

James 1:17_27

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, comes from the God of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow.... ¹⁸In fulfillment of God's own purpose [we are] birthed by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God's creatures.

[Hear these instructions:]

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. ²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The Message (MSG)

16_18 So, my very dear friends, don't get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. God brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all creatures.

19_21 Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.

22_24 Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

25 But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life! — even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.

26_27 Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

Create in me, a clean heart, O God - There are many attitudes and experience that can help us toward a Clean-Hearted life.

The lectionary scriptures for August began with the familiar favorite for many, Psalm 51 - Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me. With this earnest ancient plea, we have explored messages in the letter to the Ephesians, and this morning from James, to discover some of what it means to be clean-hearted. We have looked at what it means to be mature, grown ups as we listen to the reminders to live with genuine acceptance, “humility and gentleness, with patience, with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of love.” In the Message interpretation of Psalm 51, the psalmist asked to be tuned in to “foot-tapping songs, and set these once broken bones to dancing.” Ancient texts can offer us instructions on how to live together. Many scriptures give very persistent commandments to love each other and be of service to each other, not just our friends, and those we know, but all the orphans and widows among us. This means care for everyone! James is one of these texts.

Charles Swindoll has said that - “The book of James looks a bit like the Old Testament book of Proverbs dressed up in New Testament clothes. Its consistent focus on practical action in the life of faith is reminiscent of the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament, encouraging *God’s people to act like God’s people*. [Isn’t that also part of clean-hearted living?] The pages of James are filled with direct commands to pursue a life of holiness. In the mind of this early church leader, Christians demonstrate their faith by walking in certain ways and not others. For James, a faith that does not produce real life change is not a worthy life” (Charles Swindoll)

<http://www.insight.org/resources/bible/james.html#sthash.dwz7A51g.dpuf>

James seems to be asking us: “How well do our actions mirror the faith that we proclaim?” I don’t know about you, but sometimes it’s very hard for me to follow instructions. It definitely depends on where or who these instructions are coming from. I was raised in times that stressed we should “question authority” and I did then, and I still do. I was also encouraged to be strong and independent. And in many ways, I am. When I am learning something new, if it means changes to the way I’ve been doing things, it’s very difficult. Certainly in personal relations, and specifically marriage, Al and I are still doing some of the same things we have always done that annoy each other. And thankfully, we’ve also changed some of our ways.

James has told us we “must understand this - be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” These instructions alone, if followed, could absolutely change the world.... let alone our family life. Relationship experts have said that listening is the key to effective communication. How often do we really listen? Or are we already planning our response? Are we slow to speak? Or do we interrupt and blurt out our opinions? And can we take a breath and remain calm and be slow to anger? Or do we react impulsively and let the other person have it full blast? In the Message, we are encouraged to “Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.” We all need these friendly reminders at least some of the time. I think I’m safe to say that there is not one among us who has never reacted to someone’s words or behaviors out of a place of anger. And most of the time, this is not us at our best.

Anger by itself is not a bad thing. In fact, Anger is a very important sign that something’s wrong. It is a secondary emotion that usually signals something very different than it appears. We are feeling hurt, disappointed or overwhelmed. Something is not feeling fair. It’s what we do with this anger that matters... and matters significantly.... because our angry, impulsive responses can hurt and are often far from helpful. Our anger, well directed, can make a big difference when we reach out and care for those who are being treated unfairly and we advocate.... we raise our voices for them.

James says, “Be doers of the word, not merely hearers.” and through the lens of the Message - “Act on what you hear. Those who hear and don’t act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are.”

Who are we? What has shaped our lives and choices? For those of us who grew up as churchgoers and those who came to church later, still the universal message that is mirrored toward us is about love and care.

On the ten-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and its destruction in the Gulf Coast, many are remembering. And too many still live with the aftermath today. A friend of mine is from the New Orleans area. Katrina hit her family.... and many families. She went back several times to help in the recovery for them, and for others. She shared her brother’s blog this week (Blog of Brother John) And I share some of it here with you. John writes -

People were drowning. People in the neighborhood I was born in. People in Lakeview, too, the neighborhood my brother lived (and still lives) in. People by the hundreds. My people.

