

The Sixteenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 13, 2015

Prayer of the Day: Let your continual mercy, O Lord, cleanse and defend your Church; and because it cannot continue in safety without your help, protect and govern it always by your goodness; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Alleluia! (Philippians 4:4)

Sermon Text: James 1:17-27

One media outlet ranked him as No. 30 of the "100 Greatest College Players of All-Time." A major sports magazine listed him as one of the top nine linebackers to ever play college football. He even won the top college linebacker award *twice*— something no other linebacker has ever done. Perhaps the most intriguing thing about him was not so much how he looked, but what he said.

Every week he singled out the best player on the opposing team, promising to make that player a non-factor. He stood big and tall in front of every camera, revealing a mammoth body which could stop anyone from running around him. He flexed his muscles, showcasing incredible strength that could outmuscle anyone. He never really mentioned his lightning-quick speed because he was busy bragging about how he was so smart that he could predict where the ball was going. He talked up amazing words. Just by listening to him, you felt like your team had already won the game; his words packed that much power.

Many devoured the hype— but that was all they got. Empty, meaningless hyped-up words. When he faced that opposing player, he was the non-factor. His large size made him an

James 1:17-27

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

¹⁹ My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it— he will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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.

easy target to block on every play. His brain never told him to conserve his energy, so his quick speed quickly wore out. As for his tremendous strength— well, on national television, America watched a running back plow straight into him, knock him on his back, and then drag him into the end zone for a touchdown. From that time on, his words waned. No one listened to him (even his fans!) because his promised actions were absent. They realized that he could not do the things he said.

Football players are not the only ones expected to do what they say. Every day we say the things we are going to do and we are expected to do them. Be it taking the kids to school to grocery shopping to finishing that “honey-do” list, our words are expected to become actions.

What about the words we say here—in this house of worship? What about the words that make us a Christian? Do those words which align our identity to God something that leaves this house and carries over into our day-to-day routine?

That is what James is asking you this morning. Holding up God’s perfect law, he asks:
WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE MIRROR?

As we look into God’s perfect commandments, you see something, that at first sight is unexpected. You do not see a reflection of yourself trying so hard to be a better person, how you strive to have your words and actions always line up, how you try to prove to God that you are valuable to him. No, as you look into that mirror of God’s perfect commandments, you see who you are now.

In that mirror, you see Jesus, who obeyed God’s every command for you. Never once did Jesus promise to keep these commandments, only to do disobedient acts later. No, he said that he loved his God with all his heart and his perfect actions proved that he loved God with all his heart. He said that he loved his neighbor as himself and his selfless tending to the needs of others proved that he loved his neighbor as himself.

As you look into that mirror, you see a Savior, who takes your stained, tattered, failed obedience, and removes it from you. He carries those wrongs himself to the feet of God, enduring the promised punishment for every law-breaker. Yet, he does not leave you holding nothing. No, by his death and resurrection, Jesus wraps you in his perfect obedience.

Yes, when it comes to doing what you say, James does not start by telling you and me some 5-step plan to be a better spouse or parent or child or student or worker or Christian. He knows the power to do what we say does not begin with us; it begins with Jesus—and what he has done for us. **WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE MIRROR?** *A child called by God.*

[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. See what wonderful gift God has lavished on you. He calls you a “firstfruit” of his creation. In the Old Testament, God wanted the Israelites to bring their firstfruits, the first cuts from the first crops. These would be the healthy, good-looking plants. Even though the people had yet to put anything else into their barns, they gladly gave their first and their best to God because they knew God would continue blessing their fields and granting them a big harvest.

Along that same line, God calls you a “firstfruit” of his creation. That is, through faith in him as Savior, he is happy to give you eternal life in heaven. That is a guaranteed promise. Just as Israel gave their first crops before the final harvest, God has written your name in the book of heaven, making you an heir of eternal life even before the Last Day.

