

## James 1:17-27

James 1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

James 1:19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

James 1:26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

## GOOD NEWS OR GOOD ADVICE?

In verse 19 of today's lesson James gives us some good advice. He tells us that we should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. That advice is reminiscent of a rather amusing passage from the Old Testament book of Proverbs. In Proverbs 17:28 we read, "Even fools seem clever when they are quiet."

Certainly this is good advice. It is better to bridle our tongues and not give free reign to our anger. I like the way Eugene Peterson translates verse 19, "Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear."

I am reminded this morning of something my preaching professor used to drill into us, "Don't turn the good news of the gospel into good advice." It would be very easy to do that with this passage and indeed with the whole book of James. Good advice is easy to give but very hard to follow. Most of us knew before we read it in the Bible this morning that we should listen more, talk less and keep a tighter reign on our anger.

On the other hand, quite often we do just the opposite. We don't listen. We talk too much. And when things don't go our way, we explode in anger. What we believe and what we do are not

always in line. Quite often we don't put our faith into practice. We don't practice what we preach.

And that's what makes the book of James so hard to take. James won't let us off the hook. James is all about practicing what we preach. In fact James tells us if we don't put our faith into practice it is worthless. Faith without works is dead. That doesn't sound like very good news, especially for those of us who know in our heart of hearts that we not the kind of people we should be.

The more important question for is this morning is not: what should we do? We know what we should do. The more important question is: how can we do it? How can we avoid being hypocrites?

I think our passage suggests two answers. First, we need to think about God. We need to look heavenward. We need to ask ourselves, "Who is God? What is God like?"

And second we need to think about are we in the light of that heavenly vision. We need to look long and hard in the mirror of God's grace. Who are we and what are we called to do in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ?

## WHO IS GOD?

So, who is God?

God, according to our passage from James is the source of every act of generosity. God is the original gift giver. God's gift is perfect and comes down from above. All that we are and all that we have is due to the grace of God.

And of course the greatest gift of all is the perfect gift of God's Son Jesus.

In Jesus we see the light of God's love for all people. In Jesus we see that God does not desire to condemn the world. God desires the world to be saved. (John 3:16) In Jesus the Word of God becomes flesh and lives among us. We don't have to guess about the nature of God. In Jesus that nature is clearly revealed. God is a forgiving and compassionate God.

James describes God as the "Father of lights." God is the one who created light and everything else in the universe. This God is reliable. In God there is no shadow or change.

One preacher noted that this revelation of God is markedly different from the theology of popular culture.

As many of you may remember in the movie, Star Wars Divine power is depicted as something called the Force. The force is supposedly an energy field comprised of all living things. And the

force has a dark side. The lives of the characters in that movie are shaped by whether they draw on the bright side or the dark side of the force.

## CHOSEN BY GOD

But, the book of James presents a different view of God. God does not have a dark side nor is God an energy field that people tap into at their will. God is the Giver who conveys life by the force of God's will.

And the way that God does this is through the power of God's word. In verse 18 we read, "In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures." In other words God has chosen us to be his people. We are the "first fruits" of the kingdom that comes.

You may remember that in the Old Testament the first fruits were the first ripe sheaves of grain or the first fruits to appear and ripen on a tree. These first fruits were signs of a greater harvest to come. And the first fruits were regularly offered to God as a sign that the whole harvest belonged to God.

So if we are first fruits that means that we belong to God. We are claimed by God. We are wanted by God. We have been called according to God's purpose. And we are to serve as a sign of a greater harvest to come.

This view of God radically changes how we view ourselves. We are not the masters of our own ship or the captains of our own fate. We have been called according to the purposes of a sovereign God.

Our life is not our own. We belong to God. And so therefore we do not have the luxury of just doing what we want to do when we want to do it. We must live in a thoughtful and reflective way because we are (as the Bible puts it) ambassadors for Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Have you ever noticed how diplomats choose their words very carefully? There's a reason for that. They know that they represent their country, and if they speak carelessly or in an angry way, it could do great harm to the kingdom that they represent.

It is the same for us. We are God's representatives. We have a responsibility to embody the values of God's kingdom in the world. And if we fail to do that, we fail the kingdom that we represent. We are poor ambassadors for the faith.

## LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

So, how can we be the people that we are called to be? How can we be ambassadors for Christ? Our passages suggests that we need to look in the mirror. I don't know about you, but I have a

hard time looking in the mirror ... especially in the morning. The mirror is unrelenting in its evaluation. We are not the person we would like to be when we look in the mirror.

But, of course looking in the mirror is also helpful. If our hair is sticking out in all sorts of wild directions, we need to take care of that so that we don't look foolish all day long. If we forget to look in the mirror one day, then the results will not be good. Every morning, like it or not, we need to look in the mirror.

The same is true in our spiritual life. But, we're not talking about looking in a mirror that shows us only skin deep. We're talking about looking into the mirror of God's Word as revealed in Jesus Christ. What do we see in that mirror? We see a sinner saved by grace. We see a person who is loved by God and who has been given gifts to share with the world.

Many of us don't like the way we look. Maybe our eyes are too close together. Maybe we're too skinny or too fat. Maybe our hair is too unruly or maybe our hair has let loose. Looking good is big business in this country. How many infomercials have to do with makeup, weight loss or hair restoration?

Now that's okay. I'm all for people looking their best. But, as disciples of Christ we need to learn to look deeper than just skin deep. We need to look into the mirror of grace. Our real identity cannot be found in external appearances. Our real identity is found in what we believe and especially in what we do.

The grace of God is found in forgiveness and in God's holy law.

## FAITH AND WORKS

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation was a bit suspicious of the book of James. He called it an "epistle of straw." In other words, in his eyes the book of James wasn't all that important in comparison to the other books in the New Testament.

To Luther the book of James promoted a doctrine of works righteousness that seemed go against the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. The name of Jesus is mentioned only a few times, and unlike Paul's writings there is a heavy emphasis upon doing the right thing versus believing the right thing.

I think Luther got it wrong on this one. Yes, there is heavy emphasis upon doing the right thing in the book of James.

But, this passage gives us insight into why we do the right thing. We don't do the right thing because we think it will gain us salvation. Only God's grace can save us. We do the right thing because we are grateful for the salvation that is already ours. We show our faith through our actions

When we look in the mirror of God's grace and forgiveness we see all that God has given us. And out of gratitude we are enabled by God's Spirit to live in a different way. We are empowered to live in a way that does not come naturally to us.

## SLOW TO LISTEN

For example, in verse 19 we read that we should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. And I noted that unfortunately we naturally tend to do just the opposite. We are slow to listen, quick to speak and quick to become angry.

Why are we so reluctant to listen and so quick to speak? One reason is that we are insecure. We are afraid that if we don't say what is on our mind right away then others will run over us or think that we are not important. And if two insecure people who like to talk get together, often there is an angry exchange. They believe that they are not worthy unless they are heard.

What is that sad refrain that is heard in so many marriages? You don't listen to me.

But, the thing that really destroys the marriage is not just a lack of communication. It is a lack of confidence. When a needy person demands to be heard it drags down a relationship and creates resentment and anger.

This is true not only in a marriage but in all our relationships. And it's especially true in the church. Quite often the church is damaged by those who do not have the confidence to be quiet and really listen.

But, how can we change? How can we bridle an unruly tongue and really listen? We look into the mirror of God's grace, and then we act upon that image.

## THE MIRROR OF GRACE

Suppose you're getting ready to go out for dinner and dancing. You put on your tux or your finest dress. And just before you leave, you look in the mirror. And you say to yourself, "You look fine."

How will you act as a result of that look in the mirror? Chances are you will have more confidence. You will laugh more. You will be interested in what others have to say. You will have a good time. You're not worried about what you look like, and this changes your actions.

And this tends to be a cyclical pattern. If we feel good about ourselves chances are that others will like to be around us, and our self-image will be improved even more.

In a more profound way when we look into the mirror of God's grace we like what we see. We see a sinner saved by grace. We see someone who doesn't have to prove anything to anyone. We see someone who is now able to really listen to others and give to others in a meaningful way.

But, we have to act upon that image of grace.

#### TOO LITTLE TIME BEFORE THE MIRROR

Going back to my night on the town image, suppose you looked into the mirror and saw that all was well, but you were in a rush. You didn't have time to look really closely so you just took a quick glance, and hopped in the car so that you could make it to your dinner reservation.

