

August 29, 2021

James 1:27-37; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“I WISH I Could Forget What I Look Like!”

James 1:17-27 Common English Bible

17 Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. 18 He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created.

19 Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. 20 This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.

22 You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. 23 Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. 24 They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like. 25 But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

26 If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. 27 True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 Common English Bible

7 The Pharisees and some legal experts from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. 2 They saw some of his disciples eating food with unclean hands. (They were eating without first ritually purifying their hands through washing. 3 The Pharisees and all the Jews don't eat without first washing their hands carefully. This is a way of observing the rules handed down by the elders. 4 Upon returning from the marketplace, they don't eat without

first immersing themselves. They observe many other rules that have been handed down, such as the washing of cups, jugs, pans, and sleeping mats.)

5 So the Pharisees and legal experts asked Jesus, “Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?”

6 He replied, “Isaiah really knew what he was talking about when he prophesied about you hypocrites. He wrote,
This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far away from me.

7 Their worship of me is empty
since they teach instructions that are human words.

8 You ignore God’s commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you.”

14 Then Jesus called the crowd again and said, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand. 15 Nothing outside of a person can enter and contaminate a person in God’s sight; rather, the things that come out of a person contaminate the person.”

21 “It’s from the inside, from the human heart, that evil thoughts come: sexual sins, thefts, murders, 22 adultery, greed, evil actions, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, insults, arrogance, and foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from the inside and contaminate a person in God’s sight.”

I have been thinking about changing jobs...for instance cleaning and polishing mirrors is a job I could really see myself doing!

My rear view mirror fell off the other day...I haven’t replaced it and I haven’t looked back since!

I decided that it was time for some reflection...so I held up my clock to my mirror!

A friend of mine who thinks he is very funny recently got a new magical mirror. He says when he looks into it he sees a very funny comedian. So I

asked what I would see when I looked into it and he said, "Why, you would see a joke!"

There's an old story, from the days before eHarmony and Christian Mingle, of a man and a woman who meet and fall in love by mail. After months of correspondence, the two of them agree to a rendezvous; he will travel to her city, and they will meet for the first time at the train station. Because they've never exchanged photographs, each of them has no idea what the other looks like. So, they agree on a simple visual code: She will wear a green scarf, a green hat and a green carnation.

As the man gets off the train, he begins looking for the one he loves. Eagerly scanning the crowd, his eye lights upon a woman with a green hat, green scarf and green carnation.

In that instant of recognition, the man's heart sinks: for this is truly one of the most homely, unattractive women he's ever laid eyes on. He very nearly walks off without speaking a word -- but, he has come this far, and she is expecting him, so he introduces himself.

"Am I glad to see you!" the woman responds. "Can you tell me what this whole thing is about? That woman over there gave me twenty dollars to wear these things." And there, on a bench, sits the most beautiful woman the man has ever seen. Later, she explains that, all her life, men have fallen over themselves to get to her, only to become tongue-tied in her presence -- and all because of her looks. "I want someone to love me not for my outward appearance," she confesses, "but because I'm beautiful inside."

Perhaps this story reminds us of how we are to actually "SEE" each other...and how we are to "SEE" ourselves.

If you look carefully at the James passage for today you will notice that James (who we believe was the brother of Jesus) is talking a lot about being doers of the word and not just hearers. And he compares those who don't Do but only Hear to those who look in the mirror and then walk

away and forget what they just saw. That is an interesting analogy and comparison. I'm not 100% sure what to make of this...but as I have been thinking about it I realize I do sort of do exactly what James is saying. I always...so far...do remember who I am when I return to the mirror the next time. But what I do forget is how I look to others! I am constantly disappointed and amazed at how old I look now and I realize that to others I must be seen as an old white man. But here's the thing...I don't feel (most days) that much older than I did several years ago. And one thing I'm learning as I get older is that all of us "oldsters" still think of our days of youth and find ourselves feeling much the same, emotionally at least, as we always have. The trick, I suppose is to take an honest look at ourselves...not just physically but emotionally and spiritually especially and as well.

In fact, such candid self-assessment is downright encouraged in the first chapter of James. The brother of Jesus recommends that we regularly assess our own beauty as baptized, believing members of God's family and to root out anything that might be considered spiritually "ugly." He writes, "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 ..." (James 1:19-21a).

As members of God's family we must be willing to ask the question, "Am I spiritually ugly? Am I reflecting the righteousness of Christ, or today, in the way I am thinking, acting and treating others, do I look like I've been hit with the ugliness of sin?" And as we've learned, the audience for this question makes all the difference. We can ask ourselves and we'll see what we want to see, conveniently justifying everything unattractive. Or we can go to someone who knows us, someone who loves us, someone who wants what's best for us, and who can look well beyond what's on the surface and peer deep into our souls.

Who might that be? Well, it's the God who loves us and saved us through Jesus Christ. And how might we ask for God's opinion of our spiritual beauty, you ask? Well, according to James, the looking glass of spiritual

beauty, the forum for feedback on our spiritual features and the tool that God uses to cultivate change in his children is God's Word.

