

FAT DOGS

by Tracy Robinson, Hickory Christian Academy

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

—James 1:27

As is always the case when I travel to Haiti, I end up in a conversation that is convicting to my American Christianity. For a decade, Gayle and I have supported a particularly poor Haitian family, one that is considered poor even in the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. This is a family of a father, mother, and nine children, ranging in age from 21 years old to 3-year-old twins. All eleven of them live in a house that measures less than 150 total square feet, with one bed and a dirt floor. Were it not for our meager financial support, they would certainly be facing the threat of starvation. Even with the support, they still have to worry about sickness (they have all had malaria, dengue, and other tropical illnesses), clean water, mudslides, assault, and other issues that rarely cross our minds here.

During our trip last week, we were checking out the progress on an expansion to their house, when a puppy happened to walk by. Doing what Americans do, I picked up the puppy, handed it to my son, Sam, and took a picture. After all, who can resist a puppy!?



SYLVIE'S FAMILY

Our Haitian friends watched this with wonder, and the oldest son, Likanson, asked in his broken English, “Do Americans like dogs?” Sam quickly answered “yes,” to which Likanson replied, “Haitians hate dogs”. He then added the piercing question, “Are American dogs fat?” Sam answered, “Yes, many of them are fat, especially compared with Haitian dogs.” Likanson’s face revealed his heart.

As a background to those who have never traveled to a third-world-nation, dogs are considered pests and scavengers, who compete with the humans for food. They are treated with contempt, and often chased away with sticks or rocks. Most of the dogs we see in Haiti are on top of trash piles, trying to get any morsel of

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food they can find. In Scripture, we see that this battle between man and dogs for food has lasted for thousands of years in poor nations. In Mark 7:27, Jesus says, “Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

When Likanson asked about fat American dogs, what he was really thinking was this: “In Haiti, my brothers and sisters are starving. My community cannot find enough food for everyone to share. But, in America, even the dogs have an overabundance.” He holds this view, not as a critique of Americans, but in awe that a nation could possibly be so wealthy that even dogs (detested animals to them) are fat (and often clothed). I do not bring up this story as an accusation toward American animal lovers. I have a spoiled dog myself. Instead, I bring it up to point out the vast economic chasm that exists between America and most of the remaining world.

Before leaving America, I announced our intentions for this trip, especially in light of the devastation left behind from Hurricane Matthew last month. I had scores of people offer donations to help the cause, and ended up receiving over \$12,000 in donations. To put that in perspective, with the average Haitian earning around \$500 per year, we raised 24 times an average annual salary in 2–3 weeks, without really breaking a sweat!

This takes me to the Scripture I led off with at the top of this page.

In James’ epistle, in a single verse, he defines a true, “pure, undefiled” believer by his actions. In other words, if you claim to be an authentic Christian, there are two characteristics that should define you to the rest of the world, and set you apart from those who are lost. I will discuss them in reverse order.

1. TO KEEP ONESELF UNSTAINED BY THE WORLD



BOWLS OF RICE AND BEANS BOUGHT BY OUR OWN FOLKS. WE HAD ENOUGH TO PROVIDE ABOUT 20,000 MEALS.

We all know that there is an ongoing battle between the spirit and the flesh within each of us. The things that I know I should be doing, I choose not to do, and the things that I know I should not be doing are very appealing to me (Rom. 7:15–17). No amount of trying real hard can get us over this hump. As Paul says in Rom. 7:25–25, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Only through Christ’s victory over sin and death can we live righteously, but as James points out, once we are saved, we are expected to live apart from the stains of the world. Combining these two Scripture passages, we see that in order to display authentic Christianity, our lives should be defined by righteousness, but with an understanding that that righteousness can only come through the power of the Spirit placed in us, through the sacrifice of Jesus



THANKSGIVING IN HAITI

Christ. One thing I would add is that righteousness is defined by God alone, not by man. We tend to add our own asterisk to certain situations so that God's will matches our personal preferences. God's will is defined in God's word. Anything we add or subtract voids the truth because it becomes God's word PLUS my word, based on my interpretation, to accommodate my own flesh (Rev. 22:18–19).

2. TO VISIT ORPHANS AND WIDOWS IN THEIR DISTRESS

To understand the magnitude of this statement, one must understand the context of history when this was written. In the first century, women and children did not have the opportunity to work for themselves. The only hope a woman had in those days was to marry the right guy so that he could support her, while she, in turn, provided a home and family for him. If the husband/father died, the widow and her children were immediately in crisis. There was no social security check, no life insurance policy, and no government welfare program. Unless someone came to their rescue, the widow and children were in danger of starvation (I Kings 17:10–12). However, if someone did decide to take care of them, they did so with the understanding that the widow and orphan children had no means to pay them back. The message here is clear. While speaking specifically of widows and orphans, James is instructing

us to minister to those who could not possibly return the favor, ultimately in the fashion that Jesus chose to die for each of us, knowing that we can never repay Him.

This is why I love going to Haiti, and why many of you love ministering to someone, wherever that may be. It is the opportunity to invest in someone who can never invest in me in the same way. In my American abundance, if I can share just a fraction of that surplus with a child who is starving, what better picture of the gospel message can I display? Our Savior saw our desperate condition here on earth. He saw the sin we fall prey to, the pride we embrace, and the world in which we live, and chose to leave the splendor of Heaven to rescue us. We were literally starving spiritually, and He gave us the bread of life. As Paul put it so eloquently,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
—Philippians 2:5–8

In my daily routine at home as a parent, or at school as headmaster, my desire is that my privileged children would understand the importance of serving others and giving from their surplus. HCA is a blessed people, and it is so easy to get snuggled up in our comfort zone and forget that much of the rest of the world is in crisis. I challenge you to seek out someone who fits the “widow and orphan” mold and invest in them, expecting nothing in return. As a Christian, that is what God requires of us, along with personal holiness. And, I don't know about you, but as an American, I want to be known for my selfless, sacrificial giving, not for my fat dog.

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