

Our Call to the Least of These

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[0 : 00] If you all would, turn your Bibles to James chapter 1 verse 27.

! It's a blessing to be able to continue our study through the book of James. You know, James is generally cited as a favorite epistle by a lot of people. It's a pretty plain spoken message.

There's not a lot of veiled imagery. There's not a lot of deep theological concepts that are beyond the average reader. James is a very practical book giving instructions to a persecuted church on how to glorify Christ in the midst of a lost and darkened world.

How to grow closer to Him and to become more like Him in the midst of all of our trials. You know, some of my favorite stories and some of my favorite movies are stories of the underdog, you know, rising to the top.

You know, someone of lower means defying the odds. And I think that all of us enjoy stories like that, right? If you don't enjoy stories like that, come and talk to us afterwards.

[1 : 17] We might need to work on some issues. But it satisfies this personal need for justice that's within us. And honestly, that need for justice, it's really part of bearing the image of our Creator.

Because we serve a completely just God. He is perfectly just in everything that He does. So our longing for justice, that's really part of bearing the image of our Creator.

You know, as you read through God's Word, you see that God has a similar heart for the needy, for the oppressed, for those that are outcasts in society.

As you read through the book of Leviticus and Exodus, you're going to see laws that highlight the poor and the oppressed and that guarantee justice for their cause.

We also see, on the other side of that, God's wrath displayed on those that do take advantage of those that are in need, those that are hurting. We see His wrath displayed.

[2 : 20] So I don't think it's any coincidence that the passage that we're studying today falls on the Sunday that we're celebrating or observing the sanctity of human life. And the sanctity of human life, it doesn't just apply to the unborn.

Whenever you hear that phrase, you really see it applied to things like abortion. The sanctity of human life does not just apply to the unborn, but it applies to all people that are created in the image of God.

The overturning of Roe v. Wade was a landmark decision for pro-lifers, for Christians. But really, what that decision did is it revealed a heart problem in our society that goes much deeper than abortion.

It's a heart problem that making new laws doesn't necessarily fix. You know, as I talk to foster parents, teachers, maybe some people that say they're women's rights activists, they were publicly proclaiming what a burden this would create on the world because of all the children that were going to be born into poverty and desperation.

That abortion was somehow the last line of defense for a broken welfare system. And the other heartbreaking reality in this is that these were sentiments that were being expressed within the church by people that claim to represent a Savior that has a heart for the least of these.

[3 : 54] So this is a very serious problem. We have made the poor and the needy something that should be eradicated rather than ministered to.

Rather than blessing them, we try to serve ourselves by erasing them from our culture. Church, when we cease to see all people as made in the image of Christ, we begin to place a value on them based on the things that are valuable to us.

We begin to value them based on what they contribute to our lives. That's not where value comes from.

The value is not what they contribute to society. It's not how they benefit us. Their value comes from the one that created them and the image that they are created in.

So James' message, even though it was written so long ago, it's very timely. It's very relevant to our day and time. It's a battle that we are still fighting today, not just in the world, but even within our own church, as I've just stated briefly.

[4 : 58] So with that, our main idea for the sermon today is that Christians are called to mirror God's heart for the least of these.

It's a simple concept, but it's something that is lost on a lot of people today, even within the church. Christians should mirror God's heart for the least of these.

And from the scriptures and the text that we are going to be reading today, I want you to see two truths. The first is that God cares for the least of these and he expects you to as well.

Because as Pastor Mike had talked about last week, inaction defiles our faith. And we'll get more into that here in a minute. The second truth is this, that God has entrusted you with the responsibility of caring for the least of these.

Not just the church in general, the Lord has entrusted and commanded in his word that you specifically would have a heart and a responsibility for the least of these.

[6 : 02] And these are important truths to take hold of, church. Because in Matthew 25, which we're going to read later on in this message, we're going to see that God is going to one day call us to account for either the ministry that we had towards the least of these or the apathy that we had towards the least of these.

We will be called to account for it one day. So with that in mind, would you all stand with me as we read our passage out of James today? Chapter 1, verse 27.

Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this, to look after orphans and widows and their distress and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

This is the word of the Lord, church. You all may have a seat. You know, while we're focusing just on this one verse, I think it's important just to kind of add a little context to where this verse is in Scripture.

It's sandwiched between two very familiar passages. The one preceding this verse, it talks about being a doer of the word. And Pastor Mike covered that last week, to be a doer of the word.

