

You might have guessed a common theme based on our reading of the law, confession of sin, Old Testament Reading, and now the conclusion to our New Testament Reading – dealing with widows and orphans. You would be correct in noticing that common thread throughout our worship liturgy.

I don't want to exposit the text this morning in reverse order, but I do want to pose up front that this formula of commanding sympathy and care for the orphans, widows, and sojourners is an extremely common theme in the Old Testament. Just as a very quick survey, we see it not only in our reading of the law this morning in Exodus 22, but in Deuteronomy 10, Deuteronomy 14, Deuteronomy 16, 24, 26, and 27. Psalm 94, 109, 146. Isaiah 1, 9, 10; Jeremiah 7, 22, 49; Lamentations 5, Ezekiel 22; Zechariah 7, and Malachi 3. Over and over we see this formula in some order: "orphans, widows, and sojourners." Obviously the Word of God treats these as a special category in his law, Psalms, and prophets.

So I hope we likewise will see these attributes through the book of James this morning with a new appreciation, because we are no different.

But before we come to that, I would like to remind you that we concluded last week with an exhortation to look to Christ as our consummate joy, especially in the midst of trials and temptations. James has introduced his epistle with the exhortation to "count it all joy, my brothers, when ye fall into divers trials and temptations," and he is speaking to a population of Jews who have been scattered from their homeland, possessions lost, abandoned by friends and families for the sake of the name. Scattered into a world that is unfriendly toward the gospel, unfriendly toward a religion that would make the audacious claim there is only one way to heaven, through Jesus Christ.

Of God's own will, he brought us forth – or birthed us – by the Word of Truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures, designed in his spit and image, so to speak, and meant to imitate Christ.

Have any of you ever spoken too soon? I mentioned last week my conscious attempt to make sure I infer correctly what someone else is meaning to imply. Again, I count this as among the most neighborly things we can do for one another: to attempt NOT to misunderstand each other. Relationships are ruined, churches split, lawsuits filed, people fired, all because what someone inferred – that is understood to be meant – incorrectly what was implied – that is, meant to be understood.

Words are extremely powerful. And we are reminded in various spots in the book of James to be careful with our words – in how we infer them and how we imply them; in how we understand them, and how we mean them to be understood.

And remember, these Jews were scattered into foreign lands with foreign languages, where the risk of miscommunication is greatly exacerbated – dealing with foreign customs, foreign body language, where a once-common courtesy could now cause grave

offense. It's in this context James exhorts his audience, “count it all joy, for within the various trials you are facing, the testing – the proving of your faith works patience.

One way to remain joyful, is to be quick to hear, slow to speak, praying for wisdom, faith, and humility in your response to offenses – working patience, so that patience may have her perfect work so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. It is easy to “count it all wrath” when we or our worldviews are the target of offensive speech. It's easy for our hasty responses to our spouse to turn into argument, which lamentably leads to hasty anger. This hasty anger of man, as James calls it does not produce the righteousness of God.

Here is another contrast: The hasty anger of man is opposite the righteousness of God. This type of anger will rob you of joy, not produce it – all because in your lack of wisdom, faith, and humility, you “have to be right” or “have to have the last word.” Instead, hasten to hear and understand what is being meant, be wise, faithful, and humble in your response, and resist the temptation against producing the hasty, unrighteous anger of man.

As I said, words are important. But James knows there's something transcendent about words; or that our everyday words we talk and hear and read and write, they are symbolic of something higher than the things themselves – signs of the things signified. There has historically – especially in Christianity and Judaism – been an understanding that words are special. The earth was created by the Word of God;¹ The Abrahamic Covenant was established by the Word of the Lord;² The Law was given to Moses by the Word of the Lord³; The covenant with David was established by the Word of the Lord;⁴ We read constantly about “the Word of the Lord” accompanying Elijah, and of course we see the formula, “thus saith the Lord” or “The Word of the Lord” in every Old Testament Prophet (except Habakkuk, interestingly, though we do see God in obvious communication with Habakkuk, just not the formula).

It is a common observation that our ability to use words is the very thing that makes us distinct from the beasts. Our ability to express words makes us able to be creative, to legislate, and to educate – our capacity for language – for the word – is what makes us in the image of God.⁵

¹ Genesis 1:3ff, Colosians 1:16

² Genesis 15; Luke 1:55, 73; Galatians 3:18; Hebrews 6:14

³ Exodus 20:1; Exodus 24:3; Luke 24:44

⁴ 1 Kings 17ff; Mark 9:4

⁵ “As our being itself is derived from God (we exist because he exists), and as our knowledge is an analogue of his knowledge (we know because he knows), so, too, our capacity for language and other forms of communication is derivative of his. We speak because God speaks, because he is a speaking God; that is his nature and so, derivatively, it is ours. In other words, man in his linguistic functions, as in all he is and does, is to be understood as the creature who is the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). In fact, should we not say that especially in his language man reflects the divine image he is?” Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Speech and the Image of God: Biblical Reflections on Language and Its Uses.” In *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries* (Philipsburg: P&R, 2004), 182-183. Cited in

We see in John 1: “THE WORD” – The Consummate Word – made flesh and dwelling among us, and James has already told us we have been birthed – made family – by that word of truth. Now James is reminding his readers not just to use words carefully, lest you sin, but to remember THE WORD that is implanted in you, which is able to save your soul, to put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.

