

## James 1:17-27

<sup>17</sup>Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights, who does not change or shift like a shadow. <sup>18</sup>Just as he planned, he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of firstfruits of his creations.

<sup>19</sup>Remember this, my dear brothers: Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. <sup>20</sup>Certainly, a man's anger does not bring about what is right before God. <sup>21</sup>So after getting rid of all moral filthiness and overflowing wickedness, receive with humility the word planted in you. It is able to save your souls.

<sup>22</sup>Be people who do what the word says, not people who only hear it. Such people are deceiving themselves. <sup>23</sup>In fact, if anyone hears the word and does not do what it says, he is like a man who carefully looks at his own natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup>Indeed, he carefully looks at himself; then, he goes away and immediately forgets what he looked like. <sup>25</sup>But the one who looks carefully into the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continues to do so—since he does not hear and forget but actually does what it says—that person will be blessed in what he does.

<sup>26</sup>If anyone considers himself to be religious but deceives his own heart because he does not bridle his tongue, this person's religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that is pure and undefiled in the sight of God the Father is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

## What an Image!

### I.

An alarm jars you awake. A hand gropes around, seeking the button that will turn the infernal thing off. Though reluctant, before so much as a second passes, feet swing to the side and hit the floor. Sitting on the edge of the bed arms stretch toward the ceiling and a yawn escapes. Could it be that you stayed up just a little too late watching TV last night?

Shuffling feet stumble through the darkened room, out into the hall and down to the bathroom. Like an automaton a hand brushes the wall and over a switch on the wall. Ah! The light! It's so offensive! And then...*then* you look at the mirror for a sight that is *really* offensive—the squinting, morning, barely-awake you. Scarey! *You* don't want to see *that*, let alone let anyone else see it.

That squinty-eyed reflection staring back at you from the mirror is your natural face. Is it really possible that you don't want people to see you the way you naturally are?

What are you like spiritually by nature? The Apostle Paul says: "I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my sinful flesh" (Romans 7:18, EHV). The Bible tells us we are born with a sinful nature. That's who we truly are. It's a scary sight. Do you want anyone to see *that*?

"If anyone hears the word and does not do what it says, he is like a man who carefully looks at his own natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup>Indeed, he carefully looks at himself; then, he goes away and immediately forgets what he looked like" (James 1:23-24, EHV).

In catechism instructions for children and adults alike we talk about the most important use of God's Law—the Law as a mirror. Mirrors reflect. They show you as you are. The Ten Commandments God gave his people through Moses are a nice summary of the moral law. Study them carefully and you realize that they cover far more than people think at first glance.

Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said to people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be subject to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22, EHV). Point by point in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus explained that the moral law covered far more than many people wanted to admit.

To wrap up his sermon about the moral law, Jesus said: "So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Use the law as a mirror and you will see that you *always* fall short of what God wants.

### II.

I wonder. Do you ever take that first squinty-eyed look at the reflection in the mirror and shrug

your shoulders and walk out the door into the wild just like that? I'll bet not.

"If anyone hears the word and does not do what it says, he is like a man who carefully looks at his own natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup>Indeed, he carefully looks at himself; then, he goes away and immediately forgets what he looked like" (James 1:23-24, EHV).

You don't leave your house after that first look in the mirror, but is that an apt description of how you live as a Christian? Do you just shrug your spiritual shoulders and slink out into the world? Do you forget all about how you look by nature?

Anger is tantamount to murder we heard Jesus say in his Sermon on the Mount. James says: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. <sup>20</sup>Certainly, a man's anger does not bring about what is right before God" (James 1:19-20, EHV). If you find yourself disagreeing with someone, do you tend to listen more carefully, or just talk louder and faster yourself? People quickly and easily become angry with each other when they stop listening and start talking.

It isn't just with other *people* that this happens, it is also with the Word of God. When you find something in the Bible that doesn't match your world view or what you *want* it to say, do you listen more carefully to what God says, or do you stop listening and talk louder and louder, insisting that what *you* think or feel certainly must be right? Do you slam the book with an angry gesture and just go back to doing things the way you *want* to do them, and refuse to live as a follower of Christ?

If anyone considers himself to be religious but deceives his own heart because he does not bridle his tongue, this person's religion is worthless" (James 1:26, EHV). A whole bunch of those Commandments from God pertain to the tongue, don't they? Using God's Name incorrectly certainly comes to mind. A rebellious attitude and words to parents and all kinds of other authority figures. Hateful words, as Jesus mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount. Gossip and slander and lying about others. Wow! We really fail to bridle our tongues, don't we?

### III.

"So after getting rid of all moral filthiness and overflowing wickedness, receive with humility the word planted in you. It is able to save your souls" (James 1:21, EHV).

