

Spiritual, but Not “Religious”?
(22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27—Pure Religion

¹⁷ Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from *the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change*. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by *the word of truth* that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures... ²¹ [R]eceive with meekness the *implanted word, which is able to save your souls*. ²² But be *doers of the word, and not hearers only*, deceiving yourselves... ²⁷ *Religion that is pure and undefiled* before God and the Father is this: *to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world*. (James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27)

1. Divine Immutability: “no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17)
2. Word of Truth: is a life-giving word; “able to save your souls” (1:18)
3. Importance of Works: “be doers of the word, not hearers only” (1:22)
4. What is “Religion”? (Greek *thrēskeia*; Latin *religio*) = acts of *worship* (1:27)
 - a. Jewish Worship (Philo, *Special Laws* 1.315; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.222)
 - b. Pagan Worship (*Dionysius of Halicarnassus* 2.23)
 - c. Early Christian Worship (*1 Clement* 62:1; *Letter to Diognetus* 3:2)
 - d. Religion of Israel (Acts 26:5)
 - e. Illicit worship of Angels (Col 2:18)
 - f. Christian Religion (James 1:27-28 2x)
5. The Twofold Nature of “Religion” (1:27)
 - a. Acts of Charity: “visit” orphans and widows
 - b. Holiness/Purity: “keep oneself unstained from the world”
6. James’ Critique of False “Religion”: (1:27)
 - a. Liturgy: believers who engage in *liturgical acts of worship* of God
 - d. Charity: but neglect *acts of charity* directed to love of neighbor

The Living Tradition

Bede: Admirably he added “before God and the Father, because *there are those who appear religious to other people, when they are held by God to be idolators*. Hence Solomon also says, “There is a way which appears righteous to people, but in the end it leads down to death” (Prov 14:12)... Because he had said that the doer of the work would be happy in his action, now he says *what actions are particularly pleasing to God, namely mercy and innocence*. For when he orders us “to visit orphans and widows in their tribulation” he implies all the things we ought to do mercifully for our neighbor. How much this avails at the very time of judgment will be manifested when the judge comes to say, “As long as you did it for one of the least of these my brothers, you did it for me” (Matt 25:40). *In turn, when he commands us to keep ourselves stainless from this world he shows in detail all things in which it behooves us to keep ourselves spotless*.

Among these are also those things that he had advised us above to observe, that we be slow to speak and slow to anger.” (Bede, *Commentary on James 1:27*; trans. David Hurst)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

1. According to James, what is the twofold character of true “religion”? Which of these two are you tempted to neglect in your own spiritual life? Why?

For Further Reading

1. Bede the Venerable. *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*. Translated by Dom David Hurst, OSB. Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1985.
2. Kelly Anderson and Daniel Keating. *James, First, Second, and Third John*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017.