

James 1:17-27

September 20, 2009 – 16th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Pure Religion

✦ **Honors the Giver** (vv.17,18)

✦ **Listens – to do** (vv.19-25)

✦ **Guards – to care** (vv.26,27)

In the name of Jesus, God's greatest Gift who does all things well, dearly beloved children of God:

Do you think there would be less animosity in the world if everyone practiced **Pure Religion**? Do you practice **Pure Religion**? What if the Pope of Rome in 1054, and the Patriarch of Constantinople had let Christ be the Head of the church instead of excommunicating each other? Would a pure, united Christian church have held against the Muslim Turks? And if **Pure Religion** had driven the Crusades, wouldn't the Roman Catholic West have spared the Eastern Orthodox Christians such damage on the way to Jerusalem? Can you blame a prison chaplain for checking out our "Lutheran" pastors if "Lutherans" lately in the news are passing resolutions for what God calls "*abomination*" (Leviticus 18:22)? Should I be surprised my neighbor has a hard time with my religion if I've spoken unkind, judgmental words to him? **Pure Religion** God wants because He wants everyone to be saved. **Pure Religion** starts inside and...

✦ **Honors the Giver** (vv.17,18)

What is it about prosperity that make people so poor? You'll never find a more poverty stricken church than when someone gives such a large gift that everyone else forgets how **Pure Religion Honors the Giver**. Marvin Schwann gave only the average to his local congregation and the rest to Confessional Lutheran synods lest he stifle good stewardship. Why in the "Roaring Twenties" and ".com Nineties" did our synod go into debt unless we were forgetting that **Pure Religion Honors the Giver**? Winning the lottery is not good if you still end up borrowing more than you can repay. Easy mortgages seem good until people start losing their homes when reality strikes. Does what looks good on vacation still taste so fine back home when the bills come in? **Pure Religion** sees rust and eternal death in the sin of coveting.

God is gracious. James is reminding his fellow Jewish Christians that God does not tempt anyone, so don't blame God. Since prosperity can bite like a rabid dog, James warns, "*Don't be deceived, my brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*" He loved us from all eternity. To remove the sin of coveting forbidden fruit God promised His greatest Gift of a Savior. He wrote His Law to mirror our sin and gave the Gospel of His Son who would wash that sin away with His holy, precious blood. From all eternity, "*He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*" Think of that! You are God's gift to Himself, the first and best of the bumper crop He produced through the death and resurrection of our volunteer Savior Jesus Christ. "*I will...take delight in my people,*" (Isaiah 65:119 NIV), says the LORD, **the Giver** of "*every good and perfect gift.*"

Do you delight in Him? Do you **Honor the Giver** with the firstfruits of your income as the LORD has honored you as the firstfruits of His delight? When I sit with my bills in one hand and my paycheck in another, selfish fear doubts, but faith trusts God the gracious **Giver**. **Pure Religion** seeks forgiveness for selfish fear and help to **Honor** God with the first check. Firstfruits giving trusts that the **Giver** will more than repay whatever we give back to Him. You can't out-give **the Giver**, but it sure is fun to try. "*Humbly accept the Word,*" "*Whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*" (2 Corinthians 9:6 NIV)

✦ **Listens – to do** (vv.19-25)

Can you feel how **Pure Religion** reaches deep inside? James is writing to church people who seem to have known about Paul's emphasis on salvation by grace through faith alone, but kept cutting off God's goal. In the great grace passage Ephesians 2:8 and 9, a tenth verse follows. Remember? "*For it is*

by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:8-10 NIV)

James is helping us not to ignore verse 10. He totally agrees with Paul because both were inspired by God the Holy Spirit. And our Lutheran Confessions echo this agreement. Last Fall we reviewed in the Augsburg Confession that good works are necessary, but not for salvation. Salvation is done. Heaven is won as a free gift of God’s grace. But good works are necessary to prove you have faith to receive it. Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. Or as James puts it, **“Faith without works is dead.”** (2:20 KJV)

God does not want His people to walk away and forget what they hear. **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”** And if you think you do, watch out because not one of us has reached heaven’s perfection or the holiness God’s law requires. James warns: **“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”** (2:10 NIV) God declares us righteous for Jesus’ sake. Now **Pure Religion** goes to work. It **Listens – to do.**

James’ example crumples our pride. **“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”** The Bible acknowledges righteous anger in things that make God angry. But when we try to accomplish anything by our anger, our sinful nature gives the devil a foothold. **“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”** Look intently into **“God’s perfect word which makes [you] free...not merely listening and then forgetting, but actually doing what it says.”** (NETNT) Blessing abound when **Pure Religion – Listens – to do,** and...

⚔ **Guards – to care** (vv.26,27)

Most of us have experienced what terrible damage is done when someone’s tongue gets loose. It isn’t just ships that can sink from loose lips. **“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”** You would understand **“worthless”** quite painfully if you suddenly saw yourself in a mirror criticizing someone not there. Gossip can destroy a congregation in no time, and it can be a major stumbling block for someone’s faith. I praise God for His forgiveness of every slip of my tongue. I praise God for helping guard us here at New Life. A new member noted one thing he likes about New Life is how “there isn’t much gossip in this church.” And another member said, “Don’t even listen to it.” I’ve been so impressed by God’s grace in WELS pastors who catch the group straying and simply say, “We don’t want to break the Eighth Commandment.” Indeed, we don’t. We want to defend our neighbor, speak well of him and put the best construction on everything, taking his words and actions in the kindest possible way.

Pure Religion thanks God then guards His grace and mercy in order **to care** for others as God so deeply cares for us. Sometimes we feel distressed, alone and forgotten, like David when he felt so dry and dusty inside. Desert sands can destroy your soul when it seems that love gets up and runs away. David cried out in Psalm 27: **“Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior. Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.”** (Psalm 27:9f NIV) Heartfelt prayers move God’s heart to pity. I may feel weak and miserable, but thanks to God’s grace in Jesus my **Pure Religion** Savior, I can say with His Apostle Paul, **“When I am weak, then I am strong.”** (2 Corinthians 12:10)

James and all the apostles rejoiced that the Lord loves us so much to promise, **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”** (Hebrews 13:5) Now we want to live **Pure Religion** by being kind and faithful to others. **“Religion is pure and unstained before God the Father if people look after orphans and widows in their troubles and keep themselves unspotted from the world.”** (NETNT) Impossible for us, but God’s great gift in Christ Jesus polished us up to put us on His trophy shelf. He plans to keep polishing the gold of our faith until it gleams and glistens in the glory of heaven. **Pure Religion** is in God’s hands that still delight to hold you close in Christ. Amen.