[7 : 18] And the section preceding this verse, it speaks about the sin of favoritism. Now these are both admonitions and warnings to the church that if ignored, would leave the helpless neglected.

Bringing us again to our first truth that we were going to talk about in today's passage, that God cares for the least of these and he expects you to as well. Because the church should be different from the world that's around us.

We should be different people. So I want to ask you something. And again, Pastor Mike talked about this last week and we're going to cover a passage here in James briefly. But what is the difference between belief and faith?

The difference between faith and belief. Because I think that if you asked a lot of people in our culture today, the majority of people would say that there is some God out there.

They would say that they believe in God to some degree or level. Now there are some people that say that yeah, there's no God. But the majority of culture I think would ascribe to the truth that there is a God out there.

[8 : 22] But it's this belief, this mere belief, the kind of faith that Hebrews was talking about when it says without faith, it is impossible to please God.

James has a lot to say on being a doer of the word. And you know, some people actually accuse the epistle of preaching a works-based salvation. But that's not true.

That's not what James is doing here. What James is just trying to do is he is trying to make a clear distinction between genuine faith and useless belief.

That's really all he's trying to do here. In James chapter 2, verses 14 through 17, it says, What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works, can such faith save him?

If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed, but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it?

[9 : 28] In the same way, faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. So again, James is not teaching how to obtain salvation.

He is teaching what the effects of genuine faith is going to look like. It's an active faith. And the activeness of our faith will always be clearly seen, as James is saying here, in our care for those that are in need, in our care for the least of these.

So James has really hit the nail on the head here. If we have genuinely become children of God, what's going to happen is that we are going to become passionate about the things that he is passionate about.

Our heart is going to reflect his heart. The things that break our heart should be the things that grieve his spirit. That's really what sanctification is, church.

Sanctification is not becoming a better version of ourselves, though some might want you to believe that. It's not about living your best life now. Sanctification is about becoming more like Christ.

[10:37] And it's not seen just in the way that you believe, but it's seen in the way that you live and the way that you treat those that are around you that are made in the image of God. So belief without obedience is useless, or as James would say, it's dead.

Now the great lie that society would try to push on you is that faith is something that's personal. It should be kept to yourself. Faith is alright, just as long as it doesn't affect or change the people around you.

Well, I gotta tell you that to stay silent and inactive, as we had talked about earlier and as this passage has just said, to stay silent and inactive with our faith is to have a defiled faith.

Genuine faith is always going to be a call to action. And for those of you that might think that it's okay to be inactive, it's okay to just check the spiritual boxes to go to church and to have my belief, some might be okay with that.

But I want to lay down this warning for you that Satan is never inactive, that Satan is always working. He is always roaming, looking for someone to devour.

[11:53] And sin's crosshairs are on all people. And I will tell you this, from my time as a foster parent and as a minister, I can tell you that it is always the helpless, the vulnerable, the needy, those that can't speak up for themselves that are going to suffer most in this life in Satan's war against God.

Who better to turn to for relief than the church? Those that represent Christ. That's why God has given us this command in Scripture. Proverbs 31, 8 and 9 says this, To speak up for those who have no voice.

For the justice of all who are dispossessed, speak up, judge righteously, and defend the cause of the oppressed and the needy. Again, who better to run to for relief, church, than those who represent Jesus?

Jesus, the one who beckons all who are burdened and heavy laden to come to him. Scripture reflects God's heart for the needy. His laws in the Old Testament also show God's desire for us to reflect that in our own lives.

To be holy as God is holy is not just wishful thinking. It's a command in Scripture. So how can genuine faith lead to inaction?

[13:18] And again, I want to make this very clear. This is not a works-based salvation that James is trying to proclaim. Genuine salvation, true saving faith, is through faith alone by grace alone.

And it's granted to us through Christ, not through works. But our works will be symptoms of a genuine faith. So talking about the things that, you know, people place value in.

You know, value is pretty relative. People value different things. I find it funny, honestly, the things that people place so much value in. This is from my time of growing up in the 90s.

Anyone fan of Pokemon cards? Any 90s kids out there with Pokemon cards? Don't be ashamed. I mean, I see a hand back there. Thank you. Pokemon cards were the big thing when I was in school. Now, to me, I would use them as coasters before I placed any value on them. I just, that was something that never interested me. But, there is a card out there, and again, some of you that are Pokemon fans might know what I'm talking about because I sure don't.

[14:30] The holographic, shadowless, Charizard card. That's a mouthful. Now, if you are a Pokemon fan, this card can be yours.

