

# Ministry In The New Testament Church

**Memory Text:** “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27)

**Setting The Stage:** Religion can be defined as “belief in God or gods to be worshipped, usually expressed in conduct and ritual” or “any specific system of belief, worship, etc., often involving a code of ethics.” Well over 90% of the world’s population adheres to some form of religion. The problem is that there are so many different religions. What is the right religion (which we won’t be answering)? What is true religion?

The two most common ingredients in religions are rules and rituals. Some religions are essentially nothing more than a list of rules, do’s and don’ts, that a person must observe in order to be considered a faithful adherent of that religion, and thereby, right with the God of that religion.

Other religions focus more on observing rituals instead of obeying a list of rules. By offering this sacrifice, performing this task, participating in this service, consuming this meal, etc., a person is made right with God.

True religion is neither rules-based nor ritual-based. True religion is essentially a saving relationship with God. True religion does have rules and rituals, but they are observed out of gratitude for the salvation God has provided, not in an effort to obtain that salvation.

And stemming from this relationship with God is a life that gives consideration for and care toward those who need help. James 1:27 summarizes what true or “pure and undefiled” religion looks like.

“Pure and undefiled” references a diamond or precious stone, whose perfection consists in its being free from flaws; not cloudy, but “crystal clear”. True religion is the ornament of the soul, and its effects, the ornament of the life.

Works of charity and mercy are the genuine fruits of religion; and those especially the objects of charity and mercy are the orphans and widows. False religion may perform acts of mercy and charity; but its motives are not pure, defiling the man, and his acts.

True religion doesn’t merely give something for the relief of the distressed, but it visits them, it takes the oversight of them, it takes them under its care; it goes to their houses, and speaks to their hearts; it relieves their wants, sympathizes with

them in their distresses, instructs them in divine things and recommends them to God. And all this it does for the Lord's sake. This is the religion of Christ. The religion that does not reveal itself by works of charity and mercy is not of God. What religion do you have?

## Sunday – A New Kind Of Community

Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37

After Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the group of believers grew rapidly and created the early church. However, this new community was not just something that they made up among themselves; rather, it was built on the teachings and ministry of Jesus and drew on the long history of the Hebrew Scriptures and their prophets.

**Acts 2:42-47:** “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” (cp. Acts 4:32-37).

“To have things in common was not unusual in Jewish life of the time. Visitors to the yearly feasts often had their needs supplied by their friends in Jerusalem. It is clear, however, that something more than this is implied in Luke’s statement. The Christians were thrown back upon themselves, and new, a Christian economy was set up. However, this does not mean the institution of what is called Christian socialism. It was probably a continuation and enlargement of the ‘bag,’ or common purse, of John 12:6; 13:29.

“The new converts would be more ready to share their material possessions because of their new-found love for Christ and for one another, and their earnest expectation of the Lord’s soon return (Acts 1:11).

“There was nothing compulsory about the sharing (5:4). It was a literal fulfillment of the Lord’s words (Luke 12:33), and a very natural act for a society founded, not on the law of self-interest and competition, but on the law of sympathy and self-denial. The Spirit of God was showing His power, not only in the specific gifts, but also in the way of love.

“There is no evidence that this way of life continued in the church for any length of time, except of the gracious benevolence that the church doubtless showed at every

opportunity. At the same time, however, the church learned to discriminate in its economy (2 Thess. 3:10; 1Tim. 5:8, 16).” (SDA Bible Commentary, vol.6, p. 149)

How can we reflect the same principles today?

## **Monday – Dorcas’s Ministry & Witness**

Acts 9:36-42

Joppa was a port city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Because it was the nearest port to Jerusalem, it was used to land timber brought from Lebanon for both the building of the temple under King Solomon and under Zerubbabel. It was the port from which ships sailed to Tarshish. In Peter’s day it was notorious as a headquarters for pirates. Here, as in the case of Lydda (a city not too far from Joppa), Christian companies were probably raised up by Philip (see Acts 8:40).

**Acts 9:36-42.** “Tabitha” or “Dorcas,” both mean “gazelle.” As a gazelle exhibits a graceful style when running, Dorcas exhibited God’s grace in her ministry of “charitable deeds.” And whom did her ministry especially bless? It was the widows (v. 39). And what specifically did she do? She made garments for charitable purposes (v. 39). Someone wrote about Dorcas, “She was not content to be charitable by proxy (through another), but gave herself as well as her possessions.”

Dorcas let her light shine before men that they might see her good works (Matt. 5:16). Dorcas wasn’t content to merely give through a charity. Dorcas became charitable. She was a disciple in every sense of the word as she took up the responsibility of caring for those women who had been deprived of their husbands.

Dorcas had adopted Joppa as her field of labor. She was determined to grow where God had planted her. Dorcas didn’t just speak about what it meant to love one another, but exemplified what it meant to love one another in her life through generous deeds or mercy. What is your Joppa? Are you engaging the gifts God has given you in ministry toward others? How can your church collectively reflect the spirit of Dorcas?

