

# TOGETHERFORADOPTION

## The Forgotten Part of James 1:27 (Parts 1-2)

*"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).*

As I was preparing for the breakout session I gave at the April 30 - May 1 Christian Alliance for Orphans Summit V, I spent some time thinking about what it means "to keep oneself unstained from the world." It's the part of James 1:27 that we orphan advocates sometimes neglect—not because we think it's unimportant, but because we're so burdened for orphans. So, I thought it would be wise for me to think about this forgotten part of James 1:27, particularly as it relates to our efforts to care for orphans.

I began by considering what being unstained by the world might look like. By "world" James is referring to its value system. The world tells us that our fundamental identity is determined by *our* performance. It seduces us to find our main sense of significance in what we do. In Luke 15, "the world" seduced the prodigal son into seeking his significance, his identity, by doing his own thing on his own terms. His pursuit of identity and significance was performance based.

But "the world" also seduced the elder brother in Luke 15. He was seduced into seeking his significance, his identity, by conforming to his father's standards (see Tim Keller's *The Prodigal God* for an in-depth look at Luke 15). When things didn't work out like he had hoped, he became furious. What we learn is that the elder brother's pursuit of identity and significance was just as performance based as his prodigal brother's was.

As long as each of the brothers received a good return on his performance, life was good. But as soon as the return went south, so did their sense of meaning and significance. Their problem was *not* their circumstances. It was that they had become stained by the world and its performance-based value system.

The world tells us that our fundamental identity is determined by our performance not by the performance of another (i.e., Jesus). It seduces us to believing (often unknowingly) that our main sense of significance is found in what we do or in what we're involved in.

It might look like this: "God is pleased with me because I have given my life to caring for the least of these." Now, does God smile at us when we care for orphans? Yes,

but if the main way we sense his smile is by *our efforts* to care for orphans, then chances are we've become stained by the world.

If our primary sense of God's smile upon us comes from our involvement in caring for the least of these, then it's highly likely that to some extent our lives are performance-based rather than grace-based. In other words, it may be that *my functional* paradigm of Christian living is: "I share God's heart for the orphan; therefore, God is pleased with me," rather than "God is pleased with me *because of Jesus; therefore, I am freed to care for the orphan.*" There is a massive difference between these two ways of thinking. To think the first way is to be stained by the world. To think the second way is to be unstained by the world.

How do I know if I'm being stained by the world in my efforts to care for orphans? It is likely that I'm being stained by the world's performance-based system of living if I look down on those who don't share this heart or passion for orphans. Sure, I may be "visiting orphans in their affliction," but if I'm looking down on those who don't "get it," I'm not keeping myself unstained by the world (at least in this area of my life).

So, what should I do if I find myself being stained by the world in this area of my life? Answer: Look to Jesus. Scripture's teaching on adoption comes to the rescue time and time again for people like me. By his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has forever secured the Father's pleasure and acceptance for us. I have been adopted by God, not because of *my* performance but because of *Jesus'*

My performance earned me the status of a "son of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). As a result, I had "no hope" and was "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But Jesus was the true Son: he lived the life I should have lived and died the death I should have died. He who always did the will of the Father was treated at the cross as if he were the son of disobedience, and he did this for my sake (2 Cor. 5:21) that I might become a son of God by grace through faith (Gal. 4:4-6; Eph. 2:8).

Think of it this way: while the world stains us with

performance-based mud, the gospel washes us clean with grace-based water. When the performance-based world stains us, it also stains everything we do, including our efforts to care for orphans. But when the grace-based gospel does its cleansing work, it daily frees us to care for orphans without looking down on those who don't yet share this passion. The gospel daily reminds us that God is pleased with us not because of what we do but because of what Jesus has done for our sakes.

God's smile is upon us because we have received adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. When we were spiritual orphans, God visited us in our affliction in the person of His Son so that we might become His sons by adoption. If there's anything that will keep us unstained from the world (and there is!), it is the gospel of grace. Only the gospel has the power to free us to visit orphans in their affliction and to patiently love and embrace our brothers and sisters in Christ at the same time. Only the gospel can produce "religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father."

## Part Two

After posting my article, "The Forgotten Part of James 1:27," I received some excellent feedback that I think warrants a second post. Here's the feedback:

From my quick read, you seem to think that performance-based Christianity is the stain of the world. But isn't performance what James is addressing there?

In the first chapter, he addresses wrong thinking about trials, joy, anger, wickedness, doing the Word, and controlling the tongue. In the second, he addresses partiality, mercy, and the necessity of works to validate true faith.

Don't get me wrong, I think what you said was true. I just didn't see where you got it from James.

When I argued that being stained by the world means being seduced by its "performance-based" value system, I was referring to the kind of thinking that says, "God accepts me **because** I've performed." That is certainly **not** what James is saying anywhere in his letter.

Yes, James is concerned about action; but his concern is for action that flows out of belief. Genuine belief in the gospel *results* in Christian action (i.e., bridling the tongue, v.26; caring for widows and

orphans, v. 27; showing no partiality, 2:1; etc) because the gospel produces Christian action.

So really, the question we must answer is this: what is this gospel that produces Christian action? It is the good news that in Jesus "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). It is the good news that God has accepted me because of Jesus, "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). It is the good news that for our sake God made Jesus "to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). We could go on and on.

My point is that the kind of action that James calls for is action that is based on and produced by the performance (i.e., action) of another. The Christian paradigm of living says, "I care for widows and orphans, bridle my tongue, and show no partiality because God has cared for me, has spoken the life-giving words of the gospel into my heart, and has accepted me because of who Jesus is for me."

In a sense, we could say that both the world and Christianity are performance-based. The world calls us to look to our own performance; its paradigm of living is me-centered: "I care for the orphan; therefore, God accepts me." Christianity invites us to look to the performance of another; its paradigm of living is Jesus-centered: "God has already accepted me because of Jesus; therefore, I care for the orphan."

Ultimately, to be stained by the world is to operate from a me-centered, performance-based paradigm. If this is the paradigm we live by, after a while, we stop "doing the Christian life." Why? Because it's so draining and exhausting. We were never meant to live by our own performance. We were meant to live by the performance of another, namely, Jesus.

So, what James is calling for is a Christianity that lives out of true faith. He's calling for action that's based on and that flows out of the performance of another.

If anything will sustain the church's care for orphans for the next 20, 50, or 70 years, it will be the performance of Jesus. In other words, the orphan's hope is the gospel of Jesus. The gospel is the one thing—the only thing—that can mobilize and empower the church to care for orphans in their affliction until Jesus returns.

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