



Sermon – November 21, 2021
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Verses Covered This Week

James 1:27

Let me invite you to open your Bibles with me. We're going to spend our time, yeah, we can praise Samantha for that great testimony. It's just so encouraging to hear how the Lord has worked in her life through her adoption story. We're going to follow along with that theme this morning from James chapter 1. James 1:27 is where we will camp out this morning. And if you're a guest with us this morning, welcome home. We're so glad you're here. And it was a real joy for me today to have our worship led by my longtime friend Brett McDonald. Brett was with us back here at Central at the same time I was coming through. He led in our Central worship at the time and now he is the worship pastor at another church called Central. This one in Round Rock, Texas. Will y'all let Brett know how much you enjoyed having him with us today? Him and Helen and all the kids.

We're coming to the last week of our sermon series on Every Generation Reaching the Next Generation. And I want you to know, as we get ready for the message, during the response time I'm going to invite you to take a step with us today. You'll notice in the seatback in front of you, there's a small card. It looks just like this. And you're welcome to grab it already right now if you want to. But at the end of our message today, I'm going to challenge you to consider who the Lord may be laying on your heart as we step into this Christmas season to be praying for them that God might bring them to know Jesus in a saving way. And so as we're processing through this message this morning, keep that on your mind because we're going to fill those out and drop those off in the baskets on our way out the door at the end of the message. And as we come here to this final message in our next generation series, we're looking back to last week. And we had the whole stage decked out with all those different sports memorabilia. Y'all were in your favorite sports teams shirt. And the theme for the week was "Get in the Game". And we had the opportunity to fill out those Get in the Game cards and to come lay them at the steps. And my big bold audacious prayer before the Lord was that 200 families might respond by filling out those cards. And we were blown away because when we tallied them all up, there were over 300 of you that filled them out. Isn't that incredible? Isn't that encouraging? Yeah, and just ready to take that step of engagement here. As a matter of fact, there were 30 out of those 300 who we didn't have any record of who you are. This is our first time to know your name and get your information. In fact, one lady came to us, she wanted to step into Kid's

Ministry, she filled out her card last week in the morning. She had already volunteered in our Kid's Ministry one time before. We got her plugged in last Sunday night at Awana. She jumped right in off the sidelines and into the game. And we, as we're working our way through this series, here's one of the dangers we need to recognize. We might catch a vision for reaching the next generation that misses the heart of God. That we could have the right purpose but miss the right people. That we could pursue the right mission but in the wrong way. That we could be captured by the right vision but not have the right values. That's why James 1:27 is going to help us this morning. Because it's going to offer a warning to us that helps us get a window into the heart of God for sinners and sufferers like you and me. Let's see what the text says. James 1:27.

²⁷Religion 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.

Let's pray together.

Father, even now as we know just a few moments, few minutes from here, we'll have alarms going off around this room to mark that 10:02 prayer time, Lord. We're coming again praying for laborers. That You would raise us up so that we might reap the harvest along with You. And as we turn our hearts to Your compassion for the vulnerable, for those on the margins and the shadows, these widows and orphans, I pray that You would stir in us a heart that follows after You as we seek to reach the next generation around us. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

The Bible is filled with stories of one generation passing the baton of leadership to another. And I think there's no stronger contrast in Scripture about how that can go poorly and how that can go well than in the contrast between King Saul in the Old Testament and Paul in the New Testament. So remember what played out back in the life of King Saul. There's this man named David, a shepherd after God's own heart, that God is raising up to be the king following Saul. And Saul sees him as a threat. In other words, he rejects next generation leadership. But then when we come to the New Testament, we find the life of the apostle Paul. He is not only mistering but he is cultivating and pouring his life into those that are coming after them. He doesn't reject next generation leadership; he raises it up. And I want you to hear these words. A friend of mine had this to say about the contrast between these two biblical figures. He said, the older generations in the church in every era must decide if they will respond to their successors as Saul to David or as Paul did with Timothy. In David, Saul saw his own mortality and seethed with jealousy and envy ending in the throwing of the spear. Instead, he should have seen God's goodness in keeping His promises to Abraham. But Paul, on the other hand, he spent his final moments shepherding and mentoring his successors, Timothy and Titus and others. Every generation has a choice to go out like Saul or to go out like Paul. That's the choice before us, Central family. We've been talking about this deep heart to reach the next generation. And as we raise up next generation leaders, will we go out like Saul or out like Paul? And the way that that question will be answered for us is, are we going to follow the heart of God we see in Scripture? And that heart of God is captured here right in James 1:27. He gives us a glimpse of what it looks like to go out like Paul. Because think about what's happening in this text. It's written by the brother of Jesus, James. And he is writing this letter full of powerful imagery; practical application. And right here in James 1, he is setting up the reality that we are not called

simply to be hearers of the word, but doers of the word. Those that put it into practice and imbedded in this text is the reminder to us, the reminder just like those alarms are reminding us, to be doers of the word. To be those who care for widows and for orphans. And what we might recognize this morning is that in our heart to reach the next generation, we might overlook how it is we're called to do it with the heart of God.

