



The Idea of an Essay

Volume 7

Article 3

7-28-2020

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Recommended Citation

Harriman, Sierra D. (2020) "Pure and Faultless," *The Idea of an Essay*: Vol. 7 , Article 3.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol7/iss1/3

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Pure and Faultless

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Eventually the plane landed. It was dark out the window, but I could tell that what waited for me outside was nothing like America. Cigarette smoke and odd shades of yellow greeted us at the airport. A van pulled up. We got in. It smelled like cigarettes too. Once on the road I learned my first lesson: speed limits and stop signs are only suggestions here. Gripping the seat, I silently prayed that we would somehow make it to our new house. And it was the first of many prayers that God answered for me in Azerbaijan. A corrupt, confusing, yet somehow beautiful country of the middle east. Soon my prayers would be saturated with the nameless children of a local orphanage and the struggle to forgive and love the Azeri people. Soon God would teach me what true religion meant, as described by the inspired hand of James 1:27, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

In 2009, we parted from our peaceful suburban existence in response to a job position with an oil company. Azerbaijan is country abundant in oil– and homeless children. In light of this, it became clear that God did not bring us here only to remove oil from the ground, but perhaps to remove some children as well. My mom connected with a handful of ladies in our church who had the same conviction and volunteered regularly at an orphanage. Thus, the grueling process of adopting internationally began.

I remember my first visit to the orphanage. It took time for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. A clicking sound echoed down a long dark hallway. A proud woman turned the corner and peered at me

through the dim glow of a depressing yellow light. She was a typical upper-class Azeri woman. Black dress. Heavy make-up. Tight heels teetered on the floor. She was the Director, or should I say Dictator of a fortress that no American had tried to tear down before. It became our mission to get at least two precious children out of there, out of her cold hands. Around this time, we came across James 1:27 during a family Bible devotion. Considering our circumstance, this verse carried a deep impact in my heart, “to look after orphans” I zeroed in on this statement and allowed the next words to fade into the background... “and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

Finally, the day came. The paper work was approved and soon we would welcome two little people into our lives. I was going to be the proud oldest sister of three siblings. I could already hear their laughter in the empty rooms next to mine... “pure and faultless religion.” It felt exhilarating.

A week passed. Then another. Then a third. A tangible tension followed us everywhere, casting its shadow over every despairing moment. My parents’ whispers at night screamed in my ears all day. Something was wrong.

“We’re not allowed back,” my mom finally confessed. “She is refusing to let more children go unless she is paid.”

“Then just pay her!” I clenched my fists. “We have enough money.”

My dad explained to me that it was bribe money. It’s illegal.

That day two members of our family were lost. There was no funeral, no goodbyes. Just silent heartbreak. My mom spent hours alone in her room. With teary eyes she searched for comfort and answers in her Bible. My dad stayed faithful to pray for God’s direction and tried to keep the door open with constant phone calls and more hours at the Embassy.

But not me. I was bitter. My heart grew hard. I cried to God in desperate confusion. “I thought this was pure and faultless in your eyes? We were just doing what you told us to do!”

About two months later I was alone with mom in the car. Like usual, the conversation reverted back to the adoption. After hearing her tell me why it fell through again, how the “Director” closed the doors after failing to receive her money, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“I hate her.” It felt good on my lips to say out loud. If only she was right there in the car with us so I could say it to her face. If only I could tell the entire country of Azerbaijan, “I hate you!” Mom didn’t say anything at first. Evil thoughts chanted in my head as I waited like a starving animal for her response. I expected her to join me in my righteous anger. I longed to hear her nastiest words, or at least some agreement. After all, she had suffered the most out of all of us. She took in a breath. I hoped it was a breath of fire, instead her words washed over me like cool water. She simply looked me in the eyes and told me that hating her would change nothing.

“If God could forgive us after taking and crucifying His own Son, how can you not forgive this woman who has never been shown kindness before?”

Those words pierced my heart. I had become just like her! My thirst for revenge was my bribe money and withholding forgiveness was my refusing her a chance at being part of God’s family. God gave his only Son that we could receive forgiveness and be called sons and daughters of His Kingdom. How dare I judge anyone unworthy of my love?

Pure and faultless religion is to bring light and hope to those who have none. And to keep oneself from being polluted by the world doesn’t mean to avoid it. In fact, as Jesus himself demonstrated, it means to sit with sick people, to dive headfirst into dirty and dark places with the Gospel. To forgive. I believe God calls caring for orphans pure and faultless because it is a perfect image of what He did for us through Jesus. Apart from Christ, everyone is an orphan in need of a Father. The abandoned child in that dark place who needed a family most was the rich middle-aged woman who wouldn’t sign the papers. Like innocent children in an orphanage, it’s effortless to love people who love back. But the ones in the shadows who reject and hurt us, they are the ones in desperate need of unconditional love.

These are the very ones Jesus died for. This is what God has done for us, this is what he has commanded us to do. Pure and faultless...