

Unstained by the World

(James 1:27)

With Study Questions

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(James 1:27)

Religion 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 (James 1:27).

Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing moral and philosophical environment. To be sure, older people have always been a bit stuffy when it comes to change. I don't doubt that Abraham, Moses and David all had their "kids these days!" moment. But things change much more rapidly now than in the past.

During the entire course of human history, man had not mastered the art of flight. Then, in 1903, in Kitty Hawk North Carolina, the Wright brothers took flight for less than one minute. A mere sixty-six years later Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. I recall teaching a Bible study at a retirement home where some of the women remembered living through both of these events.

We truly live in a different age. Unlike the Iron Age, the Bronze Age, the Middle Ages or even the Age of Reason, the age in which we live changes briskly. We raced from the Space Age (1950s) to the Computer Age, Digital Age, Information Age and New Media Age to the point where these ages overlap. And what we see when it comes to the more recent ages is that they are information oriented. We, and our children, can know almost immediately what is going on all over the world. It is literally at the tip of our fingers.

This can be very good, but it can also be very dangerous. It is reminiscent of when Luther brought the Scriptures and the clear message of salvation by grace to the common man. Erasmus thought such news would only encourage slothfulness of religion and open a floodgate of iniquity. Luther didn't entirely disagree but thought putting the truth of God's word in the hands of the public was worth the risk.

It was worth the risk. At the same time there was (and is to this day) great evil done by people with Bibles in their hands. It is quite easy for the church, for Christians, instead of being salt and light, to develop feet of clay. That is to say, that the faltering church is not merely faltering due to

attacks from without, but infection from within. Those whom the Scriptures refer to as **“spots in your loves feasts...clouds without water” (Jude 12)**. Those who **“creep into households” (2 Timothy 3:6)**.

The enemy transforms himself into an **“angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14)**, seeking to win the hearts and minds of the church. And again, this is nothing new, it is just quicker. According to Barna, Millennials (mid 20s-30s) and Gen Z-ers (mid teen to mid 20s) are more likely to think that what is morally right or wrong changes over time based on society or individual beliefs. Gen Z-ers are also far, far less likely to challenge other beliefs. Let’s speak of this briefly, since these two statements contain both good and bad.

How is it good for us to acknowledge moral changes across time and societies? It is good because it requires we understand what is happening in the lives of other people in other places. It is not helpful if we refuse to grasp what is going on in the lives of our unbelieving culture. When Paul wrote that he became **“all things to all men, that (he) might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22)**, he had to have some idea of what was going on with all men (Jew, Gentile, weak, etc.). I think it can be a healthy thing that our young people be cognizant of the pull, the claims, the ethics or their rapidly shifting world.

At the same time, there is a great danger. It is the danger of the logical *Fallacy of Mass Appeal*. That is to say that something is true because so many people think so. We must never underestimate the power of this fallacy. The ability for our judgment to be clouded can be astonishing. Just this week I had an exchange with professing Christians (some Millennial, some a bit older) who were endorsing views that were so patently unbiblical that I had a difficult time figuring out the heart of our disagreement.

I had to ask if they simply did not believe the Scriptures at all! When I asked that question or brought up a text, they generally just ignored it and changed the subject. I am not going to say this disingenuously, but I do regularly ask myself if I am the one missing the mark. It’s not as if that can’t happen. I most certainly can be the victim of the influence of the world. At the same time, some of these issues are so perspicuously unbiblical that it becomes manifest that the world has simply won their hearts. Some of these issues will be brought up in our Hot Topics series in due time (abortion, gender issues, stealing, premarital or extra marital intimacy, sins of thought, forms of government and the role of government).

But for now, my main concern is that we all seek to be aware of pull of the world, the flesh and the enemy. Who has the greater influence-the world upon the church (Christians) or the church upon the world?

Bear Fruit, Remain Unstained

In our opening passage, James admonishes Christians to two things: to bear fruit and remain unstained. If our religion is to be godly, it should be marked with good deeds. James mentions widows and orphans. Jesus mentions the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick and imprisoned (Matthew 25:35). There is a certain sense in which we need to be willing to get our hands dirty in our service of Christ. It is one thing to get our hands dirty, it is quite another to get our hearts dirty. In Jesus' prayer for His followers (which include us) He prays in a similar fashion.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one (John 17:15).

During the course of history, Christians have experimented with various methods to remain unstained by the world. One of those methods is to remove ourselves from society and build our own cultures. The Amish come to mind, but one needn't move to the rural Pennsylvania in an effort to cloister oneself. We can create our own Christian ghettos in the midst of the big city.

Yet this isolationist attitude does not seem to comport with the call of Christ to **"Go and makes disciples" (Matthew 28:19)** or engage the world with service and the message of the Gospel. Paul writes,

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).

