

Sermon Text: James 1:12-27

Do you remember back when people were first getting those little portable cassette recorders? Do you remember the first time you recorded Grandma’s voice or your own voice, and then you played it back? Do you remember what everybody said? They said, “That doesn’t sound like me!” But it does whether or not you think so. Now, I don’t like the way I sound. I know I said in the morning service, and I’ll say it again, when Emmie is playing my sermon tapes in the office, I tell her to turn it off or I shut my door because I don’t like to hear my own voice recorded. I would like it to be a lot lower, and in my mind, it is. The tape recorder says I’m wrong.

Now, do you remember the first time you compared the Ten Commandments to your actual life? They’re all about loving God and loving neighbor and before you feel safe, thinking that you can handle the Ten Commandments, remember Jesus redefined those Ten Commandments saying that we break them wide open even when think idolatry, even when we think murder, even when we think lust or envy. He redefined so that even the thoughts were breaking those Ten Commandments. I would love the word “sinner” to be a word for other people, just as I don’t sound like that is what I’d like to say, I’d like to also say that I don’t sin like that, I’m not that bad, but if it’s in my thoughts then oh, I guess I do sin like that. Before God I am a sinner. I am as covered in mud as the prodigal son, mired in the ugliness of sin, thought, word, and deed. That’s who I am! I don’t like the way I sin.

My mirror at home, when I look at myself, what I see is what I’d like to see; a decent guy, a tithing guy, a preacher, a missionary, a faithful husband, a good father, a provider. I don’t live too extravagantly by middle class American standards. I mean, in my mirror, as I see myself, I look pretty good. What is God’s standard? What would God’s mirror be? It would be the very light of Jesus Christ. That is God’s standard. As I turn away from my mirror, and even though I know that Jesus is the standard, I do this thing that we all do. I start looking for people who are worse than me. Don’t we do that? I look for people who are worse than me. Oh, that makes me feel so much better, and I can find them. I can find plenty. I forget about my extravagances. I forget about my sins of thought and word and deed and my sins of omission where I fail to do what I know that I should do. As long as I can find somebody else that looks worse, I can imagine myself pretty good!

You know the old fairy tale saying, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest of them all?” Well, relatively speaking and using many, many qualifiers and ignoring the standard of Christ, I guess I just might be among the fairest. Now, Jesus, Jesus lived His life in God’s will and for the good of others. He lived it in God’s will and for the good of others.

In the Book of James it says that we should respect other people. We should listen to them. I’ve already said it in the morning service so I might as well say it here. Caroline’s out there tapping Morse code with her foot when I’m saying this because she

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knows this sermon is for me as well as for many of us. I don’t always practice quick to listen and slow to speak. Let us hear. This is the way we are to be loving to others. James says to be quick to hear, listen for real, not just for ammunition when it’s your turn to talk. I know husbands and wives know about that. Listen for real, and be slow to speak. Don’t interrupt. Love them for real. Be very slow to anger says James. You aren’t going to accomplish anything for good, and you can’t claim to be living for God if you discount people, if you don’t listen to people, and if you jump straight to anger when things don’t go your way. You’re not doing God’s work when you act that way. The mirror of the standard is Jesus Christ. You can’t act like that, and follow Him.

James goes on to say that if you want to be religious, this is what he says, if you want to be religious, truly religious, then you must bridle your tongue. If your tongue spews anger and judgment and dissention in the church, you are deceiving yourself. James says this man’s or this woman’s religion is in vain. Verse 27 says that 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 by the world. Keep the ugliness out of your speech, and listen to and respect other people. You are called to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God in the words you take in, and that means the movies you watch and the books you read and the music to which you listen, be careful about the words you take in, and the words you speak out to other people, and James is heavy on this, the deeds that you do. Jesus lived His life in God’s will and for the good of others.

Now, a lot of you know about Coach Bill McCartney. He was formerly the coach at Colorado and also the head of Promise Keepers. Back in 1990, he did something to reveal the power of living for others. In 1990, his team, Colorado, was on the road to the National Championship, and they faced the toughest schedule in the nation. Next on their game roster came Nebraska, the Cornhuskers. Colorado had lost 23 straight times when they played Nebraska at home, and this coming up game was at home. Bill McCartney as an outspoken Christian sought to demonstrate the principles of Christianity to his team so with that in mind, he came up with a plan to motivate his players. He called his players together, and this was genius! Coach, I don’t know if you could afford to do what he did. You probably know this story. He said, “At the end of this game, each one of you is going to receive a \$70.00 game ball with the final score printed on it. Before we leave tomorrow, I want you to call up somebody to whom you are close and tell them to watch you play and tell them that you are dedicating your play to them, that you’re playing for them.” Well, on a soggy, cold, rain swept Nebraska field, Colorado was down 12 to 0 in the fourth quarter, and they came back to beat the Cornhuskers 28 to 12. Now, Coach McCartney said later that their strength came from their attitude of selflessness. They dedicated their game play to someone else and so they became bigger than just themselves.

