

## Chapter VI

### PURE RELIGION IS THIS

For me, the word *religion* brings a negative connotation to mind. The reason for this is all of the religions of the world are false, with the exception of Biblical Christianity, which to my mind is technically not a religion. Thus James differentiated, writing *pure religion is this*. Religions are *after the commandments and doctrines of men*. Religions have their roots in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and are firmly entrenched in *a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death*. Consequently the religions of this world are the many and varied concepts of mankind concerning the worship of God, or as defined by Webster, *the gods*.

Though few of us have had the opportunity to travel the world, most of us have been to Jerusalem via television. By this medium we have likely witnessed a member of the Hasidim (an orthodox sect of the Jews) weeping and intoning his prayers before Jerusalem's western wall. His head would have been adorned with curled earlocks hanging beneath a hat, or skullcap, called a

## Pure Religion Is This

*yarmulke*, or *kippah*. He would have worn a prayer shawl, which the Jews call a *tallit*, the fringes of which would have been visible beneath his coat. We would have seen him rocking rhythmically before the wall. At some point in his devotions, he would have pressed a scrap of paper into the crevices of that ancient wall. The television camera could not have revealed what was written on the paper, but traditionally it would have been a request for the rebuilding of the temple; a request for the peace of Jerusalem; and a request for the coming of the Messiah. This act reveals the Jews have not yet been cured of their idolatry. They have venerated the wall (which was never actually a part of the temple, but provided a base upon which the temple was built) while rejecting the God *Who does not dwell in temples made with hands*.

One day Israel will be cured of her idolatry when she returns unto the Lord. Nevertheless during the greater part of her historical relationship with the Lord, Israel has attached the name of the Lord to the false gods of the people she did not drive from the land of Canaan. She has worshipped Baal, Moloch, Remphan and many others by ascribing the name of Jehovah to them. Her blatant idolatry can be corrected the way all idolatry is corrected: when individual Jews recognize Jesus is the Christ and confess Him as Savior and Lord, believing He died for their sins according to the Scriptures, was buried and arose again the third day, according to the Scriptures.

This is presently possible through the preaching of the gospel by believing Jews or Gentiles. Failing this, some of them will come to believe on the Lord through the preaching of the one hundred and forty-four thousand during the great tribulation. This will result in their almost immediate martyrdom. Then, at the end of the great tribulation, one-third of the nation will return from the wilderness, where the Lord will have preserved them for three and one-half

## Pure Religion Is This

years, to observe His second coming to the mount of Olives. When they *look upon Him Whom they pierced*, they will believe on Him to their eternal salvation.

In the New Testament the Jews who did not believe on Jesus were divided primarily into three religious sects: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians. The Pharisees were the fundamentalists of Jewry, believing many of the fundamental truths of the Old Testament Scriptures. They believed in one God; in heaven; in hell; in angels; in spirits; and they believed in the resurrection from the dead. The Sadducees were the modernist of Jewry and denied virtually all of the things the Pharisees believed. The third group, the Herodians, appear to have been fewer in number than either the Pharisees or the Sadducees, but were despised by both because of their allegiance to Rome and their belief the Christ would come from the Idumaeon family of the Herods.

It is interesting in this regard, after the nation of Israel rejected Jesus as the Christ and appealed to Pilate for His crucifixion, about fifteen years later in 44 A.D., the whole nation of Israel came to believe Herod Agrippa I was the Christ. They held this belief until after his death, which resulted from a grand coup against his close friend and former schoolmate, the emperor Claudius. Agrippa believed he was the Christ and planned to take over the whole Eastern empire of Rome to form the kingdom of God on earth, but was smitten of God at Tyre, eaten of maggots, and at the end of five days died. Luke described his death in Acts chapter twelve, and so did the Roman Emperor Claudius in a history written by him and translated by Robert Graves. (*Claudius the God*, Robert Graves; Copyright 1935, 1962; Random House, pages 315-323.) These three sects, despite their differences in doctrine, were unified in their common religious belief that a man is justified before God by the

## Pure Religion Is This

works of his own hands, which equates to the world's belief in *a way which seemeth right unto a man*.

