

Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Text: James 1:22-25

We spend time each day looking into a mirror.

Some spend a long time in front of the mirror to make sure our faces and hair are just right.

Others take a quick look, pat down any unruly hair and walk away.

Some will look into a mirror several times a day, others just once.

Regardless of how we use a mirror it always tells the truth.

If there are a few more gray hairs – it won't be shy about telling you.

If you have bags under your eyes – it will show you in their full glory.

If you have put on weight – it comes right out with it and shows you in glorious detail the extra bulges.

A mirror doesn't spare our feelings.

In fact, the closer we get to the mirror, the more it reveals.

So why do we have a mirror in our bathrooms, if it's only going to abuse us?

As unpleasant as it maybe to confront our own faces first thing in the morning, we know that if we don't take a look at ourselves, and make some adjustments, the rest of the world is going to see that morning face!

So we figure, it's better to "face" the truth and make some changes.

In the Letter from James, God's Word is compared to a mirror.

God's Word reflects the truth about God and our lives clearly and mercilessly.

It mirrors back to us the blemishes in our lives,

the warts of failure,

deep lines of evil,

the ugliness of sin,

and how out of shape we are following God's ways.

The mirror of God's Word shows us bulges and bumps in our spiritual lives that shouldn't be there.

As we glance into the mirror of God's Word we might wish we hadn't because it is too revealing. But James says,

"If you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like."

Put it this way. What would be the point of looking in the mirror, seeing that I had vegemite from on my face from breakfast, and then just walking away? None, whatsoever!

James says that when we read the Bible and don't apply it to our lives, it's just like seeing food stuck on our face and leaving it there. The reading and looking were pointless exercises because we didn't act on what we saw reflected.

When we read the Bible, or hear a sermon, it's easy to dismiss the message as irrelevant to us especially when it challenges our attitudes or lifestyle and believe that God is speaking to everyone else except us. We can easily switch off if God's Word touches a raw nerve and we don't want to face up to the pain that wrong-doing has caused in our lives and the lives of others.

For example, through James God says to us, *"If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless"* James 1:26). It's easy to read those words, but there is definitely an 'ouch' factor here. Controlling what we say is so hard and so it's easy to put this Word from God in the too hard basket and forget about it

Without a doubt, one of the most important reasons we read and study and understand the Scriptures is to let it be a mirror. Without this kind of revealing reflection, we would believe that everything is fine; there's no dirt in my life that needs cleaning up. It would be like the person who wears food on his face all day because he ignored what the mirror told him.

James writes, *"So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says"* (James 1:21-22a NLT).

We don't like to hear that sort of thing.

We don't like to think of ourselves as having *"filth and evil"* in our lives. We have a much better idea of what we are like and *"filthy habits and evil conduct"* (GNB), or even harsher *"rampant wickedness"* (literal translation), are not part of how we think of ourselves.

This *"rampant wickedness"* may be quite acceptable to the rest of the world but not in God's way of thinking.

We may simply like to tell juicy stories about other people – everyone does it so that can't be all that bad, right? This is one of those *"filthy habits"* James is talking about (3:1-12).

We may be in the habit of unfairly criticising others (James 4:11-12) or be biased because of a person's skin colour or nationality or political persuasion or social standing (James 2:1-4). These are *"filthy habits"*.

We may let our anger get out of hand and sting others with harsh and judgemental words. That's a *"filthy habit"* (James 1:19).

And what is more, we are very good at justifying ourselves and making excuses. We don't see any need to change. *'It's not my fault that I get angry – other people just press my buttons.'*

Habits take a lot of work to break.

The first step in breaking a habit is recognizing what it is that we're doing. So we look into the mirror of God's Word and it reflects back what we are really like. And just as we say "Uugh" when we look into the mirror in the morning, we say something similar when we see the *"filthy habits and wicked conduct"* reflected back to us from God's Word.

James says bluntly, *"Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says"* (James 1:22).

Don't shake your head in agreement and then forget it. Listen and then put it into practice. Let the Word that you hear have an impact on your life. Let it show you the naked truth that all is not right with your relationship with God and the way you speak and act is not acceptable to God.

If we take our car to a mechanic and he says that the funny noise coming from the motor is serious and some urgent repairs need to be made, we would be foolish to ignore his advice and drive away. That's just asking for trouble. Our Maker has some important advice for each of us and likewise it's foolish to ignore it and continue on our merry way as if he hadn't said anything to us. This is a message from God that tells us how to live happy and peaceful lives.

Let's go on from here. For Christians the mirror of God's Word has something else to say to us. When we ask, "Mirror, mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them?" God's Word also comes back with the answer, *"You are the fairest of them all!"*

But how can that be when the biblical mirror has just reflected many *"filthy habits"* in our lives? We have done our best but still God's mirror keeps on showing us that evil still rules so much of what we do.

God's mirror tells us the truth and tells it to us straight, *"You the fairest of them all because of Jesus your Saviour"*. The mirror has got it right.

Because of what Jesus has done for us in his death and resurrection we can look into the mirror and see ourselves without spot or blemish. Jesus has made us clean. On a wooden cross outside Jerusalem he sacrificed himself in order to get rid of anything that would mar our complexion in the sight of God.

Through faith in Jesus, we are told that God has forgiven us. We are clean. We who are dirty and untidy have now been declared “not dirty”, “not guilty”. Because of God's saving love we are beautiful in his eyes; we are the fairest of them all.

There is something of a paradox here. On the one hand, the mirror of God's Word tells us we are sinners, imperfect, and that we readily indulge in “*filthy habits and wicked conduct*”. But on the other hand, the mirror of God's Word tells us that through Jesus we are forgiven, made clean and that we are indeed, “the fairest of them all”.

I could carry this mirror imagery just one step further and say, “How do I, whom God calls “the fairest of them all”, reflect the image of Christ to the people in our lives and the community around us?

Do people see in me the love and compassion of Christ, or do they see what James calls “*filthy and evil habits*” in the way I speak and act?

Do people see what the mirror reflects – not a “holy joe” who has got it all right; not a person whose life is out of control with “filthy habits” but someone who is a sinner (and knows it) and who reflects the joy of what it means to know Jesus and his love?

The beauty of the mirror of God's Word is this – as we gaze deeply into it, we see reflected back the love Jesus has for us and the clean start he gives to all who trust in him.

That's why James insists that we don't just listen to the Word of God.

Receive it.

Read it.

Remember it.

Believe it.

Trust it.

Embrace it.

Do it.

Respond to it as the Holy Spirit leads you.

James nicely concludes by saying,

God will bless you in everything you do, if you listen and obey, and don't just hear and forget (James 1:25 CEV).

Amen.