As Christians, we are on God’s team. God’s outpost of the Gospel of forgiveness and eternal hope is beaming right here from Main Street United Methodist Church. Our strength and our game plan are from God, but our mission is completely for others. The game plan is from God, but the mission is completely for others. We tend to say you love

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me God, you forgive me God, thank you very much. No! We’re not playing for ourselves. We’re playing for others. Too many people in the church care about who gets the credit, and who has the power, and who has the say so, and who gets the glory. Folks, if we do this thing right, echoing the letter of James, true religion is for others, and God gets the glory. We know, we know that it is in spite of our ugliness that God can work through us. Not because of how wonderful and perfect we are.

When I was an associate at a large church in Charleston, I learned that you can get almost anything done in a church as long as you don’t care who gets the credit. I found I could accomplish great things as long as I was pointing that spotlight away from me. I found the secret was not worshiping in the mirror and saying, Jim; you did a wonderful thing, but true humility. I remember my senior pastor’s first words to me. They were in fact very humbling. I won’t say who he was. His first words to me were, “Jim, as my associate, your job is to make me look good.” That’s humbling! I found out though that when I just forgot myself and focused on what needed to be done to build up the church and to help others, big things happened. I think that humble service always works because God honors it. If we all live the attitude that James spells out, there’s no telling what God can do through Main Street. We know what we really are in the mirror of God’s standard, Jesus Christ. That should lead us to humility and service out of thanksgiving for God’s love in spite of us.

Ruth Knowlton tells this on herself. She says, “Years ago, I lived in an apartment building in a large city, and the building next door was only a few feet away from mine, and I could see across the alley, straight into her window. I really didn’t know the woman there. I had never met her, but I could see her as she sat by her window in the afternoon, sewing or reading or whatever. After several months had gone by,” Ruth writes, “I began to notice that her windows were getting dirty. Everything was indistinct. Her windows were smudged. I would say to myself, I wonder why that woman doesn’t wash her windows. They look dreadful! One bright morning, I decided to do my spring housecleaning including washing my windows on the inside, and late in the afternoon when I was finished, I sat down by the window with a cup of coffee for a rest, and what a surprise! Across the way, the woman sitting by her window was clearly visible. Her windows were clean. Then it dawned on me. I had been criticizing her dirty windows, and all the time, I was looking through my own dirt.”

Doesn’t that remind you of 1 Corinthians 12 I read last week? For now in this life we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face with God. Now I know only in part, but then I will know fully even as I have been fully known. One day, we won’t need mirrors. One day we won’t be looking through a dirty glass wondering what God is like and what we’re supposed to do. One day we shall see God face to face, and we will know God just as completely as God knows us. Now, this is a scary thought! God now completely, completely knows us! Self-delusion doesn’t help with God. A new haircut doesn’t help with God. New makeup and new clothes don’t help. God knows us, but it is a good thing to see that God loves us in spite of knowing the very worst about us. We can look forward to knowing God in all His righteousness, glory and holiness! Without

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all this stuff getting in the way. Most of what gets in the way between us and God and between us and others is us! Who is that ugly man in the mirror? It’s me. It’s me. Ministers, too, stand as sinners in need of God’s forgiveness and grace – just like everybody else, I ain’t Jesus. None of us are perfect in God’s eyes. We are not perfect in our spouse’s eyes. Can I get an amen on that? We are not perfect in our children’s eyes. Who’s got a teenager? We are, I’m afraid, imperfect all the way around, and yet James would have us believe that we can with the help of the Holy Spirit live in a way that reflects true faith. He says that you are imperfect, but you can reflect real faith with God’s spirit working through you. Control your tongue, he says. Be quick to listen, he says. Be slow to speak. Be slow to anger. Visit orphans and widows in their affliction. Keep yourself unstained from the world. Unstained from the world! Spend more and more time in God’s Word and live life among God’s people and do God’s work, and force that spotlight away from you and to others and see what happens when you humbly serve. I think God honors it.

Switching gears here, Caroline and I once did a marriage enrichment workshop a few years back. It was at a Baptist church. I guess there were about 35 people there. It was a two-day thing. At one point, we had an exercise. We played a song some of you may know by Diana Krahl entitled “When I Look Into Your Eyes.” I played one minute of that. I encouraged the couples, who had all been married for at least a couple of decades, to look for that one minute into each other’s eyes. One wife that I knew began to cry. She began to just bawl. She said later to me that she had seen herself as a mother, she had seen herself as a worker, but she had not seen herself in the eyes of her husband for years and years.

I dare you to take this Scripture seriously and be quiet and slow to speak and slow to anger with others. Instead of looking at yourself and projecting what you think others see, see yourself in the eyes of your spouse, in the eyes of your child, in the eyes of your grandchild or a trusted friend, and most of all, see yourself in the eyes of God, who knows you fully inside and out. Our faith is about others. Our mirror has nothing to do with it. The others with which our faith has to do are #1 is God and #2 is all these people around us. What we really are, we are as we relate to them. What we really are, we are in their eyes, not as we imagined, but as they see us. We need to see ourselves, not through the eyes of advertising telling us to buy this or buy that in order to be wonderful. We need to see ourselves through the eyes of God who created us, came to us in Jesus Christ, and believed we were worth even death on the cross. We are worth something not because of winning or losing or who we are or what we have, we are worth something because God loved us in spite of the ugliness within, in spite of sin. God loved, God loves us in Jesus Christ. That is our worth, and it is through His eyes that we should see ourselves and see others. Only then do we truly begin the journey of faith. Amen.