



The Good News

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Pure and undefiled Religion

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On numerous occasions, people will call churches looking for a "hand-out". Generally, they are looking for help with rent, a utility bill, or they need money for gas. While I'm sure there have been some sincere needs, I have always replied that the Bible does not give us the authority to help non-Christians monetarily from the church treasury. The response to this is usually the same: there is a confused silence and then they begin arguing with my statement, or they just hang up. "I thought churches are supposed to help people!", or "Doesn't the Bible say that pure and undefiled religion is that churches help people in need?" The Bible does indeed mention "pure and undefiled religion" but is most often taken out of context and misapplied by those in the world. So what does James mean when he talks about "pure and undefiled religion" in James 1? Let us address the claims that this passage commands churches to help those in need of the world.

"Pure and undefiled religion is that churches help people!" Is this an accurate statement by some who have called seeking money for their bills? **Context:** In **James 1:26-27**, we find this passage to be in a context of being doers of the Word and not hearers only (v.22). We see pronouns such as "he" (v.23), "he" (v.25), and "every man" (v.19). In fact, the first time we see any reference at all to the church is in James 2:2 and even in this context the command is on an individual basis ("you" (v. 3), "you" (v.4)). Even the condemnation for showing partiality in verse 4 is towards individuals in saying that those who show partiality have become "judges with evil thoughts". So our context is most certainly talking to individuals, not churches. However, what does the text itself say? "*If anyone among you thinks he is religious,*" (v.26) and "*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*" (v.27) No matter how much someone twists this passage, they can never make it say this is a command to a church. **Actual Command:** Another sticky point is the fact that the command is to "*visit orphans and widows in their trouble*". These are very specific categories of people, and will not apply to most who call in asking for money. But even so, people argue that it is the spirit of the command that we help those who are in need. While I can appreciate the concept, the "spirit" of the command is to "visit" (which means to "to inspect, look upon, care for") those who are not able to help themselves. Widows and orphans had no ability to take care of themselves in that day and time, and it was good for individual brethren to

help those in need who could not help themselves. When someone calls on the phone and asks for help, there is no way for me to determine if the individual is able to help themselves or not, especially given that there are so many non-religious programs available to help people in financial need. While that does not preclude me from helping them personally, it is notable that even the "spirit" of the command is often misinterpreted to make it say what people want it to say.

"Whatever an individual can do, a church can do." When faced with the fact the **James 2:27** is referring to individuals, a cunning money-seeking caller may claim that whatever an individual can do, a church can do. This is a dangerous assumption that is not supported by Scripture. Individuals can conglomerate together, pool funds and go preach overseas as a group. Churches cannot do this. The same holds true in James 2:27. To prove this point, **I Timothy 5:15** is an excellent passage to use. We learn that if any member of a church has a widow in their family, the individual is to take care of her, and the church cannot. Only widows who are "widows indeed" can be continually supported by a local church, and there are extremely specific qualifications that define a "widow indeed". It is important to acknowledge that God has specified (by way of command, example, and necessary inference) how churches can use the funds that are contributed by the brethren. The same restrictions are not placed on individuals. While we are to be "good stewards" of what God blesses us with, we have the freedom to do what we will with what we have, within the character and conduct suitable to a Christian, of course.

So if the church cannot fulfill James 2:27, how can I fulfill it? The term in the Greek for "visit" is "episkeptomai", which means "to inspect, look upon, care for". In light of this, the fulfillment of James 2:27 is to consider the widows and orphans (and others who are not capable of helping themselves) and do what we can to help them.

In the end, the Bible says in **II Thess. 3:10**, "*If anyone will not work, neither let him eat.*" There are indeed some in the world who cannot work and have needs, or have become so overburdened by an abundance of financial responsibilities that they are having difficulties, and while an individual can and should help them if they are able, the church cannot. But the blunt truth of the matter is that the majority of those who call asking for money are simply too lazy to earn it and so they seek to burden a church with it. Let us truly understand what "pure and undefiled religion" is and how we can apply it in our lives.