

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 1, 2024**

**“Doers Who Act”
James 1:17-27**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our Epistle Lesson from James begins by celebrating God’s generosity, celebrating God as a Giver of gifts: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift,” James writes, “is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (v. 17). And what gift does James want to celebrate? The gift of God’s Word! “In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth,” James writes, “so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (v. 18). The Word, James says, is no ordinary gift; the Word is a gift that God gives to renew us, refresh us, recreate us.

And what do you do with a gift? You receive it, you open it—which is precisely what James is inviting us to do: “welcome with meekness,” he says, “the implanted word” (v. 21). So here’s the question: how do we open and unwrap this gift? How do we receive the gift of God’s word? One of the best compliments in giving a gift is when you see that it’s well used. Nothing beats seeing that the gift you gave someone has become worn with frequent use. And that’s really how James thinks about the Word; we receive this gift by putting it to use: “be doers of the word,” James says, “and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (v. 22).

For James, that doesn’t mean just listening or reading Scripture; that’s only half of it. For James, the Word of God is a gift we receive *by doing*. There are lots of things that are meant for watching—that don’t require action. There are athletic events which, for everyone’s safety, you should consider spectator sports—like javelin! By all means watch javelin on TV; but do not try this at home. But for James, the Word of God is nothing like that. James insists that the Word is not a spectator sport: the Word is something we’ve got to do.

For James, hearing God’s Word means enacting it; hearing God’s word means responding to it; hearing God’s Word means embodying it. And if we don’t, then we lose something essential: if we hear the Word and it doesn’t affect us, then it means we’ve missed something deeply important: “be doers of the word,” he says, “and not merely hearers *who deceive themselves*” (v. 22). When we hear the Word of God, and dismiss it, ignore it, bracket it out from the rest of our lives—then we’re lying to ourselves, then we’re taking part in our own self-deception. To James, when we hear but ignore God’s Word, we’re really being untrue to ourselves.

And James expresses what that means with his remarkable image of the mirror: “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” (vv. 23-24). It’s a verse that’s maybe quite familiar to you...

But here’s the thing; this verse is more radical than maybe you realize, because it comes out of something remarkable about the ancient world. In the ancient world, for those early Christians

James was writing to, many people did not know what they looked like (Wright). I mean, that's kind of hard for us to even imagine, but it makes sense: there was obviously no photography, selfies were not yet invented, painted portraits were a rare luxury for the wealthy, and even mirrors—which we take for granted—were not common.

So in a time when one's own face could be rather unfamiliar, something of a mystery, James imagines a person who gets this rare opportunity to see their own reflection in a mirror...but then barely glimpses it in passing and doesn't absorb what they see. In the original language, you get the sense that it's a rushed glance at the mirror (Johnson); they just take a quick peak and off they go (cf. Mayor).

And what results from this casual glance at their reflection? “[O]n going away,” James says, they “*immediately forget* what they were like” (v. 24). The language here is about more than just forgetting their appearance; it's about forgetting “what sort [of person] they were” (ἐπελάθετο ὁποῖος ἦν). One paraphrased translation expresses it well: “Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea *who they are*” (Peterson).

For James, hearing the Word and ignoring it isn't just about missing out on information: it means losing sight of ourselves; it means forgetting ourselves and our identity. When we listen superficially to the Word, and then leave it at that—James says we're forgetting ourselves, forgetting who we are in God's eyes, and who we are called to be in Christ.

When we hear the Word of God, and ignore it, it means forgetting that we have been lovingly made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). When we hear the Word, and dismiss it, it means forgetting that we are children of God through the love of Christ (Romans 8:14-27). When we hear the Word of God, and discount it, it means forgetting that we have been created to love as God loves us (1 John 4:19). It's a tragic picture, really, of forgetting who and whose we are; when we hear the Word of God and fail to enact it, we're forgetting who we are and who God has made us to be.

And yet, James promises, there is another way: “be doers of the word,” he says. “[T]hose 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” (vv. 22, 25). When we hear the Word and ignore it, James warns that we'll get mixed up in self-deception and self-forgetfulness; and yet, when we enact the Word, James promises that there is blessing; “they will be blessed in their doing,” he says (v. 25).

Now notice what James *doesn't* say. James does not say that “doers who act [*perfectly*] will be blessed in their doing” or “doers who act [*without making mistakes*] will be blessed in their doing.” James promises that we will find blessing in enacting the Word of God...even though we will certainly get many things wrong. Yet there is blessing in the attempt, James says; there is blessing in our flawed efforts to embody the Word of God.

So what would it look like, according to James, for us to look into the mirror, see who we are before God, and enact God's Word? He writes: “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” (v. 25). To hear God’s Word and put it into action, James tells us, means getting caught up in God’s compassion for the world, finding ways to care for others “in their distress”; it means not imitating the harmful behaviour we see around us, but finding ways to put God’s Word to use with compassion. And if we give that a try, James tells us, we will be “blessed in [our] doing.”

You know, people can spend a lot of their lives wishing they were better. We see what others are doing, and we think, “I wish I was a better person—like him or her.” But that’s not what James is telling us: James isn’t saying, ‘be someone else,’ but ‘be who God has made you to be.’ James says: Look in the mirror; do you see who you are (Koester)? Look into the Word; do you see who God has made you to be? Now—when you see yourself reflected in the Word, don’t forget it! Don’t walk away and forget this; remember who and whose you are—then act like it.

“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” (vv. 22-25). Amen.