

Demonstration > Definition // Mercy Hill Church

James 1:22-25, 27

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12/5/21

It's so good to be with you today! As _____ said, my name is Philip Pattison and I lead a movement called Foster the City. Foster the City is a movement that launched right here in San Jose. About 6 years ago, my wife and I became foster parents. I was pastoring a church here in San Jose and we started to get our church involved in foster care. And as we started to serve these children and families, we also started to build relationships with social workers. At one point, a social worker sat us down and said, *"hey we're happy to partner with your church. This is great, but listen, right now we're in an emergency crisis. There are more kids entering into foster care than there are homes ready to care for them. The need is honestly bigger than your church. Would you start mobilizing other churches as well to help us address this crisis?"* We said yes and launched this coalition of churches called Foster the City and it's been one of the greatest joys of my life watching the way churches just like Mercy Hill have responded to this invitation. Within several years, our coalition has expanded to all ten Bay Area counties...and today, leaders in other parts of the country have seen what Bay Area churches have been doing together and now doors are flying open for us to launch in new places where there is a similar need. This last summer in fact, Foster the City expanded to Southern California, where they manage the largest population of foster kids in the entire country. There are more foster youth in Southern California than there are in any entire state in the US. Since we launched just a few months ago, there are already ten churches working together to help these kids...and that number just continues to grow. Plus, this year we began conversations with leaders in Northern Nevada. They told us that right now, there are zero beds available for children entering into foster care...and so I'm so excited to share with you that last month we launched Foster the City in Northern Nevada! Today, in Reno and Carson City and Sparks and Incline there are churches now working together to raise up new foster families, and within a matter of weeks, we're already seeing families begin their licensing process. Isn't that amazing?! Listen, what started right here in San Jose with Echo and Mercy Hill and Neighborhood Bible and Bernal Church is today a coalition of 179 churches in regions across the West Coast that have linked arms together around a passion to love and care for our young neighbors in need.

I want to take a moment to say thank you for helping to make this possible. This church was one of the very earliest to jump into this movement. Folks from this church have stepped forward as foster parents, as support friends. You've prayed. You've given financially. This church has been faithfully giving to Foster the City for years. I want you to know that when you give to this church, your generosity is directly linked to the lives of vulnerable kids in this community. And I want to say thank you!

You know, in the last 6 years, I have had hundreds of meetings with leaders and not one single, solitary time have I had to convince a Pastor that this work matters to God. Not one time. Because *if you open up the Scriptures, it's crystal clear that there are*

some people in this world that have a special place in God's heart - the orphan, the widow, the immigrant and the poor. In other words, those who are without family, those who have suffered deep loss, those who are far from home, those who are without protection, those who are in need. They matter deeply to God. **Jesus said at one point**, *"whatever you do for the least of these, you've done it to Me."* Jesus identified with the poor, the prostitute, the fatherless, the voiceless and the outcast.

In fact, **Jesus' brother...a guy named James would end up writing a book** about what it meant to live like Jesus. *He had watched Jesus for decades...* in his public ministry and in the home. He had an upfront seat to both his public and private life for years and so he wrote a book saying, *"you want to follow Jesus? You want to live like Him? You want to care about the things that He cares about, then you're going to be a person that care about the poor, you'll care about the oppressed and the vulnerable."* I want to show you what I mean. Go with me to James chapter 1, starting in verse 23...

James says...

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. **24** For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. **25** But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Jump to Verse 27... **27** Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. James 1:22-27

Two things that James gives us here... **he shows us our mission as followers of Jesus and our motivation**. Two things.

Look first at the **mission**. James says *"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world."*

Okay, **I know I've already lost some of you...** I just dropped a dirty word in our culture, didn't I? We don't like that word, right? We say, *"we're not religious, we're spiritual. We're not religious, we're in a relationship."* And that's fine, but **when James says "religion", he's not talking cathedrals or stained-glass windows or dry rituals or even Sunday mornings**. The word here basically means: **the outward expression of what's true on the inside**...the outworking of what's inside. **You have deeply held beliefs and fundamental worldviews**...we all do. It's the way you see and make sense of the world around you and it's what you hold as ultimately true and as a guide in this life. Christianity is a religion. Hinduism is a religion. But so is secularism and naturalism. Religion is simply a set of beliefs that work themselves out in our life.

