

First Baptist Church Merritt Island
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Pure Religion
James 1:19-27

About 16 or 17 years ago, Emily and I had just gotten our kids to bed. And, like all parents of young kids, we were exhausted and looking forward to collapsing on the couch for a few minutes before bed. Em was coming down the hall toward the living room and stopped by our children's toy box and said, "Titus, come here."

I jumped off the couch and joined my wife by the toy box and there it was. A massive spider. The way I remember it; it was monstrous and clearly malicious. Emily just kept saying, "We can't let it get to the babies. We can't let it get to the babies."

So, we had to figure out a way to kill this spider without accidentally chasing it into the toy box where it would no doubt find a hiding spot to attack our children. With military precision, we worked to remove everything we could from around the spider so we could get a clear path for one of my size 11 shoes and bring this monster to its God-appointed end.

Finally, we had our window of opportunity and, with every ounce of energy and courage I had, I cheered Emily on as she killed the spider. The instant relief and celebration and joy. To know our babies were safe and the threat was removed. I raised a hallelujah.

But the celebration was short-lived. It turns out the spider we killed was a wolf spider. And wolf spiders carry their babies on their back – up to 100 at a time. So, when we killed out mutant wolf spider, what seemed like a thousand little spiders scattered everywhere around us. So, instead of having one battle, we had a thousand battles on our hands. It was overwhelming and we had no idea what to do next.

And that's where I feel like we are in the fight for life in this country. For decades, pro-life advocates worked to have Roe v. Wade overturned. We did it to protect our babies. We celebrated when that day finally arrived in 2022. But the celebration was short-lived. What felt like one battle has turned into a thousand. Legislation is all over the map. We live in one of the most politically conservative states in the nation. This past election, over 57% of Floridians voted in favor of one of the most liberal abortion laws in the nation. Thankfully, it required 60% to become law. But that is a disturbing trajectory. It gets even more concerning when we look at the national picture. Nine states plus Washington D.C. have passed laws that allow abortion with no gestational limit, meaning up until the moment of birth. Add to that the access that is being given to abortion pills, alongside states that do not require parental consent for minors to obtain abortions. When Roe v. Wade was overturned, we didn't crush the spider of abortion, we scattered a thousand more across our nation.

So, what do we do now? Time will not permit me to try and form a comprehensive answer to that question. So, I want to spend the time we have meditating on a passage that I believe provides important insight for us as we continue advocating for the lives of the unborn.

James 1:26-27

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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.

The word 'religion' in these verses simply refers to devotion to a god. It can be devotion to a false god or to the One, True God. And James makes it abundantly clear that there is only one, true God. As a matter of fact, James clarifies that in the next verse.

James 2:1

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

The pure religion James is talking about is a devotion to the one and only Lord of Glory whose name is Jesus Christ. And the way we are devoted to Him is through faith. We come into relationship with the One, true God through faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Just like we saw last week, it is only through the power of Christ in us that we can do anything pleasing to God.

So, James is clearly not teaching some pluralistic view of religion as though all religions have equally valid claims. You cannot be devoted to the one, true God without being devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ through faith. But how does that pure devotion, or pure religion, take shape?

Well, James says there are really only two types of religion. One type is worthless. The other type is pure and undefiled before God.

Verse 26 tells us something that characterizes worthless religion. James says it's an unbridled tongue and a deceived heart. Basically, worthless religion is all talk and leaves your heart unchanged. That means it's entirely possible to claim you are trusting in Jesus and following after Him yet be self-deceived with a life that's unchanged by His power. It's possible to have a so-called "Christian" religion that's all talk. That's what Jesus says in Matthew 7:21-23 – many will come to Him and say "Lord, Lord, didn't we do lots of things in your name?" Jesus will say, "Get away from me, I never knew you." James says that kind of religion is worthless. It does you no good.

Then, Verse 27 tells us some of what characterizes pure and undefiled religion in God's eyes. Visiting orphans and widows in the place of their affliction and keeping yourself unstained from the world. And when you put those together, they give you our big idea for this morning.

