

Sometimes I wonder if we make things harder than they really have to be. Well, with me, I don't wonder at all; I know I have a tendency to make things harder than they really are. That just seems to be my nature.

Here's my question for you. Is religion really hard?

Well, yes and no.

Before we go much further, let's define what religion is.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, religion is the service and worship of God or the supernatural; a commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance; a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices.

Looking at these definitions, religion is hard. Maybe it's because the definitions are confusing!

Let's back things up a little here. The word religion came into use in the 13th century, as an Anglicization of the Latin word religio. This Latin word is used for the Greek word threskeia in James 1:26 and 27.

James 1:26, 27

²⁶ 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.

So, what did the Greek word threskeia mean?

The ancient Greeks used a verb form of the word, threskian, as honoring a god or the gods. So maybe we do a disservice to the word religion by making it a weak noun. I think James may have been using the term to be a description of how we serve God.

I've referred to the GTP translation of the New Testament a few times. These two verses in James from the GTP read this way:

James 1:26, 27 (GTP)

²⁶ If any of you thinks he serves God, but does not control what he says, then he fools his own heart. His "service" to God is worth nothing. ²⁷ What God the Father accepts as pure undefiled service are things like these: take care of children who have no parents; help widows in trouble; keep yourself pure from the filth of the world.

Maybe the word service there makes a little more sense.

But who are the widows and orphans?

Let's take a look at the orphans first. The Greek word used in James here is orphanos. Another transliteration that isn't very helpful for us to understand what was originally meant in the text. Unlike today, when we think of an orphan as a child with no parents, the Greek word actually meant a child with no father; not that mothers weren't important, but fathers were the ones who provided for the family, so a fatherless person had no one to provide for them, so they were destitute; if they had no other family to support them, they lived on the streets and begged for their survival.

Just like orphans, widows are women with no husband to provide for them anymore. Without other family support, they were also left to beg on the streets for survival.

So what we see is that widows and orphans were those people who couldn't take care of their own needs; in fact, it wasn't necessary to be husbandless or fatherless to be classified with widows and orphans. That was a general category for people who were totally destitute.

The Law of Moses talked a lot about the widows and orphans.

Exodus 22:22-24

22 You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. 23 If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, 24 and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

That's pretty harsh. But God is showing his mercy to them and protecting them.

Deuteronomy 10:18

18 He [God] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

Not only did God take care of the widow and the orphan, but He made rules so that they would be taken care of.

Deuteronomy 14:28, 29

28 "At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. 29 And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

But let's see if we can take this just one step further. Take a look at

Isaiah 54:4-8

*4 "Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;
be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.*

*5 For your Maker is your husband,
the LORD of hosts is his name;
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,*

the God of the whole earth he is called.
6 *For the LORD has called you
like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God.*
7 *For a brief moment I deserted you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.*
8 *In overflowing anger for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,”
says the LORD, your Redeemer.*

And in

John 3:29

29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

We, as the Church, are the Bride of Christ.

Now take a look at

John 1:11-13

11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

So, as the Church, we are also children of God; God is our Father (and we pray to Him that way).

So, if we’re Christians, in a way, even if we are widows or orphans, we’re not, because God is our Father, and Christ is our Bridegroom.

This puts a different spin on who widows and orphans are, if you think about it. The Fatherless are those without God, and the widows are those who don't know Christ as the Bridegroom.

Let's look at James 1:27 one more time:

James 1:27

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.

With this new definition of widows and orphans, it sounds a little different, doesn't it? Visit or help those people who don't have or don't know God, and keep yourself unstained from the world. In other words, go out and be in the world, bringing people to God.

But let's back up a verse.

James 1:26

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

What does this mean? Well, as I've done a lot lately, let's go back to the Psalms and see what David says about it.

Psalms 39

- 1 I said, "I will guard my ways,
that I may not sin with my tongue;
I will guard my mouth with a muzzle,
so long as the wicked are in my presence."*
- 2 I was mute and silent;
I held my peace to no avail,
and my distress grew worse.*
- 3 My heart became hot within me.*

*As I mused, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:*

- 4 *“O LORD, make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!*
- 5 *Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!*
- 6 *Surely a man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*
- 7 *“And now, O Lord, for what do I wait?
My hope is in you.*
- 8 *Deliver me from all my transgressions.
Do not make me the scorn of the fool!*
- 9 *I am mute; I do not open my mouth,
for it is you who have done it.*
- 10 *Remove your stroke from me;
I am spent by the hostility of your hand.*
- 11 *When you discipline a man
with rebukes for sin,
you consume like a moth what is dear to him;
surely all mankind is a mere breath!*
- 12 *“Hear my prayer, O LORD,
and give ear to my cry;
hold not your peace at my tears!
For I am a sojourner with you,
a guest, like all my fathers.*
- 13 *Look away from me, that I may smile again,
before I depart and am no more!”*

In this Psalm, I hear David dealing with controlling his tongue. He says something he shouldn't have, and immediately regrets it.

We never do that, I'm sure.

He prays for forgiveness and mercy, after admitting what he's done wrong. Verse 13 sounds like what a child would say to a watchful parent, to me: "Please stop watching me. I'll be good!"

So, what point is James trying to get across to us in these two verses?

Watch how you talk to people; relationships are how we bring people to God, and if we can't speak nicely to people, those who are in the Church, and those who need the Church, we will just send them away angry and disgusted. We will have a negative impact on reaching the world for Christ if we're not careful with our speech.

AND

While you're working on controlling your speech, go out there and reach out to those people around you that need God in their lives.

AND

While you're out there, make sure you don't end up acting and sounding like the people you're trying to bring to God. Salt isn't any good unless it actually tastes different than everything else – it has to taste like salt to be affective.

Opening scripture: Malachi 3:1-5

¹“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

⁵ “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

Closing Scripture: Matthew 25:34-40

³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

Questions:

1. Why do you think God places all this emphasis on widows, orphans, and the “least of these”?
2. Do you think we’re doing enough, both individually and as a church family, to help the “least of these”, widows and orphans?
3. How can we do more? What is lacking?