Suppose on the way you began to question what you saw in the mirror. You begin to worry about your makeup and your hairstyle. And by the time you get to the restaurant you are a nervous wreck.

The problem is that you didn't look long enough in the mirror to feel confident about your appearance. That lack of confidence will come out in your actions. You won't have as much fun and you may even be miserable. And this will reinforce your negative self-image. It would have been better if you had spent just a few more minutes in front of the mirror.

That's why we have to spend time studying God's word as revealed in Jesus Christ and applying that word of grace to our lives. If we don't look deeply into the mirror of God's grace, we might know the tune of grace, but we won't be able to dance to the music.

#### TOO MUCH TIME BEFORE THE MIRROR

But, it is possible to spend too much time in front of the mirror. Another common complaint in marriages is this: "How long do you need to get ready? We're going to be late?"

In the same way it is possible to spend too much time looking into the mirror of God's grace without actually applying that grace in the world. This is the big problem that James is addressing in his letter. There are Christians who talk a good game, but they never actually get out on the field and play ball. That kind of religion is not very effective.

Suppose you decide to play golf, but you've never played golf before. In order to prepare for the big game you go to Edwin Watts and buy the best golf clubs money can buy. You get the latest shoes and clothes. You even have your name stitched on your golf bag.

While you're there you also buy Ben Hogan's five fundamentals of the golf swing and Herbert Warren Wind's history of golf. During the next year you do nothing but read books on golf,

watch golf on TV and think about golf. You mimic the dress of the golfers you see on TV and spend hours trying to look like a golfer.

But, all during this year of “learning” you never actually go out on a driving range and hit a ball or attempt to play a round of golf. But, you feel confident that you will be a good golfer. After all you have read all the important books on golf. You know the history of golf. And you dress like a professional.

Finally, the big day comes, and you actually go to a golf course. Standing on the first tee a small crowd gathers as you prepare to hit your drive from the back tees. Like the pros you select a long iron for this relatively short hole. You make a beautiful backswing. And then you hit a sideways shot that almost injures the crowd that had gathered to watch you play.

They walk away shaking their heads and smiling. And you decide that you are no longer interested in golf and sell all of your equipment at a bargain rate. Perhaps next year you’ll take up sailing. But, first you have to buy the best boat money can buy!

#### PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Now you might rightly say, “Frank, that’s a silly illustration. Nobody thinks that they can learn to be a golfer without actually practicing.” Actually, believe it or not, there are some.

But, there are many more who think that they can be a Christian without ever putting it into practice. There are people who know all about the history of the church, the doctrines of the church and the complexities of proper liturgy. They may even teach at the university.

But, they have never made the connection between knowing the word and doing the word. They do not understand how the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ should encourage them to be gracious toward others.

And as James would put it, their religion is worthless.

This is why many people become discouraged in the Christian faith. They do not practice their faith. And going to church or reading the Bible can actually become boring because those activities are irrelevant.

If you want to learn how to play golf, you should take a lesson from a professional and take his recommendations on equipment. You should practice three hours for every hour of instruction you receive. If you are reasonably athletic, this combination of study and practice should make you as successful as you can be in a game that was designed by the Scottish Presbyterians for the sole purpose of illustrating the total depravity of human beings.

In the same way, if you want to become a follower of Christ, the place to begin is with a trusted fellow Christian who is a bit farther down the road of faith than you are. Take their suggestions about what books to read and what parts of the Bible are most important.

And then put that faith into practice. Ask yourself, “If God has given me so much, how should I respond to that grace? How should I live?”

You shouldn’t have a hard time finding a way to express your faith. The whole world is our playing field in this sport. Every day there is an opportunity for each of us to put the gospel of grace into action. There is someone that needs us to listen. There is someone who needs a helping hand.

You don’t have to do everything. But, you do have to do something. James had it right. We all need a balance between knowing the Word and doing the Word.

And it is this balance that creates a community of faith that lives up to her high calling. Remember, we are God’s representatives, God’s ambassadors to the world.

In a world where it seems like no one listens and many are angry, we are called to agents of reconciliation. In a world where many are greedy and lack compassion, we are called to be agents of God’s mercy and grace.

May God help us live up to that high calling.

Amen.