So listen, what James is saying to us is this...*"follower of Jesus, when you are living outwardly in congruence with what's true about who you are in Christ, two things are*

going to be true of you: you'll care about the vulnerable AND you'll live unstained by the world. Two things. Now, **this might seem obvious, but honestly, a lot of us struggle with one or both of these things.**

Listen, *I might get myself in some trouble here* by saying this, but I want you to see this. James says here, **a follower of Jesus is going to understand that they have both a social moral responsibility AND a personal moral responsibility.** Let me tell you why this **is revolutionary even today.** I'm about to tick somebody off, and listen, I know this is an over-generalization, but hear me out...**SOMETIMES folks on the right side of the aisle are going to have deeply held convictions about personal moral responsibilities...traditional values...BUT are going to be a bit more open handed when it comes to social responsibilities.** *This is my money, these are my my rights...don't tell me that I have a moral obligation to my neighbor. I have personal freedoms.* Everybody ok? **On the flip side, sometimes folks on the Left are going to have deeply held convictions about our communal responsibilities...social justice, community engagement...but will be hesitant to say anything about personal, individual morality.** *Don't tell me how to live. I'm living my truth. We all have obligations out there, but I'll determine what's right for my life.* But James says, *nope. It's not one or the other...it's both. The way of Jesus is not the way of the Republican and it's not the way of the Democrat.* Jesus has a higher view of personal morality than the right and a higher view of social responsibility than the left. Your personal holiness matters to God...but so does the way we treat our neighbor.

And I love that James talks about these two pieces in the same sentence, because the truth is they are **inextricably linked,** aren't there? **Jesus says the same thing.** In Matthew 5, Jesus tells His disciples that they are to be ***salt of the earth.*** We know that in Jesus' day, salt was primarily used as a **preservative.** You put salt into things that would ordinarily decay and go bad, like a slab of meat or something. And **the salt would take what was breaking down and make it whole.** It would preserve it. That's what we're supposed to do, is **go into things that are breaking down and bring wholeness.** But Jesus says, *if the salt goes bad and loses its saltiness its not good for anything.* **Did you know though that salt doesn't go bad?** The only way salt can lose its saltiness is if something from the outside comes in and pollutes it.

How does the world corrupt us? Perhaps more than anything, the world's most alluring invitation is to say my life is all about me. I should seek my own comfort at all times...to care only for myself - it's about my pleasure, my happiness, my security, my children, my house, my country, my time, my money...But surely, my life was meant to be more than this, right? Surely the vision and dream for our lives is more than just getting to the end as comfortable and successful as possible, right? The Apostle Paul said to the church *"no, have the same attitude as Jesus, who though He was in very nature God, didn't cling to that, but humbled Himself and became a servant, and laid down His life for us."* **This is the attitude we are to have towards one another and towards the vulnerable...** And James says ***the more that we live into that, the more that the gospel is going to be on display to a watching world.***

Martin Luther once said that *"The world does not need a definition of religion as much as it needs a demonstration."*

James says ***this is what we give the world when we "visit the orphan and widow in distress"***...now **when James says "visit" orphans and widows, he's not suggesting that we swing by for a visit to say hi.** The idea behind that word is that ***we actively go to where they are.*** We don't avoid them...we *intentionally move towards them.* And the **tense of the word means this is to be our habitual, ongoing practice, not just some isolated act of charity.** It *means regularly, consistently going to where they are and meeting their needs.* **And we've seen this lived out in a thousand different ways through Foster the City:**

Let me tell you about **my friend Jordan**...I met Jordan several years ago and he and his wife were just about to be empty nesters. He had been looking forward to doing some *traveling, spending extra time with his wife, maybe write a book.* But then he came to one of our Interest Meetings and learned about the kids in this city that were in need of someone to stand in the gap with them. And so they began opening up their home to foster kids. And one little girl came into their home. And Jordan called me one day and said, ***"Philip, we just found out that this sweet girl that we've been fostering needs a forever family and I think we're going to say yes. We're going start over as parents."*** Jordan and Becca threw their plans out the window and this last year, they adopted this beautiful girl. (show pic 1) I attended the adoption ceremony and tears were streaming down my face as I listened to Jordan tell this little girl that as much as they hoped to be a blessing to her, how much more she has blessed them.

