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Sermon notes
Sept. 8, 2019
James 1:26-27
"True Religion"

They say you aren't supposed to discuss religion and politics in polite company. What about preaching about religion and politics in the same sermon? As should be obvious from Sunday, I subscribe to the maxim of G. K. Chesterton: "I never discuss anything except politics and religion. There is nothing else to discuss."

Here is something I find very interesting about James 1:27. James describes pure and undefiled religion in terms of two things: caring for widows/orphans and keeping ourselves unspotted from the world. This is a fascinating combination of virtues/practices. If we think in terms of the American political spectrum, from left to right, which side is more likely to talk about caring for widows and orphans, the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society? The left. Which side is most likely to talk about staying unspotted from the world? The right. The left tends toward a bleeding heart, hyper-empathetic form of social responsibility. (Whether or not they succeed in actually helping the plight of the poor, at the level of personal action or policy proposals, is another story. They usually don't, as I pointed out in the sermon.) But the left cares very little about keeping unstained from the world, e.g., the left has virtually no commitment to any kind of sexual ethics. The left tends to stress the social aspects of religion, but overlook or downplay the personal.

The right, of course, tends to be very concerned about keeping oneself unstained from the world. There is a big emphasis on personal responsibility and morality. Folks on the right are concerned about sexual ethics, entertainment standards, and so forth. But the right has a tendency to blame the poor for their poverty even when their plight is not obviously their own fault, or they tend to ignore the poor altogether. They stress the personal aspects of religion but sometimes ignore the social. They are uncompromising in their quest for personal virtue but do not always do enough for the poor.

These are not just the tendencies of American churches and political parties. They are tendencies in human nature, seen throughout history. We all have blind spots. Those who have more social concern are often more lackadaisical about personal morality. And those who are uncompromising in their personal morality often fail to be gracious towards those in need in the wider society.

Thus, isn't it interesting that in one verse, James has combined the concerns of the left with those of the right, and in doing so has also corrected their respective weaknesses/deficiencies? James would remind the poverty fighter that he also needs to maintain strong moral standards. He cannot let his empathy for the poor lead him to actually sympathize with sin or go soft on certain forms of culturally-approved immorality. At the same time, the person who has high moral standards because he does not want to be stained by the world needs to remember God also requires him to have a heart of compassion for the poor and needy, even if their own sin has contributed to their plight. James wisely combines the "soft" virtue of the left with the "hard" virtue of the right, and thus gives us a more complete picture of what the true religion looks like in practice. We are to be socially responsible and personally holy. We are to be merciful to those in bad situations and yet morally inflexible when it comes to the application of God's law. In other words, our religion is to look a like that of Jesus. Jesus was always gracious to sinners, constantly showing mercy to those in need, and yet he did so without ever compromising holiness in any way. He practiced mercy towards the needy and never allowed himself to be spotted with the world's wicked ways. He was tough and tender, socially compassionate and personally righteous. He is our model.

A little more follow up to the sermon. As I pointed out in the sermon, we have an unprecedented number of functional widows and orphans in our culture (families with no father).

The causes of consequences of family breakdown have been chronicled in numerous places. The fatherless crisis is indeed one of the greatest social catastrophes in our culture today, contributing to widespread violence in our cities, poverty, depression, drug abuse, mass shootings, and more. But, of course, we don't just want to diagnose the problem, we want to work towards solutions. One of the most helpful books on this topic I have read in a while is Tim Carney's *Alienated America*. Carney is largely focused on the dynamics that produced a Trump victory in 2020 Republican primaries. But don't let that distract you from the real core of his book, which is an examination of how much of American society has been drained of social capital, leaving many of us alienated, isolated, and angry. Carney examines the so-called "success sequence" (e.g., having kids after marriage), examines the notion of "privilege," and raises questions about the American aristocracy, which fails to preach what it practices, in essence hoarding wisdom about the best way to live. The overarching result in a lot of our nation is the social chaos we see all around us. While the American dream is alive and well in wealthier and better educated parts of the country, in other areas, America has become a very dark place, full of suicide, family breakdown, drug and alcohol addiction, hopelessness, and so forth. Unlike a lot of modern day jeremiads on the collapse of America culture, Carney has helpful suggestions for fixing the problem of declining social capital (hint: it starts with the church, the central institution in any healthy civil society). While the book may be a bit heavy on sociological data for some, it's a terrific and informative read.