

James 1:17-27

16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 11, 1994

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Stain.

Grapejuice spilled all over the table cloth. Try and get that out.

Mustard dripped down the front of a toddlers bib.

Spaghetti sauce splattered on a white T shirt.

Engine grease. dried blood, rust.

Stains.

Sometimes we just wear the stain, sometimes we discard the clothing, sometimes there is a secret to getting the stain out.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to keep oneself unstained by the world.

When I hear these words I think of sexual sin. Triple X movies, red light districts, adultery. Stained.

I think of dishonesty, ruthlessness. Cheating on taxes, involved in shady deals, theft. Stained.

I think of the enticements of alcohol and drugs. Wild parties, minds altered by chemicals, irresponsibility. Stained.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to keep oneself unstained by the world.

It is as if Christians are to walk in a sterile environment. Distant, separate from sinners. Unstained by the world.

For years I thought: this is what Christianity is about. So I spent a lot of time trying to appear unstained.

I spent a lot of time trying to hide stains.

Like putting on a sweater over the shirt that is stained on the arm.
And hoping it won't be too warm so I have to take the sweater off.

I'd pretend not to be interested in pictures from Playboy.

Pretend to be honest in every way.

Pretend that I was unstained by the world.

Pretending. Hiding. Covering up. That is all these words from James produced in me. And in a lot of you.

You choose a different vocabulary when I am around. Tell different jokes than you might otherwise tell. Cover what you think are the stains.

Everything that the gospels tell us about Jesus shows that Jesus did not walk in a sterile environment. He was not criticized for being distant, but for celebrating life with tax collectors and sinners. They did not feel uncomfortable in his presence. They were loved. Embraced.

No it was the stain watchers that had trouble with Jesus. The clothing inspectors who looked everyone up and down. Those who chose judging over loving. *They get a moral like had to go judging our neighbor what to wear clothes*

There are many sorts of stains. Within this community of faith for some adultery or dishonesty or drunkenness may be the problem. But for others there are much more serious stains.

Most serious is the stain of arrogance. Stain watchers, clothing inspectors are best at this sin. Every Sunday Christians are most vulnerable to this sin. The best church members are often in the greatest danger from this sin, thinking they are special in a way their neighbor is not.

Often following arrogance is the stain of bitterness. Falling from the top of the heap down into the swamp with all the rest can mark a heart with this stain.

Or the stain of indifference. James said ~~there were~~ *there are* two parts to pure religion: to care for widows and orphans in their affliction and to keep

oneself unstained by the world. Helping, serving caring for those in need is part of our faith in God. To be indifferent is to be terribly stained by the world.

Today, among the older members of our congregation is the stain of hopelessness. How often I hear the lament about the young, and how the world is. Watch the evening news long enough and our hearts are stained with hopelessness for we feed on what is humanly likely instead of on God's word and power.

If I have missed you in all of this I am sorry. If in all I have said you have not ^{yourself} seen that you are seriously stained, stained beyond your power to be clean again then I have not made God's word clear to you today. I am stained, a thousand washings will not make a difference. ^{you are stained as much as I.}

Unless ^{we} I wash in these waters. For the water of baptism removes every stain by washing us into Jesus death and resurrection. Today, in each of you these waters of baptism are as powerful and cleansing as they will be for Anna Marie. For Christ is yours, in his forgiveness ^{is yours through your baptism} ~~you are~~ ^{by the} ~~washed~~. In Christ you are pure and undefiled before God unstained by the world.

All the stains are terrible. They destroy us and our neighbor. ^{By a stain} But Christ is more powerful than any stain. In him ^{and only in him} you are clean.

What are we to do then? Watch the evening news and lament of a hopeless future? No. Wash ourselves in Christ through daily repentance, nourish ourselves in prayer and scripture, exercise ourselves in giving our time and our resources for those in need. In this God will be honored and glorified.