Let me tell you about my **friend in the East Bay**. She had just entered her retirement years. Similar to Jordan, she had all kinds of plans for her later years, especially to travel...but then she learned just how many of our young neighbors are in need of a loving family. And so they pressed pause on their plans and they welcomed in a teenage boy. And **they did do some traveling this last summer.** They took this teen boy out to Florida where his birth family lived so they could spend time together. *She told us that it's not been easy at all, but it has undoubtedly been one of the greatest joys of her life.* She told us, ***"We may not be able to change the world for everyone, but we are changing the world for this someone."***

Let me tell you about something that happened right here in San Jose. **In 2019, I got an email from a social worker here and she told me all about a 6-year old boy who had significant medical needs and was in need of a family.** In fact, he'd been living in the hospital for 8 months, and they were unable to release him because he literally had nowhere to go. **I shared that story with a family right here at Echo and she told me, *Philip, I think this little boy is supposed to be my son.*** They brought him home. For the last 2 and a half years, they turned their life upside down to meet the medical needs of this boy. This last summer, they finalized his adoption, and listen, he will never spend one more day of his life without a safe and loving family.

Let me share with you a story that is a little closer to home for me. The second little girl that we brought into our home was 6 years old. Her name is Korina. ***Her family was going through a hard time and Korina needed a foster home.*** She was in our home for about 6 months. That was a season full of a lot of fun and laughter...and a lot of challenges. Honestly, much of the time we felt like we weren't able to meet all of her needs and in a lot of ways I felt like we failed her. I remember at one point just crying with a friend, sharing with him how much we sucked at this fostering thing. It wasn't easy...but it was worth it. Can I tell you why? One day we dropped Korina off to have a visit with her mom, and while we were waiting, we went and grabbed dinner and afterwards, we came out and our tires were slashed. And we thought ***shoot, we have to go pick up Korina,*** so we called Jean who is a part of my church family. We said, ***Jean is there any way you can stop what you're doing and go pick up Korina from her visit.*** She said, *of course!* And as Jean picked up Korina, she got into a conversation with Korina's mom named Tracee. And guess what? **That day began a friendship between Jean and Tracee.** It wasn't long after that, Korina went back home to be with her family. But that friendship continued and **Jean invited Tracee and Korina and their family to church.** Guys, listen, for the last 5 years, they have been a part of my church community, finding the love and support that they needed. After a couple of years, we had the joy of watching **Tracee proclaim her faith in Jesus** and take the step to be baptized...and then 3 weeks ago, I got a message from Tracee. She said, ***"Philip, our sweet Korina who is 12 now, has placed her faith in Jesus and she has been asking to be baptized. And we were wondering if you'd be the one to do it."*** So 3 weeks ago at our south campus, I had the unbelievable privilege of baptizing Korina. (show pic 2) As we got in the car that day, **my wife looked over at me and said, "Philip, this is easily one of the greatest days of my life."** Jean was there that day too. Jean came up to my wife that day and said, ***"If someone were to walk up to me right now and hand me 1 million dollars, I couldn't be any happier than I am right now in this moment."*** I asked Tracee if I could share their story and she not only said yes, but told me how excited she was that you might get to hear the way God has worked in their story.

I could just keep sharing stories all morning long, but let me just give you one more. This time I want you to hear this directly from the family. I want to invite you to watch a short video with me so you can see what can happen when we visit families "in their affliction." Watch this with me.

Show Video: **"A Story of Reconciliation"** (download link)

You know, the more that I've been involved in foster care, the more I'm learning about importance of "attachment" in a child's brain. Listen, I've seen some young families here. You moms and dads, let me talk to you for a minute. Lean in for a moment. Listen, when your little one cries. And you go to her, and you pick her up and you feed her, or you hold her until she falls back asleep, we've learned that **a couple of things happen in her brain.** A few things are affirmed for her: she is told **I'm loved** and **I'm valuable** and **I can trust people.** I'm loved, I matter, and I can trust you. This is what affirmed in our brain when someone meets us in our need. **On the flip side, when a child cries out for help and their needs are not met.** *They cry and no one responds*

or they respond with anger or frustration, the opposite is affirmed. **Our brain is told I am not loved, I must not matter and I can't trust anyone.**

It has been incredible watching foster parents like Anna and Steven turn their lives upside down to welcome in these kids and their families and meet them in their needs and affirm to them what is true: You are loved. You matter. There are people you can trust, and a God you can trust.

