

What does the word 'religion' mean? James says, "True religion is taking care of widows and orphans." So, what is 'religion'? Many cradle-role Christians have a warm affinity for religion. It is how we practice our faith. For millennials and 'nones' (those who describe their religion as "none"), the word 'religion' might evoke something negative. They think of the hypocrisy of people who uphold institutions. Yet, Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes, "Jesus was not interested in Christianity, but in God and [humanity]. He could not have conceptualized 'Christianity'."¹ For us, religion is how we relate to Christ.

In Greek, the word 'religion' (θρησκεία) can be positive (e.g. Acts 26:5, "testifying about our religion") or negative (e.g. Colossians 2:18, describing a religion of "worshipping angels"). David E. Garland writes, "It is easy for religiosity to become so absorbed in the external routines of worship, the preservation of the purity of doctrine, and the veneration of beautiful worship buildings that it degenerates into a kind of 'churchianity' that disregards such things as justice, mercy, and faith."² So, what do we worship? What is our religion? Are we part of the institution of church, or are we seekers of truth in Christ? I hope it is the latter. If it is the former, then I pray for our conviction and transformation into a life seeking God and not a religious institution. James is rather blunt about religion, saying, "True religion is taking care of widows and orphans."

Each one of us receives many gifts. The mysterious subject in that passive-voice sentence is God. God gives each one of us many gifts. But, we must be careful because accepting them carries a price. This is not a transaction, i.e. we only get the gifts if we accept the price. The price is eternal. We can accept the blessings/gifts God gives and ignore the price. We can ignore God's expectations. Still, the cost is a richness that we have not yet imagined. The cost is actually something better; we get a better life when we pay the price. When we become aware of the relationship between every blessing and God, we can take a posture of gratitude and begin to appreciate what we have. We can offer thanksgiving for all good gifts that surround us. It is not about religion; it is about God.

The opening verses of our reading from James connect to the opening sentences of the epistle about giving thanks when we encounter troubles. Troubles help us grow. Troubles are the spice of life. Troubles help us know when things are good. Martin Luther was frustrated with James because he was so focused on the centrality of faith. Luther points to John and the letters to the Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians as "showing you Christ and teaching you all that you need to know." He wrote, "Therefore, St. James epistle is really an epistle of straw."³ I hate to disagree with a giant of our Protestant tradition, but Luther misses the significance of James. We could too, if we do not recognize James' intent. James was not making a defense for organized religion. The epistle begins with a *prima facie* assumption of faith in Christ and takes the question further. In other words, he says, 'Now that y'all believe, what are you going to do about it?'

Everything in James is about God and the way we relate to God. In James, "the course and quality of our lives matter to God."⁴ When we recognize God's role in every gift or blessing, God asks something in return. James is like an advanced instruction manual for faith. Recognizing God's role fulfills God's purpose. Then, we get to be (emphasize *get* to be) "a kind of first fruits of [God's] creatures." Immediately after introducing God's expectation that we become "first fruits," James begins telling us how.

Verses 19-27 have two exhortations and the basis for them. The first basis is a reminder of common knowledge. "You know, my beloved, 'Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of humans does not work the righteousness of God'." He appeals to common knowledge. Then, there are two exhortations: (1) obey it, and (2) do it.⁵

Verses 22b-27 provide the second basis. The formula follows a common positive/negative setup in Greek rhetoric. The first negative is "to hear and not do is to deceive oneself." God expects something from us. When we know what to do, we must do it. The first positive is "to hear and do is to be blessed." When we know what to do and do it, we experience God. And experiencing God is a blessing. Then, there is another negative, bridle the tongue, and another positive, "true religion is taking care of widows and orphans."⁶

The mirror in this passage carries weight in its ancient context. We know what a mirror is and our knowledge can distract us from a deeper truth. In ancient culture, mirrors shared our contemporary use, but it was deeper. It was about seeing the self, truly seeing ourselves, as we are. The one who sees and forgets upon going away is like the person who sees and forgets the self. It is like knowing what to do and not doing it. Plutarch and other ancient philosophers suggest using a mirror for self-improvement. Connecting this use to our spiritual lives means that we look into a mirror and see our souls.⁷

If we look into a mirror and see our souls, and know what to do, how do we respond? True religion is taking care of widows and orphans. There are times when we can actually take care of widows and orphans. There are other times when we need to interpret what "widows and orphans" means for our context. Gustavo Gutiérrez interprets this as "concrete steps toward others."⁸

According to this passage, if we know the truth, God is not asking if we are willing to sign up for the "widows and orphans" brigade; God demands it! Gutiérrez expands the "widows and orphans" manifestation of following God. He gives the following suggestions: "visiting victims of poverty, exploitation, and oblivion; opting for a just and human order and against what causes death, 'disappearances,' and sufferings."⁹

This week, I experienced a powerful sense of God's presence and blessing. I was a conference in Boston. We discussed the nature of ministering in a polarized and politicized America. Yes, it was a blessing to be with the other ministers. The conversations and

insights were a gift. But, I would like to share with you about an experience that had nothing to do with the conference.

On Thursday evening, after everything was over, I was waiting to meet up with a cousin who lives in Boston. I walked along the harbor, soaking in the history, when I happened upon the Armenian Heritage Park. In the middle, there was a prayer labyrinth like the one in the cathedral in Chartres, France. This one had a stone path, with grass along the sides. I started walking the labyrinth. The slow, methodical turns brought me into the presence of God and an awareness that everything I have comes from the author of life.

What do we see for which we can be grateful? And, can we acknowledge God as the author and giver of everything we have? If we do, what does God expect from us? Are there actual widows we can help? Yes. Are there orphans who need us? Yes. Are there victims of poverty and exploitation that need us? Yes. Can we work together for a more just world? Yes.

Let us be careful this Thanksgiving. When we give thanks, if we are open to God, we will hear the voice of the Lord saying, 'Good. I am glad you are grateful. Now, get ready. I want to make you my first fruits.'

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1962), 106.

² David E. Garland, "Severe Trials, Good Gifts, and Pure Religion: James 1," *Review & Expositor* 83, no. 3 (1986): 387-88.

³ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

⁴ James L. Boyce, "A Mirror of Identity: Implanted Word and Pure Religion in James 1:17-27," *Word & World* 35, no. 3 (2015): 215.

⁵ Charles H. Talbert, "James: Teaching Outlines and Selected Sermon Seeds," *Review & Expositor* 97, no. 2 (2000): 172.

⁶ Talbert, 172.

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Mirror of Remembrance (James 1:22-25)," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1988): 636ff.

⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Sharing the Word through the Liturgical Year*, trans. Colette Joly Dees (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 213-14.

⁹ Gutiérrez, 213-14.