Another contrast: The filthiness and rampant wickedness of this world – the source of our grief, loss, and hatred – is contrasted with THE WORD – the source of our joy, glory, and love. When you are struggling with using words righteously, pray in the name of Christ, and receive with humility the Word of the Lord.

But what then?

Shall we be hearers only? Shall we only consider in the abstract how our words relate in some way to the Word of God? Or are we to be called not just to hear, but to do as well?

Being a hearer only – let’s call him the theoretical Christian – the one who knows the answer to every catechism question, he knows who Nadab and Abihu are, he knows what a hermeneutic is, and could probably teach a course in it – this is not what James is commending here. He is not **condemning** those things either; but what James is saying is that KNOWING the Word and OBEYING the Word are two very distinct things.

God’s word is full of commandments, things for us to obey. But if we can recite the 10 commandments verbatim with no intention whatsoever in our hearts of not blaspheming the name of Christ, with no intention of not honoring our father and mother, who are you? You are that self-absorbed anthropologist that insists on judging humanity by looking in the mirror, focusing on what we want presented to the world, and forgetting what we are really like in our cursed souls, forgetting that what we are seeing in the mirror is not the thing itself, but a distorted reversal in this mirror image.⁶

I said it last week, and I’ll say it again, we will fall into temptation if we lack a proper anthropology. It is of no use to understand humanity by the subjective standards of humanity. We as judges in our own case can hardly be trusted to return a just or righteous verdict. We can’t be trusted on our own to do righteously, in other words. This is why we require an outside judge.

And James here points directly to that judge: the perfect law – the word of God! The one who looks to the perfect law, freed from the bondages of sin, given to us by the creator and judge of the universe, not ourselves – when we hear and obey this objective law

Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “Language as the Heart of God’s Image,” *Pierce Taylor Hibbs*, <http://piercetaylorhibbs.com/language-as-the-heart-of-gods-image/> (accessed October 8, 2021).

⁶ See ἔσοπτρον (mirror) in BDAG, or Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, and William F. Arndt. 2000. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*.

from this judge, then we may do righteously. By receiving with meekness this Word of God, hearing it, understanding it, and obeying it in our actions, we are not just free from misery, we can do righteously with joy.

So James summarizes his points here with two types of people: one who is hasty unto the anger of man, and another who forgets his true nature. The first is not listening to the Word; the second is not obeying the word; and both are unrighteous. Though they may seem pious, if their heart continues to manifest the grief of hatred rather than the joy of love, this person's religion is worthless. Though they may pretend to know the Bible better than you, if they pretend that "all humans are fundamentally good," their religion is worthless.

The joy of religion is not found in outward piety, being able to pray the right way, nor even having a comprehensive knowledge of the Bible while maintaining a deceitful or angry heart. Notice again another contrast – that type of religion is worthless – incapable of bringing joy; but what does bring joy? What religion is pure and undefiled?

To visit orphans and widows in their afflictions, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Now, to close this sermon, let us return to my introduction, in which I mentioned this very-common formula in the Bible about the commands to do justice unto the widows, orphans, and sojourners. To clarify quickly, the reason sojourners is not mentioned here is because the Christian Jews scattered into foreign lands are the sojourners. They are sojourning and therefore commanded to remain unstained from the world.

But the formula is familiar enough that hearers of this word would know that sojourners is a usual part of the word of God, and be able to infer its use when appropriate.

So is James saying then, "if you REALLY want to be religious do these things: volunteer at a homeless shelter, visit a nursing home, hire immigrants, and oppose worldly philosophies like legal positivism, economic materialism, and existentialism?" Is that what James is meaning for us to infer?

There is nothing wrong with doing those things; we should be doing those things – visiting orphans and widows in their afflictions, not oppressing the sojourner, and guarding yourself against the influences of this sinful world.

But if we set that standard as the ultimate standard, and we insist that we can obtain pure religion by checking a few boxes, we are once again like that anthropologist who looks at his natural face in a mirror, forgetting what he is really like.

This common formula of words, like so many other revelations in the Word, is not ONLY pointing at literal widows, literal orphans, literal sojourners. These words are pointing in

principle to something greater, or are signifying something more transcendent than the thing per se.

The usage of “widow” signifies more than the elderly woman whose husband has died, leaving her helpless. It includes this, of course, but if you survey the usage of “widow” in the Old Testament, we find they are among a category of unmarriageable or undesirable women – at the very least from the standpoint of a priest. Leviticus 21:14 prohibits a priest from marrying (1) a prostitute, (2) a defiled woman, (3) a divorcee, and (4) a widow. Genesis 38 tells us the story of Onan, who did marry a widow (his brother’s wife), but refused to give her a child because he “knew the offspring would not be his.”⁷ Read Lamentations 1 and see how Jerusalem is in one breath described as a widow, and in the next breath a prostitute; she who was married has become a widow; she who was a princess has become a slave; she who was pure, became filthy; she who was honored became despised in her nakedness. In Revelation 18, we see the harlot Babylon – who has prostituted herself to the kings of the earth – deceive herself and say, “I sit as a queen and am no widow.”