That is who you are right now. Not someone who only lives for their own personal interests. No, you live with this title of “*child called by God.*”

How does this title play into doing what you say? It lays the foundation for your Christian life. I mean, seeing Jesus give his life for you, gazing at him standing outside of his tomb, hearing that he promises you eternal life in heaven because he has paid your price, how do you respond? How does your life look? How do you react? Do you sit, nod your head, smile, and then go on to listen to God’s Word only when it is convenient, only when you want to? When you plant an apple tree, fertilize the soil, water it every day, make sure the sunlight hits the tree, does that tree just remain the same height with the same leaves? No! As it anchors its roots into the soil, as it absorbs more nutrients, as that source of light strengthens it, that tree responds by growing taller and stronger and as a fruit-producer.

In the same way, you live under Jesus’ selfless sacrifice. You stand with this robe of perfection dressed over your shoulders. Your mind basks in the peace which comes from knowing that your sins are forgiven. As a result, you cannot help but respond to the love of God. James reveals how you already do respond.

My dear brothers [and sisters], take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. That is how you respond; a child of God responds by *listening to God.*

Yet, it is not always easy to listen, is it? It is not easy to listen to God as he says: *Call on me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you*—especially when our health is deteriorating and shows no signs of getting better. It is not easy to listen to God promise: *All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me*—especially when it seems like God does nothing about a world willingly and openly rejecting his moral standards. It is not easy to listen to God say: *Cast all your anxieties on me because I care for you*—especially when those anxieties and worries and fears never go away.

Instead of listening, it is easier to speak about how God’s slowness in answering makes us anger. It is easier to blame God of ignoring us. It is easier to accuse God of not running the world good enough. Yet, this anger harms our relationship with God. If left festering, it strives to pry us away from God.

Because this selfish anger ignores the love of God, it does not allow a Christian to show God’s love to others. When you do face those frustrating times, when you feel that all you do is listen to God with no results, continue remembering who you already are. Jesus patiently marches to the cross even when his Father seems to ignore his prayer for deliverance. He patiently marches to the cross in order to make you a child of God. You see, that perfect patience receiving the Father’s response three days later as Jesus comes out of his grave.

As a child of God, you listen to God. You **humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.** By your own power, accepting God’s Word is impossible. Yet, you no longer live on our own. God has put his Holy Spirit in you. He empowers you to accept God’s Word as it stands— even when things around you tell you not to. No, you listen to God’s Word, to his promises which unfold at the right time (and not at our time).

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Doing what God says really follows when we listen to the Word. We hear what God's commands are, we take them to heart, and our response is to put those words into action.

Yet, James warns us what happens if we hear the Word, but quickly ignore it. **Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.** Mirrors reflect our appearance. You look to adjust your hair, make sure your shirt does not have a stain on it, that your clothes match. Yet, how foolish to quickly look into a mirror, brush your hair, go away, only to wonder if you ever brushed your hair in the first place.

James makes a similar point. We may be tempted to hear God's Word, think about how the words sound nice, and then completely forget that our actions reflect a life shaped by God's Word. It is easy to come here, listen to the Word, and think that because of the simple act that we are here, heaven is our home. Or to think that just by having our names in the church membership book, God will save us. Or to think the only things God wants us to do is be baptized, confirmed, married, and buried here. Actions like that do not line up with God says. Actions like that line up with what sinful hearts want to hear.

To safeguard against forgetting what God's Word means for us, we continue listening to the Word. In that Word, we see Jesus obey everything God says for us, compelling us to live for him. So, when James gives examples of what Christians do, you do them—not because you have to, but because Christ's selfless love for you moves you to show that same selfless love to others.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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. You watch your tongues, only using words which show that you consider God's name to be holy. You watch over orphans and widows, helping them should they need help, remaining a listening ear and a companion to stave off loneliness. You keep yourself from being polluted by the world. You understand that you live in this world—and through this world God gives you many blessings (family, friends, vacation, humor, relaxation). Yet, you remember that your life follows God's Word and not the world's definition of right and wrong.

Yes, the Christian life is full of opportunities where your actions reveal God's Word at work in you. Yes, sometimes we will fail to have our actions and words line up. There will be times our lives look less than Christian. Let us confess those failures, let us look into the mirror of God's perfect commands, see Jesus' forgiveness on us. Continue listening to the Word which tells you the love of Jesus. Let that Word be shown through your actions.

There is no divide between our Christian life and our day-to-day routines. No, they are one and the same because you are *A child called by God, a child listening to God, a child doing God's Word.* That is **WHAT YOU SEE IN THE MIRROR.**