

**OCTOBER 23, 2016**

**ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**ST. JAMES DAY**

**“PURE AND UNDEFILED RELIGION—James 1:27”**

Today, October 23, is the day we Orthodox commemorate the Holy Apostle James, the Brother of the Lord. So I thought today would be a good opportunity to explain a little about who he is and then to focus on a passage from his epistle in the New Testament.

The St. James we commemorate today is not one of the two St. James who were among the 12 Disciples. To differentiate this St. James from those two St. James, we often call this St. James the “Brother of the Lord” or more boldly, the “Brother of God”.

He is Jesus’ brother, but not a biological brother. He is the Lord’s stepbrother. The Theotokos gave birth to only one child, our Lord Jesus Christ. Those the Bible calls Jesus’ brethren were stepchildren of the Theotokos. The predominant way of thinking in Church Tradition is that St. Joseph was a widower who had several children from his first marriage. He and the Theotokos raised those children together with Jesus. St. James is one of those--thus, he is technically Jesus’ stepbrother but is called the “Brother of the Lord”. And being that his stepbrother, Jesus Christ, is divine, James is also sometimes called the “Brother of God”.

St. James was one of the most important leaders in the early years of Christianity. He served many years as the bishop of Jerusalem. He was a righteous and holy man, a man of prayer. It is said he spent so much of his time on his knees praying that his knees became deformed. In the year 62 A.D., the enemies of the Church decided to do away with him. They seized him and took him up to the roof of the Jerusalem temple. And then they threw him down. He survived the fall but was badly hurt. But God allowed him to pray one more time in this world..... St. James struggled to his knees and began praying for those who were killing him. As he prayed, people took wooden clubs and beat him to death. His death for his brother Jesus took place on October 23, 62 A.D.

In his later years, St. James wrote the epistle in the New Testament named for him. It’s a wonderful little book---very practical, full of wisdom and exhortation. (The founder of Protestantism, Martin Luther, didn’t like the book and called it “an epistle of straw”. He almost pulled it out of his German version of the Bible but ended up leaving it in. But we like it a lot!). Today, as we observe St. James Day, here’s an idea on how to celebrate it---today, when you get home, read his little book. It will only take you about 20 minutes.....

Today I will focus on just one verse from St. James’ book----chapter one, verse 27-----“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

In this verse, the Apostle James defines “pure and undefiled” religion. He mentions two components of it---1. Keeping “oneself unstained from the world”, living lives of holiness. 2. Visiting “orphans and widows in their affliction”---visiting and helping those needing

visits and help. I doubt St. James meant to say that those are the only two parts of having “pure and undefiled religion”. But they are the only two he mentions in this verse, so he obviously thinks they are enormously important and central. Due to lack of time, we will look only at one of these two this morning.....the one having to do with visiting those in affliction.

St. James was a simple and practical writer. He was very straightforward, to the point. And so he puts it very directly----our religion will be pure if we visit orphans and widows. Or in modern terminology: shut-ins. Shut-ins are those who never or rarely can leave where they live----whether it be in their own home, a relative’s home, or a nursing facility. Often widows or widowers, most commonly elderly (but not always), they are quite isolated and can carry out hardly any activities at all. And they’re in poor health. Not an easy life!

And if you go see them, it will certainly cheer them up! And not only will it be a blessing to them, but also a blessing to you, because by visiting them your religion will be made more pure and undefiled, as James wrote.

Someone might respond---“boy, that sounds easy enough!” And I guess, in a sense, it isn’t so hard to do. Yet, how often do we do it? I’m afraid not many do it ever or very often. And so this morning I wish to challenge you to do it more.

There are lonely and needy people who need our help---even if it’s just a matter of paying them a visit once in a while.

I’ll break them down into general categories----

First, there are our own family members. Parents, grandparents, aunts & uncles, cousins that need us to help and visit them and not forget or neglect them. They might have physical needs, they might have financial needs. Maybe they’re just lonely and bored. Caring for them is our responsibility as family members

But it doesn’t always happen. Any pastor can tell you how we notice over the years, due to our visiting the sick and shut-ins, that many people in that situation get very little attention and few visits from their families. Some certainly get a lot! Some very little.

