

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, August 30, 2015)

Text: **James 1:17-27** (*The Message*)

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 [Parent] 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 [God's] creatures.

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.

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.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his [or her] 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.

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 the [Creator], is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

**Reflections by Pastor Donald: “Do You See Who You Are?”**

Do you find it difficult to love others sometimes? Do you find it difficult to love yourself most of the time? In studying and reading and, to be honest, pulling my hair out sometimes over this passage from James these last couple of weeks, I began to realize that what was at the heart of this passage, as is at the heart of the Gospel is love and our relation to God, others and self in terms of love and how it is felt and expressed in all the areas of our lives. [*sarcastic tone:*] Such a minor concept, Pastor D – why were you pulling your hair out over something so trivial?

As we reach this halfway point in our Sundays after Pentecost, a season of growth and learning, it makes sense that we are at a point of naked self-reflection, studying scriptures that ask us to scrutinize our lives and to look at ourselves as we truly are or, as Luther Seminary professor Craig Koester remarks, “looking in the mirror and taking good stock.”

I know this isn't something I really like to do and, especially as we age, it's something we may avoid all together. It's funny, growing up as a fat kid, I remember wishing we were Jewish so I could sit Shiva every day with all the mirrors covered and be in mourning for my life. Okay, so I was always a little overly dramatic. But, seriously, even though like most gay guys it's difficult to pass a mirror without looking into it, throughout my life I would rather avoid the close inspection of what I see there and what I'm afraid others are seeing as well. Is this particular to gay men or can I get some head nods that others might feel this way too?

I think we're often afraid to face up to the reality of what we see looking back at us in the mirror because it may mean that we have to change something we don't want to, or have trouble accepting the reality that is right there before us. Couldn't we soften the lighting or put a nice foggy film over the looking glass?

In our text for today, James, Professor Koester writes, "asks us to picture ourselves standing in front of a mirror. We are to pause there as [he] asks, "Do you see who you are?" Ordinarily, standing in front of a mirror might mean that we see ourselves as thin or overweight, blemished, disheveled, wrinkled, or scarred. But that is not what James is getting at. Instead, we are to think about ourselves in light of what has just been said. Do you see you who are? You are someone who has been blessed by God's gifts, someone who has been brought to new life through God's word--a person who is a first fruit, set aside as someone who belongs to God."

Wow, what a difference looking at ourselves through THAT lens makes. James, I think, is calling to us IN every and AT every age to look far more deeply into ourselves, regarding the whole of who we are more than just our physical appearance, which, by the way, God also made and accepts fully, to our hearts and our souls and the love contained therein.

Looking at ourselves as God does, a beautiful and wondrous creation, the scales fall from our eyes and we see the blessed creature God sees staring back at us. If we truly believe we are made in the image of God how can we denigrate God's creation by putting ourselves down, kicking ourselves when we mess up and using words like "idiotic," "dummy" and "moron" and other put downs and politically incorrect slurs we wouldn't think of using against someone else? As The Message says, "[God] brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all [God's] creatures."

Now this doesn't mean that there isn't room for improvement, of course! Just because God loves us and wants us to show love to ourselves as well as to others doesn't mean that our "Parent of Light" doesn't want us to work to become the fully realized beings we are called to be; seeking our Higher Power and living as children of the Light that we may draw others to that Light and encourage them as well. Just as an earthly parent knows that a child left to his or her own devices with no instruction and no guidance will be lost, afraid and prone to danger, so our heavenly parent knows that we need assistance and direction to realize our true worth and become the children of light we were called to be.

During our study of Ephesians the first two Sundays of August, we explored ways to make decisions based on God's call and direction for our lives as well as how to be in Godly relationship with one another. Here in the book of James today, the lessons continue as we are shown ways to know we are listening to God's voice and following God's word instead of falling victim to self-deception. As with many of the Greek testament books and letters, we are given another way to study our lives and hold our decisions up to the light.