I had to look at this number twice. For a low price of \$10,000 at the right auction. A piece of paper, \$10,000. It's a playing card. Yeah.

Value is truly relative to the person that you are talking to. Now, another thing that has relative value. This is probably, for me personally, one of the most valuable things in my office.

Now, to those of you that don't know why this is value to me, this is probably just a rusty canteen. Alright? If I took this to an auction, or if I took this to like a pawn shop, I would probably have to pay them to take it from me.

It hasn't been used in 20 years. No, actually, probably a lot longer than that. But, the reason why this is valuable to me is because of the person that owned it.

[15 : 34] My Uncle Tim owned this canteen. And, if you knew my Uncle Tim, you would know that he lived more life than most people could hope to in his short time on this earth.

He was a paraplegic. He was paralyzed from the waist down. He was a police officer with the SkyTip PD. And he loved camping. He loved going outdoors. Now, I was pretty sickly as a child. I didn't get to go camping with him a lot. But one thing I did get to do with him a lot was when we lived in the same house as him while we were waiting for our new house to be built, I would sneak out of bed at night after my parents had gone to bed and watched the David Letterman show with him and stay up ridiculously late doing that with him.

And, you know, just in case you're wondering, I was curious what 20 years ago smelled like. So, I opened the canteen and took a sniff of it. He did not finish what he was drinking.

And curiosity nearly killed the cat. But this canteen, it has more value to me than most of the things in my office.

[16 : 41] Not because it has any real intrinsic value, but because of the one that it belonged to and the memories that it brings back when I look at this canteen.

Now, unfortunately, many have the same mindset that value is relative when it comes to human life. Relative to what?

I've heard a lot of people place value on human life based on different things. Maybe what that life contributes to society. Maybe what that life's political views are.

maybe the manner in which that life was conceived. I don't know. But the world has decided that the value of human life is relative.

And it's no longer based on the image that they are created in. On the one that created them. On the one that holds their life in his hands. So, why orphans and widows in this passage?

[17 : 49] You know, James has put a special emphasis on the orphans and the widows. And honestly, if you look through God's law, God does this too. This isn't just something that's unique to the book of James. But, historically speaking, orphans and widows, they were the most helpless in society.

They were the ones that needed the most help. Because, if you look at what was going on back then, there was no welfare system. There was no life insurance. So, if the husband is gone and you have no family to take you in as a widow or an orphan, you're pretty much sunk.

You're on your own. Left to your own devices. That's why the law that God has laid down makes special mention of orphans and widows. And you see it played out in other stories.

Like in the story of Ruth and Boaz, we see the law of the kinsman redeemer played out. Now, the kinsman redeemer was somebody that would step in to redeem a family member.

If they had fallen on hard times, if they were destitute, almost homeless, or maybe in a case like this where Ruth was widowed and the only person she had to go to was her widowed mother-in-law, the kinsman redeemer, which was Boaz, would step in and redeem them.

[19 : 07] Bring them out of their poverty and take care of them. children. We also see in the book of Exodus 22-22 where God specifically commands, do not take advantage of an orphan or a widow.

Church, people in desperation can be easily taken advantage of. And it breaks my heart hearing some of the stories of people who have come out of desperate situations.

The prophet Isaiah even spoke to this matter in chapter 1 admonishing Israel to take up the cause of the oppressed. There are those who are desperate around us, maybe even amongst us in this room.

Now some look at suffering and say, why doesn't God do something about the suffering in this world? I've heard that question a lot. Why doesn't a good God end the suffering?

Well, God has done something. first and foremost. He has given us Christ, who has established his church on this earth to be his hands and feet, to be his ever present body in the midst of a sinful world.

[20 : 17] The church was established for this, to be the presence of Christ to the lost. This leads us to our second truth, that God has entrusted you with the responsibility of caring for the least of these.

There's a reason that God has always placed a special emphasis on the least of these receiving his mercy. In a world that pushes for instant gratification, the idea of giving, of sacrificially giving of yourself without anything in return to be expected, it just seems backwards to our culture. Because culture teaches you to focus on one person, number one, that's you. So this idea of giving sacrificially without the expectation of anything in return might seem like a waste of time for a lot of people.

But again, the church should be different. Our care for the needy should never be linked to a desire for gain. For those that are part of the body of Christ, the least of these in our church and our community should be the focus of our heartfelt ministries.

I want to read this passage to you. This is Matthew 25. If you have your Bibles, you can turn there, but this is Matthew 25, verses 34 through 40.