I knew then that this was going to be far worse than the spate of hurricanes we in Florida had endured during the prior year. Worse than Andrew, whose effects in Louisiana I felt firsthand, and whose tremendous Cat 5 devastation I saw weeks later in South Florida. Worse than Camille, whose 190 mph winds (Cat 6 if there could be one) and 23-foot surge wiped my family's summer home in Clermont Harbor, Mississippi, off the map. Worse, even, than Betsy, whose surge gave me my very first memories, as traumatic experiences are wont to do. I can still see the view out the window of the attic we had sought refuge in, onto floodwaters that had engulfed the neighborhood. I can still remember falling, toddler feet not quite finding purchase on the attic steps, into those same waters, as they took up residence in my home. My father would tell me much later that we were rescued by a kid in a boat, days later, and taken to the local school.

Change is inevitable. Trauma is often a part of it. Both of them shape what we, and the world, move on to become. And so catastrophic change has shaped – and is shaping — what New Orleans will become...

Perhaps a catastrophe was the only way possible to make real change in a city known, and proudly so, as the one that “care forgot.” Some have said this change is for the worse, some have said it's for the better.... But one thing that has been consistently apparent in every one of my many visits back since the storm: Care has remembered.

Nothing stays the same, much as we would often like it to. But now, in New Orleans, *people have remembered how to care*. On every issue. On every side of every issue. From the upswing in public interest to the influx of young artists and entrepreneurs. From breaking backs rebuilding homes and neighborhoods to breaking down the doors of public officials...

...On my mind are two things – rather, two groups of people: the hundreds who lost their lives (in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast), and the countless thousands who have gone down, and continue to go down, to New Orleans to help rebuild....

They say we're made by our experiences. Perhaps as time goes on, the good from Katrina will start to outgrow the bad, as New Orleans and the Gulf Coast grow beyond this disaster, and become better than they ever were before....

“People have remembered to care.” Do we? We are a generous people. We take our faith seriously. There are some Biblical warnings that no longer have as much meaning for us, like dietary restrictions or some social etiquette, like the necessity for women to have their heads covered. At the very heart of our scriptures, we are offered many timeless instructions on how to live together in peace. And today, we are again called out to remember to care for each other. To love each other. We do this in small ways, and dramatic ways -

Phone calls to people we haven't seen in a while or who we know are going through tough times. And we listen.

Cards of gratitude or connection that we send

A meal we prepare for another

Donations to a cause that is important to us

Serving food at a local soup kitchen, like the Living Room

Getting to know our neighbors and offering to mow someone's lawn.

Going on service oriented and mission trips where we get down and dirty

All of these things, small and large, we do at least partly because we are following scripture instructions. We know how important it is to “welcome the implanted word that has power to save our souls.” or by the Message interpretation, “In simple humility, [knowing we are one among many,] we let our gardener God - landscape us - shape us with scripture - making a salvation-garden - a garden of hope and inspiration for our lives. Calling us to love more deeply, care with greater commitment. When we trust these ancient texts, we follow instructions.

We become doers and not just hearers. We demonstrate our care for others.

There are very few biblical references to a mirror. James has put one in front of us this morning. What do we see when we look into the mirror? How are our family and friends reflected there? Do we see our hesitation and imperfections and doubts? Do we see a beloved child of God? Do we see a servant of God?

May the God of Light Create in us a clean heart. Sustain us with a willing spirit. Put a fresh wind in our sails.... take our hand and lead us to the next right action.

O God of great compassion, we come to you with hopeful and trusting hearts. In our spoken words, and in our deepest thoughts, we lift up to you the needs of ourselves and our world. Sometimes out of necessity, sometimes out of desperation, we have taken to beds of pain and fear. Our discomforts and soreness ache for your touch. Our guilt longs for your mercy. Our dis-ease and hurts seek your healing. Vibrant Spirit of Life, come and raise us up! Blow like a cool breeze through the stale spaces of our being and send us on our way renewed. In every experience, through every distress of mind and body, keep us ever mindful of your presence with us. We pray this with gratitude for the Ministry and Message of Jesus as we pray together....