Taking care of them is our Christian responsibility, as well as a family responsibility. And it’s not a little thing. We know St. Paul was concerned that there were problems in this regard in the early years of Christianity. He addresses it strongly in I Timothy 5:8----“If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

There was a woman who had a very deep spiritual experience happen to her. And she came to think she needed to begin some specific ministry for God. She even thought perhaps overseas missionary work might be good for her to do. She went to consult with her priest about this possibility and he said, “Well, becoming a missionary is a wonderful thing and perhaps that will happen for you someday. But there is a very important ministry closer to home I think you should do for the time being.” “What is that?”, asked the woman. The pastor replied, “I see your father in his nursing home fairly often. He is so lonely and I don’t think you hardly ever go see him. He needs you. I think your ministry

should be to start taking much better care of your father.” The woman agreed and began to spend much more time with her dad, taking care of him at a much deeper level than before. And she came to see that as just the exact ministry God wanted her to carry out. (in “Our Daily Bread”, 1/3/83)

So the first way for us to carry out what St. James said in his epistle (that visiting the afflicted will make our religion pure and undefiled) is to make sure we are taking good care of our relatives.

The second category of those to visit is our fellow parishioners that are shut-ins. Maybe we’re not related to them by blood, but they are in our family, our *church* family. These are our fellow church members who can’t join us here on Sundays. They are shut-ins either in their relative’s homes, their own homes, or in nursing homes.

And how they love to get visits from you! Sure, I visit them, and the deacons visit them--and the shut-ins like our visits. But the visits they *really* love are those from *you*, their fellow parishioners. I know this from how much, and how happily, they speak about it to me when one of you pays them a call.

We do have lay visitors who make regular visits to our shut-ins. And thank you very much, lay visitors, for making those visits. But we need more lay visitors! Our shut-ins outnumber our lay visitors!

A visit to a shut-in is a simple thing to do. You just go to their home or nursing facility and chat with them a little while. It just takes a short amount of time and it’s not difficult. A very simple thing to do, a little thing to do. But not little to the person getting visited. To them, it’s huge! They have so much time on their hands. Sometime the boredom and the loneliness must become unbearable. Your stopping in for half an hour is a huge blessing to them! And it lets them know that they’re not forgotten by their church family, that they still have a church family.

One of our shut-ins once told me, after receiving a visit from one of you---“Father---it means a lot when a church person comes over. It shows me that my church hasn’t forgotten me although I haven’t been able to attend for years.”

But we really don’t have enough lay visitors. Not enough to get enough visits made. Some of our shut-ins don’t get lay visits, or only very, very rarely. So we need more lay visitors.

So, a challenge for you to consider----Can you make a commitment to make a visit to a shut-in once every two months? More, of course, is great! But if many of you visited once every two months, our shut-ins would be very well covered. The visits would really add up which would be a wonderful thing. You don’t need to visit the same person every time, although that’s fine if it’s your preference.

What a blessing for our shut-ins! And, as St. James writes, our religion will become more pure.

Once there was a monk who had a life-long dream of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to visit the Holy Sepulcher Church where our Lord was buried and from which He arose. But he lived in poverty and couldn’t afford to go, even with a very simple way of traveling. So what he did was weave baskets while he prayed every day. Then he would sell the baskets and save all the money he could. It wasn’t all that much but after some years, it

was just enough to fund his trip. The day to travel came. With great excitement he headed down the road to get to the port where a ship would take him to the Holy Land. He was happy because he believed he would grow much closer to the Lord by visiting His tomb. He had only gone a few miles down the road when he came across a beggar. In fact, there was a beggar and several children. The man had become very ill and couldn't work. The wife had died. The man and the children were in dire poverty and needed significant help, not just a coin or two. The monk faced a tough decision----give them one coin and continue on his pilgrimage with almost all his savings intact; or give all his money to them to help them survive-- and then he would have to forget Jerusalem. He struggled, he prayed, standing there on the road. Finally, he handed them the bag with all his money. He turned around to go back home, knowing he would never have the opportunity to go on the pilgrimage again. And as he went home, the joy of God flooded his soul. He spent the rest of his days in joyful prayer and service to God, having drawn much nearer to Christ by what he did on the road that day than he would have if he had gone to Christ's tomb (Father Anthony Gabriel, sermon at Antiochian Archdiocese Convention, Detroit, July, 2005)

Will you find Jesus in the Holy Land? Perhaps, and it would be great to go.... But more likely, you will find Him while visiting a shut-in in a nursing home. St. James seemed to think that-----As he wrote, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction."

Do you wish to have a more "pure religion"? Go visit the shut-ins. And please seriously consider my challenge---to visit one of them once every two months. It will mean joy for them and growing closer to Christ for you. Just speak to me about details, addresses, etc.....

May God bless you as you make your religion more pure!