[21 : 47] 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 foundations of the world.

For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me.

I was sick, and you took care of me. I was in prison, and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink?

When did we see you a stranger, and take you in, or without clothes, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and visit you?

And the king will answer them, truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Then he will say to those on his left, depart from me, you who are cursed into eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

[23 : 04] The Lord's heart for the least of these in our community of faith is obvious. They are an opportunity for us to show the love of Christ, a glimpse of the same love that he showed all of us.

When we were lost and helpless, completely unable to help ourselves, a loving and sovereign God stepped down to redeem us.

People might think that they're not about giving handouts, that people need to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, but my question for you is this, what have you done to earn the grace that you received from God?

How did you, when you were at your lowest point, obtain such a salvation? Again, I just say because a loving and merciful God showed us his everlasting kindness by calling us into his family of faith through adoption, through the death of his begotten son, even when we had nothing to give back in return.

James places an emphasis on two groups of people here, widows and orphans. How do we minister to the widows that are among us? You know, to just broaden the category a little bit, how do we minister to anyone that is in such a state of grief, that's going through a tragic loss?

[24 : 29] Church, grief is a hard thing to go through, and bearing it alone is the last thing that anyone in the community of faith should have to do.

And it's often the lie that the enemy will want you to believe that you can face grief on your own. But that's why you're part of the church. The church is here for you, and you should never have to face this alone.

You know, I've, I know relatively speaking, I'm still pretty young in the ministry, but in just the first 12 years I've been in ministry, I've been a part of more funerals than I can remember. And I've had to see widows, widowers learn how to face life alone from the one that they committed to spend it with.

And it's a hard thing to watch. But I've also seen the church rally around these people. I've seen church members open up spare bedrooms to those who aren't ready to go home alone yet.

I've seen those who have experienced the same kind of grief draw on their experience. Of how God has led them through the valley of the shadow of death and used that experience to minister to those that are in need.

[25 : 43] 2 Corinthians 1 4, this is probably one of my favorite verses when it comes to, you know, how do you handle grief? It says this, he comforts us in our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction through the comfort that we ourselves receive from God.

church, when you are present with someone through their afflictions, whether you're just a shoulder to cry on, a safe place to go, or maybe, maybe you're just a ministering presence in their lives. You are bearing the image of your creator. God has never promised us that our life would be without afflictions and trials, but what he has promised is that he will be ever present with us through those trials.

And when we can be that ministry to somebody else, we are bearing the image of our creator to those who are hurting and grieving and letting them know that they are not alone. Now, what about the church's ministry to orphans?

I think scripture paints a very clear picture of the church's ministry to the fatherless. You know, this is something that I'm very passionate about.

[26 : 56] I'll just be up front with you. I'm very passionate about adoption and foster care and the ministry that the Baptist Children's Home has. And my hope that as we continue through this is that my passion won't be what is up front, but that you will see that the gospel is clearly painted in the picture of adoption.

God has used adoption throughout scripture to accomplish some of the greatest acts of deliverance. Just to give a couple here. The first one being Moses. Moses, by all accounts, on all rights, should have suffered the same fate as so many other Hebrew children.

To be thrown in the Nile in a desperate attempt from a paranoid Pharaoh to control the Hebrew population. Instead, God placed it on the heart of Pharaoh's daughter.

God's children. To not cast this child aside, but to adopt Moses as her home. To raise him so that he could one day be the great deliverer that Israel needed to bring God's children out of slavery and captivity.

What a picture of Christ. Fast forward several thousand years to Jesus. Mary, by the laws of her time, should have been stoned. She was unwed, she was a virgin, but she came up pregnant.

[28 : 15] By the laws of that time, she would have been stoned. But God placed it on the heart of Joseph to take Mary as her own and to adopt Jesus, thus protecting him so that he could be born, fulfill the prophecies, and be our great deliverer that we needed to save us from our sins so that we, again, another great act of adoption, so that we could be adopted into God's family of faith.

faith. You know, I've seen a lot happen in our time as foster parents, and I've been asked many times, why adoption?

Why foster care? Despite people's probing questions into my personal health, there was nothing keeping us from having children ourselves. The reasons are pretty plain.

First, children are worth it. They are God's image bearers with a value that transcends any measure that we could use on this planet.

The second is that it's biblical. It's a picture of the salvation offered to us through Jesus Christ. It is an act of deliverance that we should not only celebrate in the lives of the children that are brought into these families, but in all of our lives as well, because those who have been saved are adopted as heirs with Jesus Christ.

