

## **James 1:17-27**

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. 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.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 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. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.

### **08/29/21 Sermon "Mirror, Mirror" Pastor Joanne**

Let us pray: Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us, may the Spirit of God rest upon us. Help us to be steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing and in our living. Amen.

I love it when lectionary scripture readings connect with recent sermons and emphasize the messages of God in a similar way! Two weeks ago, we talked about what we wanted others to see in us as Ephesians 6:10-20 told us to 'Put on the whole armor of God so that we can withstand evil and stand firm. For us, that armor is truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the sword of the Spirit, and shoes that will help us to proclaim the gospel of peace.'

This week, the Gospel of John tells us to 'Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger; and to be doers of the word, not just hearers.' It's not just what others see in us, it's what we see in ourselves when it comes to caring for others and following the Word of God.

In the middle of today's scripture reading, the apostle James makes an interesting and perceptive comparison. The points of reference are two types of people. James says: "For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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".

The operative word in this reading is “mirror.” And since James pins his point on this word, hoping we will understand the metaphor, let’s start there. For most people, looking in a mirror is simply a matter of checking their appearance. We can always find a mirror, and perhaps that’s why we take mirrors for granted. We use them for practical purposes and for decoration. When driving, we check our side mirrors and rearview mirrors for safety reasons.

What about the mirror that the apostle James used 2,000 years ago? His mirror was probably a piece of polished bronze or copper. Whatever it was, there’s no doubt that his readers knew what mirror was. The Bible helps us to understand the use and history of mirrors.

- Job (37:18) “Can you, like him, spread out the skies, unyielding as a cast mirror?”.
- Exodus (38:8) women had mirrors, and on one occasion, donated them for the making of a bronze bowl for tabernacle worship.
- Isaiah (3:23) refers to “mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls”.
- 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly ...”.

The simplest mirror is water. Nature lovers are thrilled when, in the early morning hours, they come across a woodland pond or alpine lake that is as still as glass, reflecting the pines and mountains above the clear water.

The mirror described in today’s reading, the Word of God, is even more amazing than this because it’s perfect! The apostle James calls it “perfect” and, according to the 20th-century Scottish divine, William Barclay, it’s perfect in at least three ways:

It is God’s law. This amazing “mirror,” however, is the “perfect law” because it comes from God. This is as good as it gets, and it can’t get better. In fact, it is the law of “liberty” or freedom. Following this law, one is truly free. And liberty is what we all want.

It is directed toward an end. That’s the meaning of perfect. God’s law is perfect because its goal, end or purpose is to teach disciples of Christ to be who they are designed to be and who do what they are designed to do. But if you look into this amazing mirror and walk away, that’s not going to happen, is it?

It’s amazing because we must lean into the mirror to see better. You can see a lot by looking, which is why we often lean toward the mirror to get a better look at ourselves. James says “having looked intently”. That implies bending over, or stooping, to get a better look. In the Gospel of Luke (24:12) the same word is used: “But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened”. Those who are “doers” of God’s word are those who humble themselves, who are on their knees in an attitude of contrition and repentance, who bend to the will of God and are obedient.

Finally, it’s an amazing mirror because it’s a two-way mirror, and God is on the other side! We get to see God in so many ways and God sees us!

- Acts (15:8) “God, who knows the human heart ...”.

- 1 Samuel 16:7 “But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, ... for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.’”
- Psalm 44:21: “Would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart”.
- Jeremiah 17:9-10: “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse — who can understand it?” The answer comes quickly: “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings”.

What are your doings? Do you look ‘on the heart’ of others? The word of God is perfect because when we stand before the “perfect law” of God, we’re really standing before God himself, who sees us as through a two-way mirror. To look in the mirror is a good thing, but only if we then take action according to what we see, otherwise, looking in the mirror is a waste of time.

We become better versions of ourselves and the world becomes a better place when we continue to look into God’s mirror — the perfect law — and act on what we see – to be “doers of the word”.

James refers to acting on what we see when he argues that a Christian who takes care of orphans and widows in distress is a practitioner of “true religion.”

In his book, Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples Through Scripture and Doctrine, Kevin Vanhoozer tells us that “Discipleship has never been a cakewalk. To follow the cruciform way of Jesus is to wander in the wilderness, as Israel did for forty years, a precursor of Jesus’ own forty-day desert trial.”

Jesus was a master storyteller, and the stories he told were designed to transform the disciples’ imaginary. Last week, we talked about how literally they heard whatever Jesus said.

Jesus wanted his disciples to be hearers and doers who understood what they were doing in terms of the stories he told and the story of the Messiah he was living out.

As a rabbi, Jesus did not want his followers simply to listen to his lessons and then continue living as they did before. To hear and not do is the opposite not only of obedience but also of learning. No one learns to ride a bike simply by reading an instruction manual and then never rides a bike. Jesus wants followers who both listen and learn.

A disciple is a learner who spends his or her life walking after Jesus. Discipleship is essentially a matter of hearing (authority), believing (trust), and doing the truth (freedom) that is in Jesus Christ.

Jesus encourages his followers to walk in the light rather than in darkness (John 8:12). Jesus is the light (John 9:5), so “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked” (1 John 2:6).

One qualification for being a disciple of Jesus is to be able to follow Jesus' stories. Yet hearing, even with understanding and apparent agreement, is not enough. Toward the end of his longest lesson, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes an explicit contrast between hearing and doing: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand" (Matt 7:24, 26).

This is our call to action: to look into the mirror and to act on what we see. When we do, we will be better for it, and so will our neighborhoods, communities and our part of the world.

God's word is a mirror that elevates us to the "thin space" between heaven and earth, where mortals like us experience what James calls a beautiful condition: "They will be blessed in their doing".

May it be so! Amen!