And do you know how they can do this? Because this is their story too.

Remember, James not only tells us our mission...he also shows us our **motivation**. In **verse 24** James says that *if your life is not being shaped and formed into this kind of person, you're like a person who looks into a mirror and then walks away immediately forgetting what you look like*. Do you know what he means by that? **What does a mirror do?** A mirror **shows you who you are**. It gives you a true picture of reality. James says, *if you're not living a life of compassion and self-giving love, you're forgetting who you are!* We love others because we are loved. **When you open up the Bible, the story of God throughout history has been a pursuit of attachment to you and me. For thousands of years, God has been trying to show us, I'm coming towards you. I'm here to meet you in your need. You are loved, you matter to Me, and you can trust Me. All throughout the Bible: In the Garden, God comes to Adam and Eve when they're hiding and alone, God comes and finds them and clothes them and gives them hope. When Hagar and her baby are abandoned in the desert, God hears their cries and meets their need and gives them hope. When the Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, He hears their cries and groaning, and He fights for them and meets their need and gives them hope. When His people are exiled and they cry out for help, God hears and brings them back home and gives them hope. And I could go on and on and on. Zecharias, the father of John the Baptist, when he heard that Jesus was on His way...the Savior was finally here, he cried out "Praise God because He has visited and redeemed His people." That word "visit" is the same word that James uses when He says we are to visit orphans and widows. In other words, He has visited US in our distress. He has visited US in our affliction. God didn't keep His distance from our brokenness. He entered in and He laid down His life for us that we might have healing and hope for our future. In a thousand different ways, God has been trying to tell you, "you are loved, you matter, and you can trust Me." This is what's true of you. You are His beloved. He says, *"I see you right where you are, and I'm coming for you"* **And what James is saying, is that perhaps the best, most vivid, most beautiful way we can show this to a watching world is by reflecting that same love to those around us.** Romans 15 says, **"Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. Romans 15:7"****

So, **how is God leading you to do this today?** Perhaps it's moving towards that friend or neighbor that's been struggling. Perhaps it's by sacrificially giving to Mercy Hill so that you can keep doing big things in this community. **Or maybe, you want to learn more about getting involved with Foster the City.**

God might be stirring in your heart to learn more about becoming a foster parent. There is a profound need for more foster homes right now. *There are kids in our city waiting for someone to say yes so they can have a home. Maybe that's you.*

For others, **maybe you can't foster but you could become a support friend FOR a foster family.** (Show FTC model image) *Nationwide only about 40% of foster families make it past the first year.* But you know what? Over 90% of Foster the City families make it past their first year! You know why? Because we wrap every foster family with a team of 4 support friends that provide consistent, practical, emotional, spiritual support to help that family foster longer and better. Maybe that's a role you could play.

If you're interested in getting involved in anyway – we want to invite you to attend one of our upcoming Interest Meetings. In fact, I was praying this week for 5 families or individuals to attend an Interest Meeting to learn more. You're not signing in blood and we're not dropping a foster kid off to your house this week. *Would you simply be willing to give one hour of your time to learn more about the different roles you could play.* To **sign up for one of those** meetings, you can go to fosterthecity.org or better yet, come say hi after the service and we'll have you fill out a Next Step card and we'll send you all the info. We would love to help you take your first step.

Let me close with this.

The Christian life can be summed up in 7 words: *We love because Christ first loved us.* You are His child. **He loves you. You matter to Him. And you can trust Him.** *May these truths create in us an unshakeable foundation of peace, confidence and joy...and may they serve as the motivation for a life of self-giving love and compassion to a world in need of some hope.*

In the words of St. Teresa,

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours...
St. Teresa of Avila*

Let's pray...