If we were to argue the merits of the various religions of the world based upon their performance of religious works and religious zeal (utilizing their personal appraisals of themselves), it could be difficult, if not impossible, to determine which religious group in this world exhibits the greatest fervor for its religion. If those who profess to be Christians were to compare their lives with many of the religious groups of the world, it might be difficult to determine which group has the most rigid life style, or the greatest zeal for its particular religion. Religion is not the way into the presence of God. No religion can meet the holy, righteous and just demands of God, but God has met those demands in Jesus Christ: in His life and in His death, providing a ransom for sin. Our Lord said, *I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me*. The apostle Paul wrote:

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence. (I Corinthians 1:26-29, emphasis mine)

Thus God has provided in Jesus Christ that which is impossible for man to do for himself. This provision of God is entered into by faith and not by works of righteousness which man might do. Despite this, man is still religious and believes he can perform adequately to be accepted of God. This was the primary fault in *the way of Cain*.

Cain's way was a product of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Cain was deceived the same as Eve was deceived. The serpent convinced Eve to think and act

## Pure Religion Is This

independently of God. Consequently she rejected the commandment of God for the lie of the Devil. She believed she would live and not die and be like God if she disobeyed God and ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thus by her independent thought, Eve became the mother of the first religious thoughts, which are common to all religious thoughts in that they came from *a way which seemeth right unto a man*: the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Do religious works tell us anything about the validity of a religious confession? James said they do. Not so much from the standpoint of establishing the righteousness of the individuals who are religious (that is impossible), but from the standpoint of revealing men do not live up to their own religious claims. Consequently James wrote:

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. (James 1:26-27)

James never stopped using the law with the Jews as a *schoolmaster* to bring them unto Christ. He challenged the validity of the Jews' religion on the basis of their own claims. They claimed to love the Lord their God with all of their heart and mind and strength, and they claimed to love their neighbors as themselves. Yet they had cast disparaging remarks at our Lord to the point of crucifying Him for blaspheme; they had stoned their own prophets when they had prophesied against them; they boasted they were more righteous than the Gentiles, despite numerous occasions in their history when they had followed after the gods of the Gentiles. Further they rejected widows and orphans as being under the judgment of God for some failure before the law. They considered them cursed of God and felt no obligation, socially or morally,

## Pure Religion Is This

to do anything for them. They did all of these things seemingly oblivious to their actual standing before a Holy, Righteous and Just God.

How do you deal with a people in such a condition (who had a great religious tradition; a direct revelation from God, called the Bible; a revered priesthood; a glorious temple; and an impressive liturgy)? You deal with them as James dealt with the Jews in his epistle: you make them aware of their true relationship with God. To do this he used the law as a *schoolmaster* to bring them unto Christ. This was (and is) the *lawful use of the law*.

In keeping with this, our Lord summarized all He had preached to the Jews in His sermon on the mount when He said, *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect*. Thus the law demanded a perfect performance for justification, and James revealed, *For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all*. Therefore the perfection required by the law was unattainable by the works of the law. It was only attainable by the vicarious life and vicarious death of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is God. Thus in His incarnation, He fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law and all righteousness; and in His death on the cross of Calvary, He provided a perfect ransom for sin and the judicial basis upon which God has the right to justify sinners and call them saints.

Nevertheless the nation of Israel had its hopes in the vain observances of the religious traditions of the elders. They offered sacrifices with no thought of failure before the law, or the promise of a Kinsman Redeemer, but simply because of tradition. They were ignorant of God's righteousness and went about trying to establish their own righteousness, which by proper interpretation of the law could not be done. Thus Isaiah wrote of their sad condition: *Woe unto*

## Pure Religion Is This

*them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!* (Isaiah 5:20) And again: *To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them* (Isaiah 8:20).

