

## SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

James 1:17-27

### The Mirror Never Lies

James here writes to Christians tempted to turn the gospel into an excuse for sin, thinking, “Since God forgives sin, sin away. Since we are saved through faith and not works, forget about works.” Paul fought the same battle in his letters. He writes in Romans 6:1-4, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

Forgiveness doesn't make sin all right. Sin cost the Son of God His life. That will never be all right. Forgiveness sends sin away; it doesn't move in next door. The gospel doesn't move into the slums with sin. The gospel cleans up the neighborhood and kicks the riff raff out. God doesn't want to see a more handsome man in the mirror. God wants to see a new man.

James here is speaking to faith. To do the word, the Word must be dwelling in you. The cross does not coach the flesh. It kills it. The gospel does not rehabilitate, reform, or restructure; the gospel resurrects. If James is simply concerned with outward morality, he could have formed a congregation of Pharisees. James is concerned that faith be living and breathing, and not dead. And this is what he means when he says that anger “does not work the righteousness of God.” The Greek is clear here: anger does not put into action the righteousness of God made our own through faith in Christ. In other words, anger is inconsistent with faith. As Jesus reminds us, we cannot serve two masters.

Sometimes when I visit those who are living in some kind of persistent and unrepentant sin, they'll assure me they're still reading their Bibles and praying. Being a subtle man, I have been known to reply, “All that assures me of is that you should know better.” Reading one's Bible does not cover or atone for sin. Only Christ does that, and a Bible without Christ is hardly a book worth reading. The person who would strangle their faith in any unrepentant sin, no matter how insignificant it might seem, can hardly take refuge in the trappings of the very faith they strangle. It would be like putting a cheeseburger in a man's mouth while you hang him, or like a diabetic saying that he walks a lot, failing to mention that he is walking to get the very things that feed his disease. You can't strangle your faith at the same time that you claim to feed it. You can't breathe out love for God when you refuse to breathe in forgiveness, and you cannot breathe in forgiveness when you refuse to spit out your mouthful of sin.

Mirrors tell it like it is. Mirrors don't flatter. Mirrors don't hide anything. The other day, when I got back from symposium, Tricia told me I was getting really gray. I looked in the mirror, and, sure enough, it was true. There were about three hundred and sixty-some gray hairs—one, I figured, for each member, and two for each child. So, off came the hair. But hiding the gray won't make it go away. It will just make it less evident to others. The problem is still there. The alcoholic can drink at the bar in full view, or drink at home in private, but he is an alcoholic all the same.

Mirrors also tell us about our lineage. When Grandma sees her grandchild, she says. "Oh, there's sure a lot of his father in him." The geneticist might reply, "Yes, fifty percent," but Grandma means something different. She means that he looks like his father. If a child is mild-mannered and bookish like her mother, an uncle teases, "She is her mother's daughter." In both instances, the apple didn't fall far from the family tree.

Spiritually speaking, we are all sons and daughters of our first parents, Adam and Eve, all filthiness and rampant wickedness, slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to anger. But God would not have us see our first parents in the mirror. As believers, He would have us see Himself, for "of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

James' point is that one who sees himself as a member of the family of God in the mirror and then goes out and acts in a manner inconsistent with his upbringing forgets who he is. As believers in Christ, Christ living in us and working through us should characterize our words, thoughts, and deeds. St. Paul said the same earlier. How can we continue in sin if we've died to sin, baptized into Christ's death, and been raised to new life through Christ's resurrection?

James doesn't play games. He is a commonsense sort of guy. He pulls no punches, even though we might want him to, since the flesh doesn't like being beaten to death. But may the fact that James kills with the law never lead us to think that he, at the same time, does not also make alive with the gospel, for he reminds us, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." As the day progresses, shadows move, as the earth orbits around the sun. Shadows become longer or shorter, and point different ways. Yet our God does not move, and our God does not change, and the shadows He casts always point to the same place: the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Our Father who gave His Son for us is still our Father who gave His Son for us. He does not change, though we might have changed at times. He is still the One who gives new birth and every good and perfect gift. And what God has made alive, only you can let die.

Look in the mirror of the cross today, because it won't lie. See whom you are, because who you are will determine how you live. You are not nose hairs and gray hairs. You are redeemed, resurrected, renewed, and restored sons and daughters of God, dead to sin, made alive through the word of truth and water. "So now live who you are," James pleads, and it sounds reasonable to me, especially since this new service is not slavery, but freedom, as now, through faith, we do what we could never do before, no matter how hard we labored: good works in service to our God, not to earn His favor, but because we have it.

What man in his right mind, healed of malaria, would go play with the mosquitoes? So also, what Christian in his or her right mind, healed of the ravages of sin, would go play with its author, the devil? Live, and stay away from anything that would strangle what God has given you. Once bitten by sin already, who would want to bear its sting again, especially when healing came at so great a price? The gospel is not excuse for sin. Far from it! It is our freedom from it. Thanks be to God for that, and amen.