So as we finish this sermon series, what I want you to notice from James 1:27 is that this book gives us three warnings that we must beware of as we seek to be a next generation church. And I want you to notice the first one with me. There at the start of the verse he says, religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this. The first warning that James offers to us this morning is that we must see our spiritual lives the way that God sees them. So look back at the text. You see that word religion. What comes into your mind when you think about religion? For many of us it's thought of as a bad word or a poor descriptor of what a spiritual life should look like. From outsiders it might seem rigid or formal. For those of us inside the church, it might seem stuffy or not spirit-filled. But James is giving us a picture of religion that's entirely different than that. He is not rejecting the term, he's embracing it. Because he knows that religion is a way to describe our spiritual pursuit of God. It's that combination of beliefs and behaviors that shape our spiritual pursuit of God. And he says there can be a danger that we look at our spiritual lives and see them in a way that is different than the way that God sees them. So what should it look like? What type of religion should we be pursuing? Well he tells us there, it should be religion that is pure and undefiled. It's two sides of the same coin. The pure is the positive dimension; that it's clean, that it's set apart. And the undefiled dimension is that there is no stain, no blemish, no defect in it. It's like that pizza you love that has no mushrooms or olives because those would defile it. Or that dessert you can't get enough of that hasn't been ruined by the nuts. That's the picture here. Pure and undefiled. It is of the essence that he's not saying here that this is all that religion is. What he is saying is if you don't have this, you do not have the kind of heart for God, the kind of spiritual life, that God desires from you. That's why he says there in the text that the key reality for how we're doing spiritually is not how others around us see our spiritual life, but how God sees our spiritual life. So look back at the text there when it says, pure and undefiled religion before God. You see that phrase, before God? In the original language what it's trying to draw out for us is that in the sight of God, in the eyes of God, this is what He is looking for. In other words, it's not what we think our spiritual life should look like, but what He thinks our spiritual life should look like. And that is one of the key dangers, especially living in a Bible belt community like Bryan/College Station. We can become so much more interested, so much more concerned, so much more worried about what others think of our spiritual life than what God thinks about our spiritual life. We can measure our spiritual effectiveness compared to others instead of looking at it in the eyes of God. And what James is reminding us of here is that it doesn't matter if you have a pure and undefiled bank account. It doesn't matter if you have a pure and undefiled record of church involvement. It doesn't matter if you have a pure and undefiled reputation in this community. All those things can be true and you can be a spiritual fraud. The mark of true and undefiled religion is the way we stand before God, the way we walk in faithfulness to His commands. And if that's true, the warning is coming to us saying, do you see your spiritual life the way that God sees it? And to answer that question, we need to see the other warnings that are imbedded in this text. Because there are two ways we can test that reality according to the text.

So let's go on to the middle of the verse here. Because there is imbedded our second warning. James tells us that we also must see people the way that God sees them. So notice the way the middle of the verse says it there. Here's what true and undefiled religion is.