This can be a difficult idea for many of us. As Scott told me once, his late wife Liz who attended here for many years before her early departure, and was loved by so many of us, often lamented that it felt to her like we were such an AA++ congregation who wasn't content to be who we were but had to strive and strive and strive beyond our means and energies to please one another, ourselves and our God. I agree with her that this is not what God is calling us to, although I know that goes against a lot of what I was taught and probably many of you were, too. It's a tough call, and one that only you and God can make together, but I think we can all use more times of hearing God's still small voice telling us to Be in God and not always Do in God.

But it's verses like these found in James that often push us the other way. It's easy to hear James' pronouncement to "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers" as the words of an authoritarian God, smacking the whip and judging us harshly, but I think there's another way to hear

these words that can lead us into the freedom and the lightness of God's kingdom instead of into harsh judgments of ourselves and feelings of stagnating guilt.

Better to see it as commentator Douglas Moo does when he says, "James' letter is grounded in grace and celebrates the "new birth," the new life we experience as we participate "in God's kingdom work of reclaiming the world." And suggests that James is, "writing about how to "let God's word, already implanted in our hearts, have its full effect in our lives."

How much better to see ourselves reflected in God's mirror, already full of God's word and God's grace so that all we have to do is allow that love that is so fully a part of each one of us emerge in acts of kindness, tenderness, forgiveness and love.

"That's the way God talks to God's people," Kate Huey writes in her commentary this week, "back in the Old Testament when Jeremiah (31:31-34) spoke of whole new hearts and a new covenant when God's people are open to God's word. That's the way God talks in the New Testament as well, in the Gospels themselves and in these pastoral letters to early churches that are striving to let their lives be wholly transformed by a God who is active in their world. This is, we know, a God who is day by day continuing to bless God's people with a word that calls us to a dramatically new way of living: "We are not just to walk away mumbling 'how interesting' or to use [God's word] as no more than a source for intellectual stimulation and academic debate," Moo writes. No, our worldview has to change, our whole way of seeing things, our way of thinking: we are to conform our whole lives to the Word of God, not to the world around us."

That's when we know we are truly seeing ourselves as God sees us. That's when we know we are not deceiving ourselves. When we can look fully into that mirror and see God shining back at us in the love we have not only for others but for ourselves as well. And if we don't see that, keep looking, keep praying, keep uncovering the God in you by showing up as Christ did in the world: Helping others, caring for those around you and across the world, lifting up the downtrodden and depressed and being the love and the light God is shining through you at all times.

"Perhaps life tests us," Kate writes, "challenges and brokenness test us, sickness and resentment test us, but God gives all good gifts, and in God is the strength we need to meet every challenge life presents."

One of my favorite commentators, the Rev. Daniel B. Clendenin writes in his article, "Religious Faith: Worthless or Faultless?" that this, "little epistle of James has had a sketchy history in the church. Some people think that it's more like Jewish wisdom literature than the Christian gospel. Except for two passing references (1:1 and 2:1), there's no mention of Jesus. Others have said that James' emphasis on human works contradicts Paul's insistence on divine grace.

"The Muratorian Fragment from the year 170 AD," he notes, "our oldest list of the books of the New Testament, doesn't [even] include James. Writing in the fourth century, the church historian Eusebius admitted that James was "accepted by many," but he still relegated it to the category of what he called "contested" writings. In the late fourth century, Jerome said that James was accepted by the church "little by little." And in the sixteenth-century Martin Luther famously described James as an "epistle of straw."

But I, like Daniel, am glad that, "James did make it into the canon of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament... As he writes, "[James] practical or ethical emphasis reminds us that following Jesus is a way of life and not just a theoretical construct. He writes about trials and temptations, showing partiality to the rich and oppressing the poor, listening to others rather than always talking, saying versus doing, bitter envy and selfish ambition, and our need for a wisdom that's far different from the wisdom of the world."

Don't be afraid to look in the mirror. Stay with your reflection a while. Stay long enough to see beyond the physical, the flaws, the fancies. Stay there until you see the light of God shining through,

allowing you to love every created part of you. Then you can walk away holding this light in your heart and knowing that what you reflect out into the world will be a reflection of God's love shining out through you.

Amen.