If you are a consumer of the news in any way, even just a little bit, you see the seamy underbelly of human existence. There is a *lot* of evil in the world. Too much of it touches you. Get rid of the moral filthiness. Get rid of the overflowing wickedness. Those things that oppose God's righteousness are no good for you.

There *is* something good for you. There is something *vital* for you. It is the word planted in you. That word is able to save your soul, says James. There are several places in this Lesson for today where the Evangelical Heritage Version is so much better than what we had before. This is one of them. The NIV said "humbly accept the word." A far better translation is the EHV's "receive with humility the word."

God's Word works. James reminded us of our natural face—the natural self that is dominated and controlled by sin. The natural self has no inclination or power to "accept" God and his Word. God does the work and you *receive* in humility the Word the Holy Spirit plants within you.

This concept fits well with the words James used to begin the Lesson: "Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights, who does not change or shift like a shadow" (James 1:17, EHV).

The goodness of the Heavenly Father is consistent. From the very beginning he wanted the best for humankind. The world he created for us was perfect. Satan and sinful human beings marred it beyond all recognition. But God *still* wanted the best for us. From the time of the very first sin he consistently gave the gospel promise that he would send someone to deal with sin. He has never changed. His promise has never shifted like a shadow as the sun winds its way from east to west. It has always remained the same.

His perfect gift was given when our Lord Jesus came down and took up *all* the moral filthiness and the overflowing wickedness that the world had to offer from the first sin until the last. He paid for the unbridled tongues. He paid for the anger that does not bring what is right before God. He paid for the natural face of sin in each one of us that stares back at us from the mirror.

And... “Just as he planned, he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of firstfruits of his creations” (James 1:23, EHV). That natural face of your sin looking back at you from the mirror of God’s Law was powerless to do anything, just as a child in the womb. But the Father of the lights, God, the Heavenly Father, who does not change or shift like the shadows, gave you birth. You are a new creature, not that old, natural self. You have faith in what the Lord Jesus has done to pay for your sins. You aren’t the same person anymore.

#### IV.

Seemingly miraculously, the brew cycle has finished on the coffee maker. That first cup of coffee in the morning is so refreshing! Now you’re ready to head back to the bathroom. Teeth brushed, showered, hair combed, shaven or trimmed for some of us, or the special color-pallet of the appropriate makeup applied for others, a careful perusal of the closet is in order—you want articles of clothing for the day that will be flattering to your appearance.

With all the morning ablutions completed, you feel a bit more prepared to meet the challenges of the day. So...another perusal of the mirror is in order. Ah! Much better. Perhaps a strand of hair needs adjustment, or the lingering breakfast crumbs need to be removed from your face—or your shirt. *Now* you’re ready for the world to see you.

“Be people who do what the word says, not people who only hear it... <sup>25</sup> The one who looks carefully into the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continues to do so—since he does not hear and forget but actually does what it says—that person will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:22, 25, EHV).

You are reborn—all showered and clean. The clothing of Jesus’ righteousness and the makeup of his perfection have been applied to you. No longer is the Moral Law of God a frightful monster that lurks beneath your bed, or one that stares back at you from the first look into the morning mirror.

*Now* the Moral Law of God is a thing of beauty. Remember what Paul said? “I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my sinful flesh” (Romans 7:18, EHV). He went on. “I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my sinful flesh. The desire to do good is present with me, but I am not able to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> So I fail to do the good I want to do. Instead, the evil I do not want to do, that is what I keep doing” (Romans 7:18-19, EHV).

You still live in a sinful world, even though the Father of lights has given you a new birth into the Word of truth—a faith that recognizes Jesus as your Savior. Your sinful nature is still there, wanting to pull you back into the moral filthiness and overflowing wickedness you see all around you.

So...“Be people who do what the word says, not people who only hear it” (James 1:22, EHV). Don’t just sit in church on Sunday morning and hear the Word of God and go out the doors and behave like part of the overflowing wickedness the rest of the week.

“Religion that is pure and undefiled in the sight of God the Father is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27, EHV). James gives two examples to demonstrate the “doing” that will overflow from the heart of a believer who has been transformed by the Lord Jesus. Widows and orphans in New Testament times were people that were forgotten by society. They needed help. Our society has all kinds of programs to help those in need, but those programs need the help of people who do what the word says. Besides your offering to the Lord for the work of his Church at the offering today, take the opportunity to drop a few dollars in the Care Committee basket that will be outside the double doors and help those, especially in the family of believers among us, who need some assistance.

Beyond your offerings and your works of charity, be doers of the Word as you pray for the family of believers, especially those going through severe trials right now. Pray also that those who don’t know Christ will be born again. Pray that you can be a doer of the Word that mirrors the love of Christ, to help them see the great things God has done. Amen.