to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,

So here we've been in the last few weeks talking about God's heart for every generation reaching the next generation. And maybe you've been energized by that vision, you've desired for God to raise up laborers. You've wanted to see God open up the doors of effective ministry on campus and in our community. You're ready to get off the sidelines and into the game. And all these things might be true for us, Central, but we might miss the heart of God as we pursue it. Why? Because as the text tells us here, there are two groups that we might be tempted to overlook as we seek to reach the next generation. And who are they? Orphans and widows. The lost generation and the last generation. Those on the margins and those in the shadows. And James is pleading with us, calling us to this reality that what it looks like to follow God with all our hearts, if you want to know if you're doing it, are you committed to serving those who can do nothing for you in return? That's the test. That's the test he lays out right here. And so, I'm just curious as we begin to talk about orphans and widows, how many of you, just by show of hands in the room, know somebody whether it's yourself or someone close to you that is either fostered or adopted kids before. Let me see your hands, all around the room. OK. And let me also ask you by the same show of hands, how many of you even right now, there's someone in your family or close to you whose towards the end of life who during this season is requiring extra attention and support from you or others who are close to you? Does anybody else fit that category? I saw some enthusiastic waving hands on that. You're right in the thick of it. James is speaking to all of us about these two realities. And he tells us that when it comes to orphans and widows, we need to both remember and to reach them. And you see that reality there right in the verb, to visit. Now when you see that word, you think of what it looks like to say, go visit your great grandmother in the assisted living facility. Where you show up because you have to, you try to spend the minimum amount of time there, it's always an awkward conversation, you never know what the smell is quite going to be like, but it's never going to be normal. You're just doing it to get it done, to check the box. Is that the kind of picture, a visit, that James is speaking of here in the text? By no means! Instead, if you look deeper into the heart of what this word means in the original language, it's not just a temporary visit, it's a deep commitment. It is a taking care of, it's a personal investment. It's not something where we look at that person with indifference, but investment. And why is it that James is calling us to that reality? Well, look at how he describes them. He says, orphans and widows in their affliction. There's a sense of suffering, trouble, a distress that James is calling us to meet them in the moment, in that deep need. And you can think about that reality back in that culture. Where if you're an orphan or a widow, you are in crisis. There is no social safety net. There's no government programs. There's no in-home hospice or help. There is no guarantee that others will care for you. You are in dire situations. And James tells us if we want to be faithful to the heart of God as we seek to reach the next generation, we can't do it by overlooking orphans and widows.

So let's take a few minutes to think about each of these groups, talking first about orphans. Have you ever wondered where that word, orphan, comes from? Well, it comes right here from a verse like this. Because in the original Greek, the word is *orphanous*. An *orphanous* is someone who has lost their parents, either by death or disengagement. They are left to themselves. And

one of the pictures that the New Testament uses over and over again to talk about the way that God sets us free from our sin and rescues us unto salvation, is through the spiritual picture of adoption. That you and I were orphans, we were prodigal sons and daughters running from God. And yet He has reconciled us, brought us back into the family through adoption. And I love the way that the late theologian J. I. Packer talks about the nature of this spiritual adoption. He says this: adoption is the highest privilege of the Gospel. The traitor is forgiven; brought in for supper and given the family name. To be right with God, the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater. He goes on to say, were I asked to focus the New Testament message in three words, my proposal would be adoption through propitiation. And I do not expect ever to meet a richer or more pregnant summary of the Gospel than that. Adoption in Christ. That's what God has done for us. Taking spiritual orphans and bringing us into His family. And part of what it looks like to visit orphans in their distress is to put into practice this spiritual picture. To take what God has done for us and seek to love and to care for those practically who are in need because they are orphans in our community. And no, I don't think that necessarily means that every family in this room is called to adopt or to foster. Although some of you, I pray, are. But what it does mean, James 1:27 is calling all of us to care for the most vulnerable among us. And one of the ways that looks like is that we need to get off the sidelines and get in the game, to serve those that are in need in this way. It doesn't come through a change first in our programs, but a change in our hearts. A change in our culture. And to give you a sense for what that could look like, what I want to do is turn your attention back to the video screens and I've asked one of our families in the church, David and Kristin Howell, to share some of their adoption journey and some of the ways that you can practically get involved in doing that. So let's take a moment to look at what they have to say to us this morning.

We're David and Kristin Howell. We have 4 kids, 3 biological kids. 12, 10, and 7, and then we can Carson who is our youngest. He's 5-years-old. He came to us at 8 weeks out of the foster care system. Was with us for 2 years as a foster kid and then we adopted him. And so he's permanently joined our family for the last 3 years. We decided to become a foster family for a couple reasons. Mainly because we became aware of the need for foster families in our area. How many kids were sleeping in CPS offices or didn't have safe homes to be in. We also had a heart for adoption and so we decided that to go with the need that was in our area and become a foster family. Not necessarily thinking that we would adopt from foster care, but just to meet the need of foster children to begin with. Parenthood teaches you a lot of things about maybe patience and you see some things in your kids reflected in what your mannerisms are that are negative maybe and you see those reflected in your children and allow you to improve. But a foster kid has a whole new set of challenges that really show you how God views us and how even though we don't deserve it He loves us. And so it's the same, almost, approach of these kids come from really tough places. They have some challenges. But it teaches you how to love unconditionally. This is a calling from the Lord. This is not just an easy thing that you decide to do. It definitely has to be something that you feel the Lord has equipped you to do and has not necessarily that you were going to be great it but that you take the step knowing that this is for His glory. That the workers that you're meeting with and the biological family and the judges and the lawyers and the children. That you are a witness to them just by being a part of the foster care system and that you're meeting immediate needs for children and families. Not everyone's going to be able to be a foster parent or be an adoptive family. But there are many ways in which the church

can serve that community. One of those is through Central's Call to Care ministry. If you could get involved in that in multiple avenues, the Care Portal is one of the easy ways to just meet a need of a family that's been touched by the CPS system. There's a lot of different ways to reach out to them and reach their needs.

