

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: James 1:19-27

Theme: “*The law of liberty*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Today’s reading from the New Testament is an invitation to look into the mirror of our lives with intent. This may sound okay but you see, for me, I celebrate my birthday in a few weeks time. Unfortunately I’ve reached an age when as I approach my birthday, I don’t look forward to it quite as much as I used to. The excitement of anticipating what gift I might be lucky enough to receive has been replaced by the anxious looking into the mirror and remembering what used to be. My vanity allows me to think that I am not turning so grey, nor have I put on so much weight and maybe I’m still reasonably fit. Looking into the mirror intently reveals a reality I’m not always so comfortable with. God’s Word invites us to look not into a mirror which reflects us back to ourselves, but instead God draws us into himself so we see him and his will for us.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Putting away the old self

James begins today’s reading with the encouragement that we are born of the word of truth, “that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (v18). We are not the result of some accidental DNA collision but are in fact created by God’s design. With us he is well pleased. Because of this, James says we should be quick to hear or listen to others and we should be slow to speak and even slower to get angry with one another. Somebody once said, and it has stuck with me, God has given us two ears and one mouth – and we should use them in that ratio! In other words we ought to listen to others more than we speak or share our thoughts with them.

James goes further by saying we are to “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness”. These belong to our former lives. They belong to yesterday. Christians are forgiven people. You don’t need to walk around carrying the guilt of yesterday, of sins done in the past. Jesus died on the cross so these could be left behind. James says put these things behind you and receive and replace them with God’s Word which has been implanted into you. God’s Word has been poured into you and through His Word, God joins you to himself. Your old self has been put away for you and you are created anew as a clean and pure person as God intended.

Be doers of the Word

Now if God’s Word has been put into you, God invites you to be doers of this Word. This passage has been misused by many people to drive others to do good things so God will be pleased with us. This passage is not about obeying God’s law to make us right with God. Instead of telling us what we *have* to do, this reading calls us to live out our lives as Christian people in a *deliberate* fashion. James calls us to decide whether we are going to be *spectators* or *active participants* in the Christian faith.

Spectators are the ones who just hear the Word of God. They may believe it as being accurate or the truth, but they just don’t see how it applies to their lives. They merely hear the Word of God. It’s a bit like listening to a good song on the radio or seeing a good show on the television. It’s good to listen to and it’s familiar but it doesn’t change anything for the spectator. Life goes on and they are unchanged by what they have heard.

Christian spectators may hear God’s Word preached or read, they may read God’s Word themselves but their lives go on unchanged. They hear about sin, but do not repent. They hear about temptation, but do not resist. They hear about the forgiveness of sins, but do not accept God’s grace which is poured out for them to begin anew, washed clean in the waters of baptism.

Participants on the other hand take to heart what they hear. They find comfort in the midst of their troubles, their burdens are lifted and they find peace and joy. Christian participants look not at themselves in the mirror but they look into the perfect law, the law of liberty. At this point we run into the problem of language. We hear the word ‘law’ and we immediately hear this as a set of rules which need to be obeyed. Happily it doesn’t mean this here. It’s more like a principle, or a restriction, or a natural reaction that must be followed as the natural outcome because of what has gone before. So the ‘law of liberty’ is the principle behind our freedom (or liberty) in Christ.

The problem with being a spectator is that you are watching what is happening to others, and whilst it may make you feel good, it's not changing you or anything about you. If the gospel *hasn't changed* anything, it means that you are still stuck where you were before you heard the gospel. If it hasn't changed anything, then you are still lost.

The truth is that the law of liberty changes everything. The gospel is not just about forgiveness – although that lies at the heart of it. The gospel is also about the love of God for us, how much he loves us and how far he is willing to go on our behalf and for our blessing. God went so far that he sent his only begotten Son to die on the cross in our place. This is the love of God for us and it's not just a fact to be held on to when you face death, but it is also a truth to be lived out throughout our lives.

God's Word calls you to live in the light of his love and good will towards us. We are to live in the light of forgiveness and eternal life. If we hear it and believe it, we *will live this out in faith* and this is what James means to be an effectual doer of the Word.

Actions preach God's Word

James gives some examples to guard us against remaining as spectators. Note that these examples might be useful for you to examine yourself – but do not use them in judgement against others, that God's business. If someone was to think they were religious because they keep up good appearances by attending church regularly and giving to the offering plate, but then speaks poorly about and to others, they are just deceiving themselves. They might make themselves feel good, but their religion is worth nothing. James is describing what it means to break the 8th Commandment, and the same could be applied to any of the other commandments.

True faith is lived out on the other hand by not only believing but enacting God's Word. Again James gives an example of visiting orphans and widows to ease their plight. But there are any number of examples that could be given. And this is where the law of liberty doesn't demand that you do any specific thing. Instead, it sets you free. The law of liberty is about being saved by Jesus' work which sets you free to live as though you have nothing left to lose. Jesus has redeemed you, your sins are forgiven, God loves you and is with you in everything you do.

Because God has looked after you, you can afford to take a risk yourself and reach out to others to care for them. You can't lose what really matters – that is Christ and his forgiveness of you. Anything material things you might lose, or any time you might forsake are just things that affect the here and now which is soon forgotten. God's Word encourages you to take a punt and help others who are in need because he has given you everything you need.

I will always remember a poster I gave to a friend of mine many years ago. The saying is credited to St Francis of Assisi and it goes: "Preach the gospel to all the world – use words if necessary". By living out your faith in actions, by participating in the law of liberty you are bringing Christ in action to others. Instead of looking into a mirror and seeing yourself, by looking into God's perfect law, you are in fact reflecting Christ so others may see him in your actions. By bringing Christ to others, you give the Holy Spirit room to work in their hearts so they too may believe in what God has already done for them also.

May the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.