

# Exegesis of James 1:27

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## Introduction

James 1:27 defines what religion God accepts as pure and defiled, and is regularly interpreted as being composed of two distinct actions: caring for the needy, and keeping oneself unstained from the world. However, looking at the evidence, a more accurate interpretation is that the religion that God accepts as pure and undefiled is a single action and its effectuation: caring for orphans and widows effects keeping unstained from the world.

## Translation

If we read just the English translations, we are left assuming that there are two commands. However, if we read the Greek, that assumption is not as clear. In the English translations of James 1:27, the translators have universally added the word “and” before “to keep.” The “and” does not exist in the Greek text. Not only do the translations all include the word “and”, commentators universally refer to this as being the second command of the verse, assuming that the conjunction exists. This assumption is so pervasive that the major commentaries don’t even point out the fact that there is no “and” in the original language. So, we must ask why this is the case.

The phrase “to keep” is translated from the Greek word τηρεῖν. The verb is in the infinitive form and in its context conveys the concept of purpose, or “in order that.” Taking that into consideration, we might read that pure and undefiled religion is caring for orphans and widows in their distress in order to keep oneself unstained by the world. This translation provides a very different starting point for interpretation than the published English translations. On the surface, this translation appears to be awkward and difficult. This difficulty

of interpretation is not only a difficulty in English, but given the textual variant that is found in <sup>74</sup>, which suggests that orphans and widows are to be kept apart from the world, we see evidence that it is perhaps difficult even in Greek. This difficulty interpreting the text may have led the translators to include the “and” due to its seemingly easier interpretation.

## Interpretation as Two Commands

The standard translation that includes the “and” leads to an interpretation that must see pure and undefiled religion as having two very distinct aspects. The first aspect is outwardly focused on orphans and widows, whereas the second part is focused on oneself. This provides a nice dichotomy where one aspect is focused on action towards others and the other aspect is action focused towards oneself. This dual natured aspect of pure religion fits well with the Hebrew Bible reference James makes to the second great command, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right” (James 2:8, NIV).

The interpretation as two distinct commands seemingly fits well into the context of James as a whole. However, we are left with a few oddities. First of all, it seems strange to bring in orphans and widows here. James has just given an example of worthless religion, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless” (James 1:26, NRSV) and is now trying to contrast that. It would seem that we should expect the opposite of an unbridled tongue as the contrast. We find that contrast in “to keep oneself unstained from the world.” With that contrast found, we are left to wonder what to do with the “first” command. The second difficulty is the vagueness of being unstained by the

world. It seems clear what the effect is supposed to be, but not clear as to how that effect is arrived at.

### **Interpretation as One Command**

If we accept a more literal translation which does not include the “and”, but rather takes into consideration the “in order that” meaning of the infinitive verb, we are forced to an entirely different interpretation of this verse. This translation forces us to deal with James telling us that religion that is pure and undefiled is one where a person cares for orphans and widows in order to keep unstained from the world.

### **Comparison to standard Interpretation**

With this interpretation, we have not lost any of the literary techniques that the two-command interpretation gives us. This interpretation still gives us the dichotomy between the external action and the internal action, and the tie to 2:8 that the standard interpretation does.

In addition to retaining the good aspects of the two-command interpretation, this interpretation resolves the oddities that the standard translation leaves us with. We no longer are left with wondering how we are to keep unstained by the world; we are told directly that it is through caring for orphans and widows in their distress. It is this outward action that effects the inward state of being unstained by the world. If we look at orphans and widows as a specific group instead of a generalization of the poor and needy, their inclusion becomes clear.

### ***Orphans and widows***

James tethers orphans and widows together for a specific purpose. “In the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, almost every instance of the term "orphan" (yatom) or "fatherless" is paired

with that of the widow (almonah).”<sup>1</sup> Most commentators simply take this phrase and make it a generalization of the poor and the needy, which orphans and widows epitomize in the culture. However, the text is not so specific and “these burdens may involve physical requirements such as food or clothing, or they may be identified as emotional or spiritual needs.”<sup>2</sup>

We know that James is well versed in the Hebrew Bible. If we look deeper into the shared distress of orphans and widows with the Hebrew Bible in mind, we find something much more profound than poverty and being marginalized. Going all the way back to creation, we see that God created humans to be in relationship to Him and to one another. He instituted the husband-wife relationship and the parent-child relationship. To a wife, the most important human relationship that she has is with her husband. The most important human relationship for a child is the one with his parent. However, when sin entered the world, death also entered. Sin broke the human relationship with God and death has left orphans and widows with the lost human relationship that is so important. Although orphans and widows may share the distress of poverty, shared distress of broken relationship caused by death is much worse.