If you feel the Lord stirring your heart to jump into our Call to Care adoption and foster care ministry, I want you to know, right after the service today, directly outside here by our Faith @ Home Center, we'll have our Call to Care ministry out there at the table. They can share more about what it looks like to get involved, either the Care Portal or through some of the other wrap around services we have, or even if you're interested in taking a next step towards adoption and foster care. And here's one of the reasons I would challenge some of you to prayerfully consider if the Lord might be stirring you to begin the adoption process. Even as I was prepping this week for this Sunday's message, our friends at Aggieland Pregnancy Outreach contacted me. This is our local adoption agency. And they said, "We've had something very unusual happen. Right now, we have no families in our pipeline who could be adoptive families in our community. None." Very unusual, very rare. There is the need because an opportunity may come up soon. But they may not even be able to step in and fill that unless people are stirred by God to take that step forward. And I want to challenge you to prayerfully consider if that may be something that the Lord is doing in the heart of your family.

See, James is speaking to us here about what it looks like to not only care for orphans, but now let's think for a few minutes about what it looks like to care for widows in their distress. You'll see that back there in the middle of verse 27. He talks there about widows. This, in that time period, would be the same as today. A woman who has lost her husband and she is not on her own. And that would typically come through death. But in that culture, she would be left behind with no income, no support, no help around here. That's why it's not surprising that one of the first conflicts in the early church they have to navigate back in Acts 6 is, how are we going to provide and care for these Greek widows in our midst? It's the reason why God raised up deacons and used them for the first time in the church to meet the tangible needs of these women in the shadows. What I know though is that in a culture like today, yes, we have widows including dozens of the most amazing people in our church who are in that situation due to death. But that's not the only way that women experience the loss of that man in their life. Because in addition to losing that man in their life through death, sometimes it happens through the circumstances of life. And we're surrounded by single moms, both within our church and around us in our community who functionally fit this exact category. Struggling day to day to provide, to care, to keep the energy going, to keep things functioning and we can step in and love them well. As a matter of fact, when James 1:27 is speaking here of visiting orphans, there's a sense in which it's speaking to the broader ecosystem of our legacy adults, both within the church and beyond. Why is that? It's because back in that cultural time period, we did not have the medical advances that would allow for the long lifespans we have today. And back in that cultural time period, you would not have the similar circumstances where families might be separated and scattered by hundreds or thousands of miles. And when you combine long lives with long distance, you can create functional orphans or widows in the late stages of people's life. And what the Scripture is challenging us to this morning is how do we love them to the finish? How do we serve them faithfully?

I came across a story not long ago of a man named Frank Notaft who has been married to his wife, Nikki, for 60 years. And some of the most challenging years of their marriage have been in the last few as dementia has begun to take over her body. In fact, things had advanced to such a stage that he put her into an assisted living home that specialized in dementia care. But every day he would leave his house, show up there, eat meals with her, hold hands walking the hallways together, which is what made it especially hard for Frank when COVID showed up on the doorstep of his community and they changed the visitation rules at his assisted living facility. He was no longer able to enter in. But guess what. That didn't stop him from visiting. What he did every single day is he would show up outside her room and he would interact with her through the window. In fact, he became such a consistent presence that the workers there and others began to bring food to him and cookies. When it got cold, they brought him a heater. When the weather was dire, they brought him a tent. He was there every day to serve this woman who was still his wife yet functionally a widow, separated by this pane of glass. Why? Because he loved her. Because he was committed to her. Because he wanted to pour out his life for her. And when James speaks here of this call to visit widows in their affliction, that is James 1:27 in action. That type of love, that type of visitation, that type of self-sacrifice. And I'm looking around this room and I know there are dozens of you who are right in the middle of that yourselves. That mother or grandmother. That uncle or neighbor who can't care for themselves anymore, who need your help. They need your support. You give and you give and you give and get nothing in return. There's no care, there's no compensation, there's no comfort for you. You don't know if anybody sees or notices. You never feel appreciated. You wonder if it's worth it and James 1:27 is telling you, keep pressing on, it's worth it. It's a picture of pure and undefiled religion. See, what James is reminding us of is we can't be effective in reaching the next generation if we fail to care for the lost generation of orphans and the last generation of widows in our midst.

