

James 1:22-27

Easter 6, May 5, 2024
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22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. 26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Let's say you stopped someone at the store and asked them what they did for a living. Maybe that person replies, "I'm a doctor." He'd probably think you were a bit odd if your next question was, "And how many days a week are you a doctor?" If he responded at all, he'd say, "I'm always a doctor!" Or, imagine asking some stranger what their political affiliation was. Maybe they'd say, "Republican." If you then followed that up by asking, "And how many days a week are you a Republican," he'd probably walk away thinking you were not quite right in the head. It's the same thing with gender (or it should be), nationality, blood type, and a host of other factors that are embedded in our individual lives—some things are just what we are, and they don't change from day to day.

Isn't it too bad that religion is different? Sadly, there are a lot of "Sunday Christians" running around. These are people who give every appearance of being pious believers on Sunday, but on the other six days of the week they behave as though they'd never even heard of the Bible. These are the people who prominently place their Bibles on their coffee tables as symbols of their Christianity, but their Bibles only collect dust after being unopened day after day.

Well, in our text today, James says that such people are fooling themselves. They're pretending that one-day-a-week Christianity is acceptable to God; that as long as they attend church on Sunday morning, that's good enough to make God happy. And they're sorely misguided. Today, James compares, in the words of our theme:

"Sunday Christians" vs. Real Christians: Which Are You?

- I. "Sunday Christians" hear the Word and forget it
- II. Real Christians hear the Word and do it!

James was writing to a group of believers who had a serious problem. This letter isn't addressed to *unbelievers* who had never heard about Jesus. The original recipients were also *not* lapsed believers who had quit coming to church! No, James is speaking to actual, active members of his congregation. These are people who considered themselves to be Christians, who still regularly came to church to hear the Word of God. *But*, these were people for whom God's Word no longer mattered—it made no difference in their lives. By hearing the Word of God and *not* doing it, James warns them in our text that their faith was turning into a dead faith—they were becoming **"Sunday Christians."**

And in an effort to get his point across, James tells a little parable of his own. He writes, ***"If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like."*** He's right

about that, isn't he? How many times have you glanced in a mirror to check and see if you're presentable, then walked away and realized that you didn't really look and have to check again? Or men, if you've ever nicked yourself when you're shaving, perhaps you take a bit of tissue and put it on the cut to staunch the bleeding. And perhaps, after walking away and no longer having a mirror in front of you, you've forgotten that you still have tissue on your face two hours later. As soon as we take our eyes off our mirrors and walk out of the bathroom, we can easily forget what we see. And that's a problem among Christians too, according to James. Christians will, at times, hear God's Word and then immediately forget what it says about them.

You see, God's Word acts just like a mirror, specifically any part of God's Word that is law. The Law of God is any section of your Bible in which God makes demands of you, demands that we woefully fall short of every day. When we study this Law of God, we can see ourselves very clearly—in fact, that's part of the reason why we come to church, to be reminded of what we really are.

And this is something God's Law does very well. It reflects every wrinkle in our personality, every blemish, every weakness, every misdeed. In short, when we study God's Word, we see clearly that we are sinners desperately in need of a Savior. And so, any time you come to services at Faith Lutheran Church, we're going to be looking into that mirror. You're going to hear that part of God's Word—the Law portion. It's not always pleasant to hear, but it is something God wants to remind you of, so that you see your sin clearly, recognize the danger, and turn away from it in repentance.

Now, the problem as James sees it is that for many Christians, the message is *heard* but not remembered. It's in one ear and out the other, so to speak. I want you to picture this scene for a moment, perhaps it sounds familiar to some of you. A husband is sitting on his couch watching TV, and his wife calls out from another room asking him to do something. He says, "OK," . . . but doesn't move. She calls out again a few minutes later, and again he says, "OK, I'll do it," but again doesn't move. Finally, she comes out and says, "What did I ask you to do?" And verbatim he repeats what she said, showing that he *did hear* it. The problem is that hearing when not accompanied by the appropriate action is actually pretty worthless.

Well, is that the type of hearing that *you* use when hearing God's Word? More of an "in one ear and out the other" sort of hearing? A hearing without action? The prophet Ezekiel was a preacher who faced the same problem. The Lord was getting fed up with the people in His congregation and told Ezekiel, "***They come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain.***" (Ezekiel 33:31) The Word had no effect on those people's real, everyday lives. Well, what about you? Does that describe you? Come to church and hear God's Word on Sunday, but then Monday through Saturday is business as usual?

In case the message isn't getting through to you yet, or in case you're still thinking this doesn't apply to you, James gives us a concrete example of what he's talking about. In verse 26, he writes, "***If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.***" Now that's a hard example to slip out of! Who among us can truly say that our talk *always* reflects our faith in God? Who can say that all of our conversation at all times clearly tells

other people that we are disciples of Jesus Christ? We can act as pious as we want in church on Sunday, but if on Monday morning we're right back to spreading gossip, to tearing someone down, if we're pouring out bitter or hurtful words on our spouse or children, if we react by spewing anger when someone cuts us off on the road—*then there's something wrong!* And this is just one of the many warning signs of being a **"Sunday Christian,"** that maybe *we too* are preventing the Word of God from really taking root in our lives.