### *Resolving the distress*

The word that is often translated as “to care for” literally means “to visit.” The beauty of the word is inevitably lost in translation. “The verb *episkeptesthai* becomes in the LXX virtually a technical term for the ‘visiting’ of God to rescue or save the people.”<sup>3</sup> By “visiting”, God resolves the distress of the people. In addition, it is only by visiting that one could ever begin to

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Yeats, "The Biblical Model of Adoption," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 49, no. 1 (2006): 66.

<sup>2</sup> Vitus E. Gideon, "An Exposition of James 1," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (September 1986): 18.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Anchor Bible - The Letter Of James*, Vol. 37A (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 212.

resolve the distress that is caused by a broken relationship. In the LXX, God visits humans, but “James here makes it a covenantal obligation of *humans* toward each other.”<sup>4</sup> James is not the first to do so and makes a reference to the LXX, “Be a father to orphans, and be like a husband to their mother; you will then be like a son of the Most High, and he will love you more than does your mother” (Ecclesiasticus 4:10-11, NRSV).

### *The inward effect*

Pure and undefiled religion is a religion that leaves the individual unstained from the world. In typical James fashion, we are given an allusion to the Hebrew Bible. Purity “is a central moral demand in the Hebrew Bible, particularly as part of the sacrificial cult (e.g., Lev 19-22).”<sup>5</sup> In Leviticus, we know that God only accepts what is pure and undefiled. We also know that the result that God is seeking in the sacrificial system and the laws is holiness, which is what James is referring to by the use of the phrase “unstained from the world.”

Church documents express an understanding of orphans and widows playing a role in the effectuation of holiness utilizing the sacrificial system as a framework. “In the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which parallel and expand it, the widow [*and orphan*] appear with the metaphor of the altar.”<sup>6</sup> In these documents, we see orphans and widows as where we offer up pure and undefiled sacrifices for the purposes of holiness.

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, 212.

<sup>5</sup> C. Freeman Sleeper, *James* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 66.

<sup>6</sup> Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 106.

This is not the only place where James suggests that what we do or what we endure effects a specific inward state. In 1:3-1:4, endurance under trials effects maturity. In 2:13, having mercy on others will trump judgment upon us.

### *The effect of visiting orphans and widows*

Keeping unstained by the world is a specific concern for purity. “This concern for purity has a direct bearing on the first part of the definition. It is important for Christians not to get caught up in the quest for status and wealth.”<sup>7</sup> This is the first aspect of how visiting orphans and widows in their distress changes us. When we experience the distress of the orphan and the widow, we are faced with the realization of what the most important blessings are that God has given us: relationships. In this light, we are freed to realize the greatness of God’s blessing versus the foolishness of the world’s blessings. James provides an excellent example of how we seek the world’s blessings in 4:1-6 and attempt to be the friend of the world. There, he espouses humility. In what other way can we be humbled greater than in the midst of the distress of orphans and widows? We are left inwardly changed, unstained.

### **Conclusion**

“The thrust of James’s advice is moral rather than sociological. Christians must find a way to live in the world without adopting its value system.... That is the mark of the Christian character, which James has been describing throughout... [the] first chapter.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is the driving point in the entire letter; the holiness that God desires is effectuated by the works of our faith. It is by these works that we are left unstained by the world. The work of “visiting”

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<sup>7</sup> Toby Ziglar, "When Words Get in the Way of True Religion (James 1:19-27)," *Review and Expositor* 100, no. 2 (March 2003): 275.

<sup>8</sup> Sleeper, 67.

orphans and widows in their distress is the purest because it addresses the direst distress and it is undefiled because the earthly reward is being unstained from the world.



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