It would appear that the only way to properly read a passage like this is to recognize that the good we are called to do must not be restricted to the Christian community.

So, it gets tricky. We need to engage the world, while at the same time remaining unstained by it. There is a cost we must not be willing to pay in our efforts to be salt and light. An extreme example here might be parents who have told me that their six-year-old child is a good witness to his/her thirty-year-old pagan instructor. Now that may be true, but at

what expense? If mature Christian adults are susceptible to worldly influence, how much more a child!

In our recent studies of the Old Testament, there is a recurring theme:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. ³You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes (Leviticus 18:1-3).

Don't be like the people in the place you left and don't be like the people in the place you're going. Israel did not do well at this and the consequences were devastating. Paul appeals to the Old Covenant admonition in his instruction of the New Covenant Church.

Therefore “Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.” ¹⁸“I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:17, 18).

He also states it quite briefly in his first letter to the Corinthians (who were surrounded by great immorality).

Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

That Paul prefaces his statement with the words, “Do not be deceived” leads us to believe that this particular vulnerable is something that we can easily be lied into thinking doesn't apply to us.

How Do We Know?

Succinctly put, we are to bear fruit and remain uninfluenced by the world. The next question is, how do I know? In a future sermon we may talk about Christian service, but what I am asking now is ‘how do I know when I'm being stained by the world?’ I will offer a simple two-step answer: self-examination and outward examination.

Examine yourselves *as to whether you are in the faith*. Test yourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5a)?

It is a healthy pursuit for Christians to take inventory on a regular basis. God wants us to be ever reminded that we are His by the blood of Christ. To meditate upon and know with certainty that we are children of God (1 John 5:13). If that is not settled, this message is reduced to good advice on how to live a virtuous life followed by death and hell. First and foremost, are we in the faith?

We also take inventory in terms of what is going on in our own minds. If we are beset with lust, anger, greed, selfishness, jealousy, drunkenness, etc., we may want to ask ourselves how we are feeding these things. Like anything else, the sin you feed is the sin that grows. Whether it's music, movies, companionships, books, YouTube channels, video games, we must be honest on that kind of impact these things are having on us. At the risk of cliché, GIGO (Garbage In, Garbage Out) is a truism.

The downside of self-examination, however, is the lack of accountability. It is just too easy to give ourselves a pass. We must be open to, and pursue, outward examination as well. I still run on the beach. Occasionally people offer to be a running partner. I always say 'no'. Partially because I enjoy the solitude (and don't want to talk when I run). But I also like running as slow as I want, which is difficult with a partner. The Scriptures provide numerous examples of our need for outward examination.

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted (Galatians 6:1).

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19, 20).

These passages, and the many others like them, require we develop relationships conducive to outward examination. This is not achieved by the mere listening to a sermon but by a robust participation in the fellowship of the body of Christ. One of the main reasons we develop home-groups, have potlucks, social events, service events and the like is to give opportunity to get to know one another.

Some of this outward examination may include basic moral behavior (anger, lust, drunkenness, etc.). Some of it may be philosophical or theological (doctrinal). In my exchange earlier this week, it wasn't personal morality that was in question (although poor theology is immoral in nature-in that it is a consequence of the fall). It was professing Christians promoting a very ungodly life and world view. I was offering (as tenderly as I could) an outward examination, but they weren't having it. You never know what might happen (someone who was not participating in the conversation privately texted me some very encouraging words-so maybe it was just for that person that God brought me into this talk.

The One Constant

Of course, neither self-examination or outward examination are trustworthy without an objective, absolute, transcendent, knowable standard. Earlier we discovered that Millennials and Gen Z-ers are more likely to think that what is morally right or wrong changes over time based on society or individual beliefs. But history is littered with corpses of those who were the victims of those who put this theory to practice-men who thought that their vision for humanity justified the death of a generation.

So, what is the one constant by which all examination (self, outward, social, ethical, political, theological, etc.) is to be governed. Jesus was not unclear.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away (Matthew 24:35).

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8).

God has graciously deposited His word in His creation, and we have the wonderful responsibility of ever growing in our knowledge of it. It is little wonder that those who advance what the world teaches (even professing Christians) have little interest in deep, honest study of (and deference to) the word of God.

Little doubt that this is why the Psalmist offers this key element in his battle against sin.

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:11).

Questions for Study

1. What is unique about the way things change today versus what we see throughout history? What types of changes jump out at you (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some ministerial benefits of living in the Information Age? What are some dangers (pages 3, 4)?
3. What are the two things that James admonishes Christians to do in James 1:27? What are some methods Christians have used to keep themselves from being stained? Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these (page 3).
4. How have you seen yourself influenced by the world? How have you seen the church in general influenced by the world (pages 4, 5)?
5. How do we evaluate if we're being stained by the world (pages 5, 6)?
6. What is the one constant by which all truth must be governed (page 6, 7)?