But I want you to notice with me at the end of this verse there is one final warning to us if we want to be a church where every generation is reaching the next generation. Notice that last phrase there. He says:

[to keep oneself unstained from the world.](#)

The third warning we see in this text is that we must see the world the way that God sees it. We must see the world the way that God sees it. And what he is showing us is that if we want to be a next generation church, the only way it will happen is if we walk faithfully in this generation. And a faithful walk today depends on seeing the world around us in the way that God sees it. So how does he see? Well, look at the way he describes our relationship to the world in the passage. He calls us to keep oneself unstained. That word unstained there literally means without spot, without blemish, without defect or fault. In other words, James is calling us to a life of personal holiness, personal purity, unstained from the world around us. And don't miss the visual he's giving us here. The world around us is full of things that will stain us, taint us, blemish us, harm us. And what James is reminding us of is there is one of two things that will happen in your life. Either the world will leave a mark on you or you will leave a mark on the world. Keep oneself unstained from the world. Y'all know we're raising 4 boys at home and they're at school at Brazos Christian School. They require them to wear uniforms and you can choose red, white, or blue for the shirts. And if you were to come to our closets, you'd see a closet full of red and blue options and no whites. And there's a reason for that. And you moms in here already know the

reason before I say it. The reason is because if they get a stain, let me rephrase that, when they get a stain, if that happens on that white shirt, it's a lot harder to hide it, isn't it? It's a lot harder to get it out. It's a lot harder to cover it up. And so we selected shirts that would make it easier to hide the stains that they would inevitably get. I can't help but wonder this morning for how many of us is that the way we live our spiritual lives? Hiding the stain of our sin. Seeking to cover it up. Seeking to overcome its reality by doing good things for God instead of doing what James is calling us to here. To recognize the spiritual reality that is true for everyone in the world. See, the problem that James is reminding us of is that no one on this earth can escape the stain of sin. We live in a world where every one of us is marked by brokenness. And as a result of that, the world has made its mark on us. There's nothing we can do to hide it. We can never force it to go away. We can't cleanse it on our own. But James is reminding us in the pure and undefiled religion that's at the heart of God, that what we cannot do on our own, Jesus did for us. You remember that Gospel reality? How the Scripture tells us though our sins were as scarlet, what has God done for us? He's made them white as snow. He's taken the stain of the shame of your sin and he set it aside on the cross making payment for your sins so that you might be set free so that you might walk in newness of life so that you might because you're bought with a price no longer be marked by the stains of this world. God takes those of you just like you and me who are prodigal sons and daughters running from God, heading into a far country, and He doesn't leave us to ourselves, He invites us into the family through the blood of Jesus Christ. He reconciles us. He gives us that seat at the table so that those of us who are spiritual orphans might be sons and daughters of the King.

That's why right now I want to invite you to grab those cards in the seat back in front of you. If you haven't already pulled that out, take it out here in just a moment. If you've got something to write with, I'm going to challenge you to take a step with me this morning. Because all around our community there are people that don't know Jesus in a saving way. And as we step into this Christmas season, we want to take time to pray for them. Maybe it's a co-worker, a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a loved one. Who knows, it might be looking down the row at the person you're going to write on this card. What I want to challenge you to do is pick out one person during this Christmas season to pray for. Like I told you, we did this last year and we put hundreds of them in the chicken wire display that's already up out in the foyer and we'll be doing the same this week. And last year I wrote down a name on this card just like you did. Guess what? The name I wrote down on the card earlier this year, during the summer God brought that person to know Jesus. And I'm trusting he's going to do it again. To take spiritual orphans, those that are far from Him and bring them near by the blood of Christ. I want us to take a moment to pray in just a second. But in the quietness of your own heart, if you've got a pen, I want you to write that name down right now so that when we pray, we can pray specifically for that person. You take a moment now and then I'll pray.

Let's pray together.

Father, as we reflect on Your heart for widows and orphans, as we reflect on the spiritual gift of adoption, we pray that You would be at work among us even now as we write the names on these cards, God. We're praying and coming to You that You will take the names that are written on these cards and that You will write your names on their hearts. We pray that this will be a season of rescue where those who are far off are brought near. Where those who have never experienced Your mercy discover Your peace. And where those who are spiritual orphans are

brought into Your family. And I pray even now You use open doors and open hearts and the open mouths of our people to bring this reality about. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.