Big Idea: Pure religion talks less, helps the helpless and avoids worldliness.

My hope for this morning is to dig into each of those areas and see how they inform our approach to the issue of abortion. So, let's take them one at a time.

1. PURE RELIGION TALKS LESS

v26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Now, talking less isn't the same as being silent. And the church of Jesus can't be silent on the issues of our day. At the same time, we don't prove our devotion to Christ through the abundance of words. We don't honor Jesus by running our mouths all the time. James says that one of the marks of Christ-centered devotion to God is that we learn to bridle our tongues. As a matter of fact, go back a couple of verses with me.

James 1:1

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;

A mark of spiritual maturity is that we learn how to be quick to listen and slow to speak. As we engage with each other, or our unsaved neighbors and co-workers, we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. And that includes conversations about abortion. It's important for us to hear the stories of women who are contemplating abortion. It's important for us to hear the heartbreak and pain of women who've had abortions. It's important for us to learn how to take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to give us the right words to speak so that our words don't foolishly or needlessly add to their pain. We cannot be silent, but we must be slow to speak.

But there's something else going on here. James isn't just calling us to talk less and listen more.

James 1:21

Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Notice that James' focus isn't on our words here. It's on the Word of God. The next few verses are all about receiving the authority and truth of the word of God in a way that not only hears it but puts it into practice. So, when James says we should be quick to listen and slow to speak, I believe he is primarily talking about the Word of God, the Bible.

In other words, we should be more concerned with what God has to say than what our world has to say. We should be more concerned with what God has to say than what we have to say.

So, what do we do in a culture that is increasingly devoted to abortion on demand? We increase our devotion to Jesus Christ by forming our thoughts and opinions about abortion (and everything else) from the Word of God.

- We honor the fact that the Bible teaches that every human being is made in the likeness of God and is a reflection of His magnificent glory. (Gen. 1:27; Psalm 8)
- We honor the fact that the Bible teaches that to intentionally take the life of an innocent human being is murder...including an unborn child. (Exodus 20:13; 21:22-25)
- We honor the fact that the Bible teaches that unborn babies are babies. Personhood of human beings extends to the womb. They aren't just fetuses or lumps of tissue. They are human babies. John the Baptist was a baby who experienced joy in his mother's womb. (Luke 1:39-45). David describes God's work of forming him in his mother's womb in a way that attributes personhood to that work. It was "me" that was in my mother's womb, not just a body that I would come to inhabit or a fetus that would turn into me. David says it was "me." A human person. (Psalm 139:13-18)
 - The reality is that this point is being disputed less and less as time goes by. Genetic research shows that at the moment of conception, a unique and complete genetic code is formed and exists within a distinct, living organism...a living human being. Many pro-abortion advocates are willing to admit that unborn children are living human beings.
 - At a 2014 panel discussion presented by the National Abortion Federation, abortion advocate Dr. Lisa Harris of Planned Parenthood summed it up like this: "[Mothers] are not stupid. They know what's in there. It's violence. It's a person. It's killing." (Des Moines Register; 12/12/2018)
 - It's what the Bible has said all along.
- We also honor the fact that the Bible teaches that God offers forgiveness and redemption to anyone and everyone who will trust in Jesus – including those who have had or performed abortions in their past. (John 3:16; Romans 10:13)
- We honor the fact that the Bible tells us to love and bless those who hate us and oppose us. (Matthew 5:43-48)

On the issue of abortion, like every other issue in our world, what matters most is what God has to say. And we display our devotion to Him when we care less about letting everyone around us know what we think and care more about what God has said in His word, the Bible. Religion that doesn't bridle our tongues is worthless. And, the Bible is the bridle that reigns over our words.

