

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

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First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

James 1:17-27

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.
(James 1:23-24 N.R.S.V.)

The Perfect Mirror

In the children's story, "Snow White," the evil queen looks in the mirror and asks, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?" The mirror tells the queen that she is beautiful, but that Snow White is the most beautiful. The evil queen does not even consider how she might correct her own flaws, instead she immediately tries to have Snow White killed.

I was reading recently that most modern people look in a mirror 20 times a day. And sometimes we talk to the mirror too.

You get up in the morning and look in the mirror and your face has sleep lines etched into it as if you slept on a waffle iron all night. Your hair looks like you just got jolted with 400 volts of electricity. And the bags under your eyes look like something coming off of the baggage terminal at the airport. You gasp and say to the mirror, "No, no, that can't be right."

Hopefully, then you don't just wander away and forget what a mess you look like. Hopefully you attempt to tame your hair, and make yourself presentable. So that the way you look won't scare animals and small children.

In our scripture for today, James talks about God's word as the perfect mirror. He 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.*

By way of background, the main theme of James is that faith without works is dead. Now at first this may seem like the opposite of Paul who says in Galatians 2:16 that one is justified through faith in Christ and not by works of the law.

A closer look reveals that what James is saying is that faith and good works are a matched pair. We need both. Have you ever been putting away the clean laundry, matching up the socks, and you discover that you have three single socks left over that don't have matching mates? Science is not sure how that happens. One theory is that the dryer transforms the missing socks into extra

tupper-ware lids in your kitchen cabinets that don't fit anything.

The point is that these single socks don't do you any good. You might hang onto them for a while hoping that the mates will eventually show up. But at some point the unmatched socks have to be discarded. They are worthless by themselves. So also faith and works are a matched pair.

James is not suggesting that we can work our way into heaven by doing good works. Scripture is quite clear that none of us are good enough to do that. Our salvation is a free gift of God's grace given to us in Jesus Christ. However, if we have truly accepted Christ as our savior and asked him to rule in our hearts, then that will result in changing the way we live. It will result in good works.

Lately I have been tinkering with old lawn mowers and weed eaters trying to see if I can get them to run again. I will clean the carburetor, replace the old gas with fresh gasoline, put in a new spark plug. After each thing, I try and start the motor. If it starts, I know it is fixed. But if it doesn't start, if the performance doesn't change then putting in a new part didn't matter.

James was dealing with people who said, "Jesus forgives my sins no matter how many times I sin, so what I do doesn't matter." James is dismayed at this cavalier attitude. He wants us to know that how we live does matter. If we have received a new heart from Christ, our performance needs to change.

So now James moves to the question of how we know we have changed and changed in the right direction. James says that the word of God is a perfect mirror. If we want to know if we are presentable to go out in public we look in our bathroom mirror. If we want to know if we are presentable to God, we look at the perfect mirror of his word.

The word perfect here means exactly the right tool for the job. A milk jug is perfect if it contains the milk without leaking and makes it easy for us to get to the milk when we want it. A milk jug is the perfect container for milk.

God's word is the perfect mirror. For in God's word we see Jesus who is the perfect example of what we should be like. In scripture, we see not only the image of God, but we see ourselves as a reflection of the image of God. For God created us in his own image.

Someone noted that when we look at ourselves in the bathroom mirror, we tend to lean in close to the mirror in order to see more clearly. Yogi Berra, catcher and manager for the New York Yankees baseball team said, "You can learn a lot by looking."

I am told that most people look in mirrors at least 20 times a day. But how often do we lean in to look at the perfect mirror that is God's word? When we look in the bathroom mirror, we are comparing ourselves to how we have looked in the past and to how we look compared to other people. But when we look into the perfect mirror of God's word, we are seeing how we compare

with Jesus. We are seeing how we compare with the person that God wants us to be. When we compare ourselves to other people, we generally come out looking good. We can easily find other people who are less caring and less loving than we are. When we compare ourselves to other people, we are generally in the middle of the pack. But when we compare ourselves to the people that God wants us to be, we see that we have some long ways to go.

James goes on to give a particular example of what it means to change to conform to the image of God that we find in his word. James says, “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.”

James is asking us to lean in and look into the perfect mirror of God’s word and pay attention to how we treat those who have less power and money than we do. Orphans and widows were the poor and powerless of Biblical days. They often had no means of support and were totally dependent on the kindness of strangers.

Then as now, those with power and money were usually treated with much more respect and dignity than the poor and the powerless. The cynical question of our times is, “What’s in it for me?” It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that those with wealth and power are in a position to help us or hurt us. And those who are poorer in terms of wealth and power than we are, will not be able to help or hurt us much.

The thing is, all of this operates on a subconscious level. We aren’t really thinking about why we are treating people the way we do. We just keep doing things the way we have always done things. That is why we need to lean into God’s word and take a good look at ourselves. How do we treat those who are not in a position to help us?

I have heard people say, “If you are nice to me, I’ll be nice to you. If you are respect me, I’ll respect you. It is as simple as that.” While a part of me really resonates with this sentiment, that is not Christian love, that is a business arrangement.

Listen to these words on love from Jesus’ sermon on the mount from Matthew 5:43-48.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The word translated as “perfect” here does not mean without flaw or fault, but rather it means that we are to be what God created us to be. The perfect tool to drive a nail is a hammer. The perfect tool for taking out a screw is a screw driver. The perfect person to show God’s love is the person who is in right relationship to Jesus Christ. We are to work at being the people God created us to be. Amen.