke and to serve boldly. The challenge here is to walk and talk as humble servants who glorify God; not ourselves or even our churches. If we act and speak as this type of beloved community, the Kingdom will come on earth as it is in Heaven and God's will shall be done.

### **Descriptive Details**

In this passage, note with careful attention the foundation of obedience as the beginning of pure religion. This obedience is predicated on one's ability to not only hear the Word, but also to do the Word. Note further the stress on praxis in our religion. There is work for us to do; namely, to help those in helpless conditions, to be cautious about what we say and to remain in a holy posture before God.

Accordingly, the descriptive details brought forth by this passage include, but are not limited to:

**Sights:** An unbridled tongue and a bridled tongue; a person with a self-deceived heart; suffering widows; suffering orphans; and

**Sounds:** Gossip; negative talk; the laughter of orphaned children as they are visited and given nurture and love; and the appreciative words of widows as they are visited, assisted and allowed to share of their concerns and their memories.

### **Note**

1. Newman, Richard. African American Quotations. New York, NY: Orxy Press, 2000. p. 285