The metaphor or allegory or things signified by this word go beyond the thing itself, and include much more. So the Jew was in these words **not** commanded in one breath to honor piously the saintly elderly women, and in the next to kick the prostitute to the curb in anger.

The word “widow” in Hebrew does mean widow – and we are to visit the widows – as we think of them – in their affliction, and Paul tells Timothy we are to “honor widows who are truly widows”⁸ “She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she [the widow] who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.”⁹ But the word¹⁰ is derived from another word that means “silent,” “unable to speak,” “bound unto silence.” No legal representation, no justice. But in Luke 18, Jesus condemns a judge who would not give due justice to a widow, who had ignored her voice, her cries, her words. Jesus instead commends the widow as his elect.

Similarly the word orphan¹¹ does not only signify the technical loss of parents, but is derived from an adjective that has connotations of loneliness, loss, grief. We may infer a command here to visit and comfort all children suffering. Jesus himself tells us, “whoever receives a humble child in my name, receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”¹²

⁷ Genesis 38:8-10

⁸ 1 Timothy 5:3

⁹ 1 Timothy 5:5-6

¹⁰ אֵלְמָנָה - widow

¹¹ יָתוֹם – orphan, one who has become fatherless

¹² Matthew 18:4-6

And so also for the sojourner. Of course the command in Exodus 22 and so many other places is not just strictly to not oppress people that are technically from foreign nations, but to sympathize with those who are lonely, abandoned, brokenhearted, homesick, without friends or family. Tax collectors in Jesus’s day were treated worse than foreigners, but Jesus called them into friendship with him.

So we see then, this description of pure religion is much more than technical obedience to the law by visiting technical widows and orphans – it’s much more comprehensive and beautiful and Christ-imitating than that.

But we’re not quite finished. Brothers and sisters, what is our motive for loving the widow, the orphan, the sojourner? Is pure religion – righteous religion, joyous religion – obtained by the mere act of obedience to this command? That is not what James is saying. James’s foundation for this entire discussion, remember, is the Word of Truth by which we are brought forth; it is the Implanted Word, which is able to save your souls.

And what of this Word? What of Christ? What of Christ to us?

Dear saints we were that husbandless woman not fit for priesthood marriage. We were the widow Ruth, banished to the fringes of the field to glean the rotting fruit on the ground; we were Gomer the prostitute, committing great whoredom by forsaking the LORD,¹³ adulterating after foreign gods, breaking the covenant God established with us.¹⁴

But Christ appeared! And the Great High Priest called we wretched widows out of the fringes of the field into the landowner’s house to enjoy all that he owns, called to be the bride of our redeemer forever!¹⁵ He called we wicked harlots, who deserved to be disowned with no mercy,¹⁶ to be his pure and undefiled wife.

We were the orphan – fatherless, grieving in our curse of sin and misery, fallen out of communion with God, liable to all the miseries in this life, liable to death, and liable to the pains of hell forever.

But Christ appeared! And out of the misery of our orphanage, we have been adopted into the Kingdom of Christ as the sons and daughters of God,¹⁷ joint-heirs with Christ the King unto eternal glory!¹⁸

¹³ Hosea 1:2-3

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 31:16

¹⁵ Ruth 3-5

¹⁶ Hosea 1:6-8

¹⁷ John 1:12; Ephesians 1:5; 1 John 3:1;

¹⁸ Romans 8:17; Ephesians 3:6

We were the sojourner, the wanderer, the fugitive¹⁹ from our home, from our kingdom, cursed with the filthy stain of this world, dying of hunger and thirst in a strange land.²⁰

But Christ appeared! And because of him we are not put to death, but instead we are called out of the slavery of Egypt,²¹ and we fugitives are greeted with living water and the bread of life,²² and our putrid, filthy rags²³ have been replaced by the pure, white robes washed in the blood of Christ.²⁴ We are no longer the widow, orphan, or sojourner – because of Christ, we are his bride, joint-heirs with him as citizens of his kingdom. We are God's people!

Brothers and sisters, we are to love the widow, the orphan, the sojourner because this is the love that was shown for us by Christ. This is pure religion, that we would be doers of the Word – that we would do as Christ has done; that we would love one another as Christ has loved us.

Brothers and sisters, may your words and your works be blessed by the righteousness of Christ, and may we seek to honor Christ our king in our words and works to one another.

BENEDICTION:

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)

¹⁹ Genesis 4:12; Deuteronomy 28:65-66; Lamentations 4:15-16

²⁰ Hosea 9:16-17

²¹ Hosea 6

²² Cf. Isaiah 21:13-14

²³ Isaiah 64:4

²⁴ Revelation 7:9-14