

# Soul Pollution Solution

Sunday, August 30, 2015; James 1:17-27

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Let's talk about pollution, but not just about the massive amount of waste that we've dumped into these waters over the years, which have resulted in the formation of a swirling pool of nasty, plastic junk in the North Atlantic that is wider than the State of Connecticut, or about the massive amount of carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, and other nasty gases that we continually throw into our beautiful, blue sky, the long-term effects of which we barely understand. While these are good topics for us Christians to consider as we try to better understand our role as children of the Maker and Redeemer of the good creation, today, let's take a look at a different kind of pollution: Soul pollution.

This kind of filthiness was a major concern of James of Jerusalem, author of today's reading. Throughout his epistle, James exhorts his readers/hearers to be a pure and unpolluted people, not filled with and then exuding the toxic junk of "the world." According to my friend and Wilton Baptist Church minister, Jason Coker, who just produced an excellent commentary on the letter of James, the world that polluted was the world of the Roman Empire and its ways of being: warring, colonizing, enslaving, and exploiting the resources of others for its own gain and aggrandizement. James viewed *this* world as evil, vile, and polluting. Throughout his letter, he demonstrates the opposition of this polluted and polluting world to the perfect and pure realm of heaven, the kingdom to which James and his community of Jesus-following Jews truly belonged.

In the Gospel of John, we are told that God so *loved* the world...In James, we are told that God *loathes* the world. James and John use the same word, world, or *kosmos* in the original Greek language of these two and the other New Testament writings, to refer to

different things. The world that God loves in John is the world of humanity; the world God loathes in James is the world-system that takes from and abuses the world of humanity. The Roman Empire's worldly ways to be avoided are listed throughout James' letter, where the recipients are called to eliminate from their lives selfishness, pride, jealousy, greed, and violence. Rather, they are called to embrace the way of Jesus and his followers, a lifestyle based on the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures and traditions, which emphasize righteousness, generosity, humility, self-control, and endurance in resisting evil.

I'm sure that James of Jerusalem would have been none too happy to witness much of the transformation of the Jesus movement, as its center of power and influence moved west from Palestine to the Italian Peninsula. Only a few hundred years after the time of Jesus and James, Christianity had become embraced by Rome, and Rome had become embraced by Christianity. Many of the pollutants described by James became commonplace in the culture of Roman Christianity as it continued to develop. And while later Reformation movements in Europe sought to purify the faith, rejecting many of its traditions that came to be seen as pollutants, European society remained profoundly shaped by its own history of greed and violence. This culture was brought to these shores by one of the Reformation movements as English Puritans streamed across the ocean, colonizing and conquering upon their arrival. The English settling of Connecticut was marked by much terrible violence and greed, and those of us who are Connecticut Congregationalists should recognize and own our own marred heritage. And as we sit upon a sandy beach of this fine, golden coast this morning, we must ask ourselves how much of our history of greed and violence, which is embedded in our society's DNA, finds expression in our own actions and in those of our representatives and institutions.

I don't mean to be a total Kenny Downer this morning; there is good news! The pollution that has been dumped into our soul can be cleaned up. While we can never become pure in the way that James envisioned, uninfluenced by the ways of the wealthy, oppressive empire, which would require a total brain transplant, we can work to identify the trash that is in and around us and commit ourselves to cleaning it up. The one who created us can also re-create us, renewing our minds and bringing new life and wholeness to our world. This is the good news of Christ: While God loathes the filthy ways of the world, God loves the world and is active in making it new.

The soul pollution solution offered by God through Christ to us this morning is to embrace the message of James: Be a hearer and doer of the word and embrace humility, generosity, and concern for the lowly. By such living, we allow God's soul-scrubbing action to clean our souls and the soul of our society. Stains of the past will always remain, but they do not have to fully define what we will be now or what we will become. And so let us take up James' challenge to "care for orphans and widows in their distress" rather than to care most about our own gain.

We are demonstrating such concern for our "orphans and widows" when we take our morning collection and distribute it to organizations that provide food and shelter to those in our midst without these necessities. We care for our orphans and widows when we put our hands to work on a mission trip, at a local Habitat for Humanity worksite, or in the kitchen of a homeless shelter. We care for our orphans and widows when we commit ourselves to paying attention to our investments, ensuring that our powerful resources are used to bring good to the world and are not harnessed by others in ways that oppress or cause suffering. We care for our orphans and widows whenever we offer words of comfort and life to the suffering. We care for our orphans and widows whenever we grow in our understanding of the plight of needy others around

the world and give and work to ease their suffering. We care for our orphans and widows when we pay attention to the needs of our environment, find ways to stop adding trash to it, and work to remove the trash that we've already dumped upon it.

So let us dedicate ourselves this morning to resisting the pollution of our souls and to partnering with God in cleaning the parts of us and our world that are defiled. May we be so dedicated, and may the God who is our vision, wisdom, and treasure be praised in our living. Amen.