[29 : 46] While we only fostered for a few years, we saw a lot happen in the lives of the children in our homes. We saw a lot happen in our lives as well. So what makes it worth it?

Why foster? Why adopt? Why? And from our time in foster care, I can tell you this. When you see a young girl go to school for the first time with brushed hair and clean clothes, knowing that today she will not be ridiculed by her peers, it's become worth it.

When you see a child that finally stops hoarding food under their bed because she no longer fears starvation and hunger or what she will eat the next day, it's become worth it.

When a young girl can sleep peacefully in her bed at night because she knows that tonight no one's coming through that door for her. It's become worth all the heartbreak and the pain that this brings.

When your daughter, who came to you at 10 months old, finally realizes that not all men are monsters because of the Christ-like love of godly men in your local church, it's become worth it.

[31 : 10] when you finally one day get to stand before a judge and say, yes, I want these children. They are mine now and they are safe with me.

And you get to see a cycle of sin and corruption broken. Your child takes your name and becomes completely yours and you get to see how God can take something that is so broken by sin and redeem in a way that only he can.

It has become worth everything that you can pour into it. Church, the story of redemption is seen in adoption. Where sin has reigned supreme in the lives of those that are broken, the church has the opportunity to step in and say, no more.

They are mine now. No. And finally, when you get to hear your child profess faith in Christ, because the word of God that you have been praying over them and pouring into them has not returned void, it's become eternally worth it.

There is a hope that these children need, that all the lost need. And God has ordained his church to bring that hope to all who are broken. Some may say they don't feel the calling to take up the case of the orphans and the oppressed.

[32 : 49] Church, you don't have to feel a calling. You only have to be obedient to the call that has already been made in God's word, that he has issued. It may sound like I am trying to put out a pitch for adoption.

And that's because I 100% am. The church is the best place for these children to find healing in Christ. The church is the only place for these lost and broken souls to find healing that only Christ can offer.

Some people wonder if it's a calling. Clearly we see from scripture that it is and it's one for the whole church because God himself has led in this example. And when we welcome a child into our home, we are bearing the same image of Christ that he bore whenever he welcomed us into his family.

As co-heirs. To receive an eternal blessing and inheritance that we could never deserve on our own. And God has paid a much higher price for our adoption than we ever will for any kids that we bring into our home.

Maybe you're in a place right now where you don't have the means to bring a child into your home. I don't want to pretend like I'm ignorant of that. There are other ways to assist in the ministry of adoption and foster care.

[34 : 14] Maddie is here today. She will be out in the foyer at her booth. She has all the information. She can answer your questions and show you how you can be involved in this ministry and look after the orphans and the widows in their distress.

And I want to leave one final warning to you all today. Some of you might think that somebody else will take up the mantle of adoption and foster care.

And you're right. If the church will not do it, the world will. And the world already has. So don't wait to feel a call to realize the urgency of what God has already commanded in his word.

Maybe you're here this morning and you've never become part of the family of faith. Maybe you've never received the adoption that God is offering.

You can still respond to God's call. You might be thinking that there's no way a holy God could ever welcome or accept somebody that is so broken.

[35 : 32] The truth is all of us were broken by sin before Christ. God. The good news in all this is that the one that is adopting has done all the work. Just as Nicole and I had to stand before a judge and say, we want these children.

God, the righteous judge, is standing and he is calling you. And he is saying, I want you. If you feel that call on your life, don't wait.

Respond to it today and become an adopted child of God. Church, let's pray. Father, your heart for the needy and the broken is obvious in your word.

Lord, your desire for your church to take up that mantle, to take up that calling is just as obvious.

So, Lord, I pray for a couple of things this morning.

First, Lord, I pray that you would place a conviction on our church and the people that are in it to take up the cause of the orphans and the widows, to look after the least of these and their greatest moments of distress.

[36 : 58] Because, Lord, that is what you have called us to. Lord, genuine faith. Genuine faith. God will be lived out in a care for those that bear your image.

So, Lord, I pray that that would be our heartbeat. And, Lord, for those that are here that have never been adopted, that have never been part of your family, Lord, my greatest prayer is that you would

open their hearts to be able to hear your call, to be able to hear you say, I want you. Despite the brokenness, despite the shame, I pray that they would hear you say, I want you. And that we would see new creations made in Christ. That we would see your kingdom grow. Lord, I pray for all these things. In Jesus' name, Amen.