

First Light

When you see a product you're interested in is labeled as "pure", you get excited. After all, there are a whole lot of knock-offs out there. Those hybrid products are only a facsimile of the real deal. As you pick up that box or bottle or package labeled "pure", you know that what follows that purchase is going to be really, really good. That's what you get when you get the real thing. There's something genuinely special about "pure".

It seems that God is no different when it comes to recognizing the value of "pure". After all, "pure" is a natural facet of his identity. To substitute a fake or a forgery for the real thing just isn't in his thought processes. In fact, he had that in mind when he imagined a world where we might live in his presence. His plan for us was to live in purity with him and enjoy the lifetime that comes with no contaminating ingredients. Yet purity comes at a cost and humanity has been struggling with that quality ever since the fiasco in the Garden. Yet, God always had a plan for our purity problem even during all the years he smelled the aroma of a thousand sacrifices often offered with impure hearts.

In James' letter to a dispersed and persecuted people across what is now the Middle East, he placed a couple of sentences in the midst of his admonition which put enormous importance on the "purity" measure. Its simplicity is striking and yet it covers such a broad sweep of our lives. He points out what God measures when he examines our "religion". Conceptually, our religion could be thought of as that spiritual centerpiece of mind and soul which influences motives and generates actions. James implies here that there are a lot of other substitutions for religion which don't bring pleasure to God, though they may seem to be "pure" to us. He gently but firmly captures what really pleases our Father in heaven.

"Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." James 1:26-27

The Message words it like this: "Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world." It is interesting that James first points out that worthless religion starts with the thought of being just that and yet not talking with true Christ-likeness. He says it's a fake and has no value. Then he sharpens his pencil with a "so you really want to know what pure religion looks like?", sort of tone. It's attending the needs of those who cannot help themselves and it's maintaining self-control against ungodly influences of this world.

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James' words echo what Jesus spoke on the Sermon on the Mountain when he described measuring a person's true motives through speech and actions. Paul cites these purity points as being signs of a person's allegiance to Jesus and encourages disciples to love, help, serve, speak, and model Christ to others who are in need.

Truth is, we need to examine our day and see if there are some forgeries we're trying to sneak in. It might be that in looking at our hearts carefully and honestly, we can replace some of these substitute attempts to appease God with more of what really pleases him. James helps us see what God really desires from us – 100% pure religion.