2. PURE RELIGION HELPS THE HELPLESS

James 1:27

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction

Orphans and widows were two of the most vulnerable and helpless groups of people in the ancient world. Orphans had no parents to care for them. There was no government foster care system, so they had to fend for themselves. Widows were vulnerable because women were largely unable to secure livable incomes or own property. Without a man to provide those things, widows in the ancient world were nearly helpless. And, when Jesus lives in us as we depend on Him, Jesus does what Jesus does – He helps those who cannot help themselves.

And is there anyone more helpless in our world than unborn children? Those children who are at risk for abortion are in a more helpless place than orphans – because the parent they have is seeking to end their life.

- A million children aborted each year in our nation.
- Nearly 70 million since Roe v. Wade legalized abortion in 1973.
- About 170 abortions will occur while we sit in this room.

And it is worthless religion to just talk about it. Pure religion, true devotion to Jesus, does something more than talk. We become doers and not just hearers or talkers.

In verse 27, James uses the word "visit." It means to be present for someone in order to help. It's how we might say to someone, "I'm here for you if you need me."

And you might wonder how you can help in the cause of caring for unborn children and their families. How can you be here for them in their hour of need? Let me give you 5 ways you can help.

Pray

James 5:16 The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

Pray for the hearts of our leaders. Pray for the hearts of expectant mothers. Pray for those on the front lines in our Agape Women's Center. Pray for national revival and a great awakening. You may feel powerless to change the landscape of abortion in our nation, but God's power is available to those who pray.

Vote

One of the ways we obey the biblical command to honor our government (Romans 13) is by engaging in our system of government through voting. And, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to do all things to the glory of God – including how we vote. If unborn children are children (and they are) then it is incumbent on us to pursue every ethical means to protect their lives. And voting is one of those means.

I know legislation will not fix the heart issues behind abortion, but God has ordained just laws as a way to curb the sinful inclinations of human hearts and preserve a healthier society. And we have opportunity to speak into the laws of our nation by the way we cast our votes.

Serve

Our text for next week will be John 13. Jesus calls us to love those who are in need by serving them like He has served us. Agape women's center has a table in Main Street and is hosting an open house after the service. Our team would love to share various ways you can be part of helping provide care for expectant mothers and their children who are abortion vulnerable.

Foster care/adoption

Our help for unborn children has to extend beyond the womb. Caring for orphans and children whose parents are unable to care for them has a significant impact on abortion. Many women choose abortion because they don't believe they can take care of a child, and they aren't aware that adoption is an option.

Give

Support pro-life ministries. When you give to support our Women's Center, you are helping reach into the most vulnerable segments of this community. You are providing ultrasounds that help women see that the baby in their womb is undeniably a child. You are supporting a network that helps women escape the adult entertainment industry. Giving is helping.

Pure religion is more than words. It's actions. It's being willing to be Christ's hands and feet to those who are helpless and in need. That brings us to the last part of our text.

3. PURE RELIGION AVOIDS WORLDLINESS

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.

The call of Jesus Christ is to live a life that is distinctly different than what is normalized in a fallen and sinful world. We are called to be holy just as Christ is holy. We are called to reject the patterns of sin that plague this world. As it pertains to the issue of abortion.

- We are called to live in purity and abstain from every single form of sexual sin that is at the root of the abortion industry.
- We are called to love our unborn neighbor and the mothers of unborn children.
- We are called to put away the kind of corrosive and hateful speech that marks most hot button discussions in our culture, so that while we contend for the cause of life, we
- We are called to reject a self-centered life that turns a blind eye and a deaf ear to those in need.

We are called to keep our lives unstained by this world. Religion that is all talk is worthless. Religion that fails to change our hearts and lives is worthless and will never change our world. As we talk about purging the sin of abortion from our culture, we had better be just as passionate about purging the various sins from our own lives.

And that's why we need Jesus. Like we saw last week, apart from Christ, we can do nothing. It's only as Jesus lives in us through faith and dependence that we can live the life He is calling us to live. So, are you trusting in Jesus today? How is Jesus stirring you to talk less, help the helpless, and avoid worldliness?