Maybe now you're feeling sick to your stomach, recognizing this in your own life. And that's good! That's what God's Law is supposed to show us! Just as you sometimes look in a mirror and see a few new wrinkles or a few gray hairs that weren't there yesterday and you don't like what you see—when we really look at God's Law, when we examine ourselves through that mirror, we will see all of our imperfections reflecting back at us. And that really *should* make us feel disgusted.

Thankfully, James doesn't just describe the *problem*; he doesn't just show us our flaws, he also points us to the solution. Do you want to take care of those spiritual blemishes? Want to be rid of those imperfections? According to our text, the cure lies in **"*looking into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevering in it.*"** In other words, **Real Christians hear the Word and do it!**

Now, I guess our first question should be, "What is this 'law of liberty'?" We obviously need to know what *that* is so that we can do it! Our text describes it as **"*the perfect law,*"** but it's not some 11th Commandment. **"*Law of liberty*"** really sounds like an oxymoron, you know—two conflicting ideas. Laws are restrictive, and generally we don't like them. And liberty is the opposite, it means freedom. So how can you have a rule, a law, that enforces freedom? I think the best picture of this is the Emancipation Proclamation. In one fell swoop, President Lincoln changed the legal status of more than 3.5 million enslaved African-Americans from "slave" to "free." This was a law; it was a legally binding executive order, and it resulted in liberty—freedom for those millions of people!

The cure that James points us to is the Law of Liberty which *Christ* brings, the Emancipation Proclamation for your souls. *Jesus* declares that you are free from every spot and stain and sin of which your conscience may accuse you. So, you look in God's spiritual mirror, and you see your imperfections. Your sin bubbles up like boils on your face. But then *Jesus* comes in with the solution. He doesn't use concealer, He doesn't merely cover up the flaws; He removes them entirely. You have been declared blemish free! You are free from the condemnation that God's law brings! This what the **"*law of liberty*"** is—the freedom that the Apostle Paul rejoiced over in Romans 8: **"*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.*"** (Romans 8:1-2)

And that Gospel message of freedom through Christ Jesus is the *other* part of God's Word that you will hear from this pulpit every time you come to worship here at Faith. What does that freedom mean to you? It ought to mean a lot! I was reading in a devotion book a story that the author told about when he was a pastor in Boston many years ago. His story went that one day he came across a young boy in the parking lot next to the church. The boy had a cage with birds in it. And the pastor asked where the boy got the birds, and the boy said that he'd trapped them in the field across the

road. The pastor asked what the boy was planning to do with them, and the boy said he'd probably take them home and feed them to his cat. So, the pastor offered to buy the birds from the boy. And the boy said, "Oh, you don't want to buy these birds, they don't even sing like normal birds." The pastor said that was ok and gave the boy some money. And after the boy left, the pastor opened the cage and released the birds. And as soon as those birds began to fly away, they began to sing. They weren't bad singers at all, the author wrote, they just needed a reason to sing.

Well, how's your singing voice? I hope it's ready to sing because that's the same thing that has happened for you. Jesus Christ has freed you from the cage of the law. You were captured by your sin, held fast and sentenced to death. And there was no way for you to break free. But Jesus has declared freedom, announced His own Emancipation Proclamation, when He declared that all of your sins could no longer hold you; hell is no longer your inevitable destination. With His own blood, He has completely washed away all the guilt that your sins bring. Isn't it only natural then that we sing?

When I was pastor at my previous congregation in Florida, there was a member in a nursing home that I visited every Tuesday. His name was Ray. Ray had had a number of health problems, including some strokes, that left him unable to speak, which made visiting with him very difficult. He'd try to pronounce words, but they'd only come out as grunts. As such, he couldn't sing the words of the hymns with me when I'd sing for him. But his disability did *not* affect his ability to praise God loudly and joyfully! I would have a devotion with him, and afterwards we'd sing a hymn, and I always watched the doorway because I got a kick out of all the nurses looking around the corner to see what was wrong. What they heard was Ray loudly grunting and yelling, but what they really saw was the heart of someone who understood how deep the grace of God is—even to a wretched sinner. And so, Ray couldn't keep quiet about it.

I pray that you also are ready to sing loudly and joyfully about the freedom that you don't deserve but that your Savior has given you. That freedom which Jesus brings is the single motivating factor in the life of a Christian. So let the fruits of faith come forth freely in your life! As natural as it is for a healthy tree to grow fruit, I pray that it is just as natural for all of us to hear the Word of God and do it.

Now, as you leave the service this morning, I want you to take note of the doorway as you exit the building. They're just normal glass doors, nothing really unique about them. But they are, in fact, very special, because they can tell you what type of Christian you are—a **"Sunday Christian"** or a **Real Christian**. You see, studies have shown that when people walk through a doorway, they tend to forget things. You've probably experienced this when you've gone into the kitchen to grab a glass of water and then after passing through the doorway, can't remember why you went into the kitchen at all.

When you come into *this* room and sit here and stare at the mirror of God's Law and hear what it says about you, and you see the flaws and stains of your sins, and then when you look into that perfect law of liberty and hear Jesus' proclamation of salvation and see the freedom Jesus has won for you—don't allow yourself to forget that when you leave! Don't be a **"Sunday Christian."** Rather, may it be our prayer that the Holy Spirit works on our hearts, making His Word take root there so that we bear fruit, so that we hear the Word of God and do it. May *each* of us be the kind of **Real Christian** who believes the saving Words from God and then continues in them every day of our lives. Amen.