The *testimony* referred to by Isaiah was the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat promised hope to the nation of Israel in the face of their many failures under the law. Once a year God provided that an atonement, or covering, should be made upon the Mercy Seat. Thus on the Day of Atonement, the blood of a sacrificial goat was sprinkled upon the Mercy Seat. That blood provided a covering (atonement) for all that was in the Ark.

There were three items in the Ark which provided testimony to Israel's many failures: the tablets of stone containing the law; the pot of manna; and Aaron's rod that budded. Israel had failed to keep the law; they loathed the bread from heaven (which represented Jesus Christ); and they rejected the authority of the leadership of Moses and Aaron (men chosen of God) for the counsel of the two hundred and fifty princes of renown. Thus the blood sprinkled on the Mercy Seat stood as a testimony to the promise of God to provide salvation through the Kinsman Redeemer and forever blot out every transgression of those who are redeemed.

There was no possibility of a right relationship with the Lord by the observance of the empty traditions of the elders. There was only a wresting of the Scriptures to their own destruction, because the traditions of the elders sought to establish the righteousness of those who observed them. Consequently all who were steeped in their doctrines were steeped in the idea they needed no atonement. They, like Cain, believed they could stand before God on the basis of their own righteousnesses, which clearly reveals there was no *light* in them. Thus our Lord said, *If*

## Pure Religion Is This

*therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!* (Matthew 6:23)

James defined pure religion for the Jews. Pure religion is to visit the fatherless and widows and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. This was not a new set of instructions whereby the Jews could establish themselves as righteous; it was the lawful use of the law to show the utter bankruptcy of the Jews before the law. The last six commandments have to do with man's relationship with man, which is to love one's neighbor as oneself. So when James brought up the matter of widows and orphans, whom the Jews despised as cursed of God, it was like our Lord telling the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor. In the case of the rich young ruler, he was proven guilty before the law by our Lord's lawful use of the law. So too were the Jews of the twelve tribes scattered abroad proven guilty by James's statement about orphans, widows and keeping oneself unspotted from the world. Our Lord:

... spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Luke 18:9-14, emphasis mine)

There was nothing false about James's statement to the twelve tribes scattered abroad. He simply told them what pure religion is. If we define religion as the things a man can do to bring himself into the presence of God, and if we recognize the *schoolmaster* role of the law, there is no contradiction between what James said to the twelve tribes scattered abroad and what Paul said to the Galatians:

## Pure Religion Is This

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:24-26)

We have stated that no man can come into a right relationship with God by religion. We have defined religion to be man's views of what is necessary to have a right relationship with God. Since man thinks in terms of rules and regulations; and since the law as given by Moses establishes the basis of absolute righteousness; and since it is impossible for man with his fallen nature to perform the deeds of the law perfectly; and since Christ, Who is God, became a man so that He could stand in the stead of man and fulfill every jot and tittle of the law and fulfill all righteousness; and since Christ offered Himself as a ransom for sin, dying the Just for the unjust; and since the Person and work of Christ fully satisfied God's Righteousness, Justice and Holiness, as well as His Love, Mercy and Grace; a right relationship with God can be obtained through pure religion, which is the lawful use of the law to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.

The world's system thinks in terms of its knowledge of good and evil, which it derived from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when Adam and Eve sinned. Therefore the world's system thinks in terms of merit and reward. Every religion, except Biblical Christianity, has human effort as the basis for satisfying its god. *Pure religion*, which is Biblical Christianity, is based upon the grace of God. Grace is without favor. It is what God has done for man, not what man can do for God.

Therefore the one who has come into the truth of the grace of God is enjoined to have a metamorphosis of the mind. The apostle Paul said:

## Pure Religion Is This

... be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. (Romans 12:2-3, emphasis mine)

The apostle John said essentially the same thing as James in his first epistle. John said:

*Love not the world [world's system], neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him* (I John 2:15). Thus the position of *pure religion* is that it stands in the grace of God. It stands for that which God has done to make the believer accepted in the Beloved. Pure religion is not based upon human effort. It cannot be, because all men have sinned and come short of the glory of God; therefore pure religion has to be based upon the grace of God in Jesus Christ.