If you were to pass away, would your contribution be mourned and missed like the ministry of Dorcas was remembered and mourned? How can we leave a better legacy of service? What practical skills do you have—such as Dorcas’s skills of making garments—which you might use in service to others?

## **Tuesday – Giving As A Way Of Sharing**

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

God alone knows our true motives (Prov. 16:2). It is possible to have the right actions with the wrong motives. To give out of abundance doesn’t require much

faith, but to give sacrificially for the good of others can indeed say something very powerful about our hearts. *"If you give what you do not need, it isn't giving."* – Mother Theresa

How much should we give then? *"I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare."* – C. S. Lewis

**2 Corinthians 8:7-15.** What is Paul talking about here in regard to giving? What principles can we take from these verses and apply to our own lives?

The Corinthian church had responded to the needs of the church in Jerusalem, but for one reason or another had waned in their giving. Using the example of the faithful Macedonians, Paul hopes to inspire a renewed sense of giving. He uses to two OT texts to urge the Corinthians toward generosity—Ex. 15, the story of the collection of the manna, and Ps. 112:9. Paul is not speaking of giving so everyone has an equality of goods, but to a proportionate equality of effort. In their present state of material prosperity the Corinthians were able to do much more.

The fight between selfishness and giving is fought more frequently than any other spiritual fight. Selfishness will chill a heart that was once on fire for God. The problem comes when we let selfishness into our Christian experience. That is, we find ways to justify our selfishness and do it in the name of Christ.

The bottom line comes down to one word: love. And love cannot be manifested without self-denial, a willingness to give of oneself, even sacrificially, for the good of others.

Unless God's love is reflected in our lives, our giving will not reflect God's love. God's love directed toward us inspires us to love in return, and it is truly the supreme motive for giving.

How should we prioritize giving when we are unable to give to every cause or need presented to us?

## Wednesday – Paul's Guide to Living & Loving Well

Romans 12

Paul's letter to the Romans is best known for its in-depth explanations of the great doctrine of righteousness by faith. But after 11 chapters of such teaching, there is a change of emphasis. Paul now turns to consider the practical application of the doctrine of righteousness by faith. Righteousness by faith means not only forgiveness of sin but also newness of life. It includes sanctification as well as justification, transformation as well as reconciliation. God's purpose is to restore sinners completely, to make them fit for service here and to live in His presence there.

**Romans 12:1:** “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.” In effect, Paul is saying that because of what God has done for us in Jesus, this is how we should live.

**Romans 12:2-8.** Living as they were in an oppressive and often cruel society in the heart of the Roman Empire, Paul instructs them to live differently—not to be conformed to this world but according to Christ’s rule of life. He begins by talking about the different roles and gifts within the church body, including serving and encouraging others, and giving generously. From the discussion of the right use of special gifts, Paul then passes on to instruct the church in the exercise of the greatest gift of all and the basic principle of all true Christianity—love.

**Romans 12:9-21.** Paul urges the church to be patient in difficulties and persecution, to care for the needy, to be peacemakers wherever and whenever possible and—as we have seen previously—to respond to evil and injustice with kindness, overcoming evil by doing good.

What are some attitudes and practices you need to resist in your community to help you live and love well as a follower of Jesus today?

### **Thursday – James “The Just”**

James 2:1-9; 5:1-5

“Christian tradition suggests that James, the brother or stepbrother of Jesus, became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem and was the James who acted as chairman for the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15, as well as Galatians 1 and 2). If so, it is likely that he was the author of the letter preserved in the Bible as the book of James.

“James was a common name at the time, but if these were the same person, he also may have been the church leader known as James “the Just,” which suggests a wise leader who properly prioritized his treatment of others and cared for those often forgotten or downtrodden.

“The book that bears his name has been described as “the New Testament’s book of Proverbs,” focused on practical godliness and living wisely as followers of God. The author of James was anxious to remind his Christian readers to “not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22), and that the religion that matters—that is pure and lasting in God’s sight—is focused on caring for the needy and the oppressed and resisting the corrupting influences of the society around them (see James 1:27).” (ABSG, The Least Of These)

**James 2:1-9 and 5:1-5.** How is James’s attitude toward those who are rich different from that commonly held in most societies? What are his particular

instructions regarding how rich and poor are to be treated within the church community?

There is to be no partiality when it comes to deference shown to either the rich or the poor. Partiality as James discusses indicates either an uncertainty over the plain teachings of Jesus regarding humility and service for others, or contempt for it. By exhibiting this double standard, according to which the rich and poor are treated so differently, the church members were denying by deed their professed allegiance to the lowly Jesus. By showing partiality these individuals show they are double-minded halting between God and the world.

### **Friday – Summary**

“Spurred by Jesus’ commission and the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples and the early believers set out to share the message and mission of Jesus as widely as possible. Drawing from the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures, the members of the early church formed a new kind of community, sharing what they had with those in need, both within and beyond their community. By their example and their teaching recorded in their letters to these churches, the first Christian leaders urged the believers to lives of faithfulness and service, particularly to those in need.” Let us live this life of faithfulness and service too.