The Word helps us to be beautiful people

This is what James is driving at when he says, "... 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" (James 1:22-24). The truth of the Scriptures has the ability to lovingly reveal how God perceives us. Then, based on that feedback, we're able to discern how we should live in response. It's a truth so trustworthy and instruction so vital that to reject it is to embrace a life of self-deception and to be unchanged by God's power.

Specifically, when we open God's Word ready for an honest, spiritual assessment, God speaks to us in two ways: through words of law and words of gospel. The law is given to us whenever we hear God telling us what we should or should not do or the kind of person we're expected to be. Reformation-era theologians liked to say that such commands not only tell us what to do, but how we've failed to uphold them and that we're crushed under the weight of them. In this way the law serves to show us our spiritual ugliness and, when bursting with pride or tempted to trust in our own awesomeness, reveal who we actually are.

Martin Luther puts it like this: "After the Law has humbled, terrified and completely crushed you, so that you are on the brink of despair, then see to it that you know how to use the Law correctly; for its function and use is not only to disclose the sin and wrath of God but also to drive us to Christ."

The revelation of our spiritual ugliness through the mirror of God's law and the burden of his commands serves a positive purpose. When Jesus confronts us with the admonition to "be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect," his goal is not to crush us and be cruel (Matthew 5:48). He's not a

junior high male saying, "You're so ugly, you went to a haunted house and came out with an application."

No, when we approach God's Word seeking a true assessment of ourselves, and the law crushes us under the reality of our sin, the intention is that by being hearers of that word we would be doers of the word and run to and cling to, Christ.

So...what we are to do according to James is be able to honestly look at ourselves introspectively...and actually SEE ourselves...and then use the WORD which I believe is both the written word of God as found in our Bibles and the Spiritual WORD which is Jesus as his Spirit lives in our hearts and we are to decide if what we are seeing reflects someone who is doing the Word as well as Hearing the Word.

This week the Rev. John Vidakovich, a fellow IGRC pastor posted this on our Facebook group...it's all about ministry and it is NOT complete but I believe it shows how we are to do ministry...or as James puts it "religion".

John wrote: Ministry is....

Checking in with the guy who eats breakfast at Subway the same time as you.

Sharing a joke with an old codger at church.

Inquiring about the family of that nice older lady.

Listening to the same story over and over from that poor soul with dementia.

Looking at pictures, first day of school pictures, prom pictures, grandkid pictures and sharing the moment.

Listening to the dreams of a teenager.

Playing duck-duck-goose with the pre-schoolers.

Stopping by the lobby of the bank and chatting up the tellers.

Of course ministry is many other things.

But ministry is all about relationships.

So...the bad news for folks like me is James is very much against folks saying things they shouldn't when they get angry. We should be quick to

listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. We should be humble as we consider each other and how we are to be in relationship with each other. WE are as James says, TO WELCOME THE WORD PLANTED DEEP WITHIN US. And if we can do as James says...then we will practice true worship/devotion before God which is caring for widows and orphans in their need.

So...ministry/religion/devotion is best done by looking at ourselves honestly...and if what we see is NOT what we should be seeing then it's time to listen to the implanted word in our hearts and with meekness and humility let go of our anger and be quick to listen and SLOW to speak...then we are to practice our devotion and religion by finding ways to care for widows and orphans in their need. If you don't see that person in the mirror...if you don't see that church as the one you are attending, in the mirror...then don't just walk away forgetting what you saw...do something about it!

Robert Fulghum tells of a seminar he once attended in Greece. On the last day of the conference, the discussion leader walked over to the bright light of an open window and looked out. Then he asked if there were any questions.

Fulghum laughingly asked him what was the meaning of life. Everyone laughed and got ready to leave. But the leader held up his hand to ask for silence, saying, "I will answer your question."

He took his wallet out of his pocket and removed a small, round mirror about the size of a quarter. Then he told this story:

"When I was a small child during World War II, we were very poor and lived in a remote village. One day on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible. So I kept the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round.

I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun could never shine. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

I kept the little mirror, and as I grew up, I would take it out at idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game, but a metaphor of what I could do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light – be it truth or understanding or knowledge – is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the dark places of human hearts – and change some things in some people. Perhaps others seeing it happen will do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”¹

Let's look at ourselves...and our church and be honest about what we see...and then let's hold up all we see to the light of the implanted Word of God...and then let's see if our religion/devotion/is as it should be. Amen.

((I don't know if I'll include this story...But when I was coaching Little League Baseball I had a run in with another coach over a rule interpretation. He said he didn't have to pitch to my best hitter...the rule book and I said he did have to pitch but those pitches didn't have to be strikes. Anyway...he convinced the umpire he was right and in the ensuing discussion I got angry and lost my temper...a bit. At one point he stepped across from me and looking down at me basically told me to shut up...and I responded that he should get out of my face. We never cussed and things got resolved after that but a fan heard me and said if she had a pastor like me she would leave the church...to which I responded hopefully not to loudly...If I had parishioners like her I would leave the church. Anyway on the following Sunday a parishioner and his family as a joke got me a shirt

¹ – Adapted from Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, (Random House, 2010).

and presented it to me in church and the shirt said, “Button Your Lip...Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get Angry.” James 1:19.)) I have never forgotten that shirt...I wish I could say I have never spoken in anger but that would not be true!