

## To Us Through Us

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - September 2, 2018

### James 1:17-27

1:17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

1:18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

1:19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;

1:20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

1:21 Therefore 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.

1:22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

1:23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;

1:24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

1:25 But 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.

1:26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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Ken Blanchard, who co-authored the old best-seller *The One-Minute Manager*, says that in the workplace it is important to maintain a four-to-one ratio of praise to criticism. Employees whose bosses offered less praise than that tended to characterize their relationship with their bosses as totally negative. This, according to Blanchard, demonstrates how reprimands are perceived by those who receive them. They strike very powerfully and can only be balanced by four positive words. (*The Blanchard Management Report*. Quoted in *Plus* magazine, October 2000, 9-11.)

A few years ago, artist Tom Greaves placed his bright red-and-white box that he called The Compliment Machine on a busy corner in DC to see how compliments are perceived when they are unattached to any action. Periodically, The Compliment Machine would chime loudly and then, in a very pleasant voice, offer a random compliment to whomever was standing close enough to hear it.

Some reported that it really made them feel good to hear a pleasant and encouraging word penetrating the fog of a bad moment. Others said it was like opening a fortune cookie to read a message with no connection to their real world. Others said it was hard to know just how to take the compliment.

Like the compliment offered by one wife whose husband had been staring at himself in a full-length mirror and finally said, "You know baby, all I see anymore is an old man. My face is wrinkled.

My belly hangs over my belt. Can you tell me what it is that you see that is positive?" She thought, maybe not long enough and replied, "Well honey, there's nothing wrong with your eyesight."

The letter of James delivers a positive message described as a "word of truth" and a "perfect gift" from God. It's not that nebulous message that is so often heard, that "God really loves us but our eyesight is lying to us either." Ever gotten that message in church?" Jesus loves you...BUT...! No, James insists that its message is that God's love has been with us from the beginning and that our Creator has always and will always seek to be in relationship with us no matter what. That "no matter what" part is the meaning of divine grace.

James offers this as the ultimate compliment that we can hear. But he also insists that it is a compliment not to be heard *only*- like a pedestrian shrugging off a disembodied compliment from a box on the street. This divine compliment, according to James, is also to be acted upon. We're not to be "hearers of the no matter what word" only, but also "doers of the no matter what word." Otherwise, James explains, the word might create a blip of bliss for us but never really translate into anything life-changing. So James says it's a compliment we need to hear again and again. We need to hear it in Sunday School lessons. We need to hear it in the music that we sing. We need to hear it in our symbols and sacraments We need to hear it from each other. We need to put ourselves in places and around people where we hear the word of God's grace saturated love over and over and over again. And though he doesn't specify a 4:1 ratio he says that we need to hear it enough for it to become implanted in us, filtering out the negative messages that can bombard us daily, and becoming a word that has "the power to save [our] souls." Do you know what it's like to be the victim of soul damage? By "looking intently" into the meaning of this word, says James, and then acting upon it, we activate a transformative power that leads us to the true "freedom" and blessing that God intends for us, but not *for us*, but for all the world *through us*.

His is an eminently practical theology. He insists that the divine compliment of liberating love and grace showered on us is meant to come to us then through us on its way to everyone else. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this" he says in verse 27: "to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." The word from God isn't the sort of thing that is merely random or philosophical. It isn't mere belief that we embrace. It's belief we embrace, with *outcomes* that we also embrace. The world around us ought to start looking a certain way because we're in it. Our faith includes an embraced set of outcomes. It's not enough to be convinced of, and assured by, the divine compliment and call that faith. It's the connection between what God says about us and what we are in relation to everyone else that defines a living faith. The alternative is what James calls "faith without works," and he pronounces that faith "dead."

The lesson from the street corner? Perhaps life does imitate art. If we're able to slow down, and if we take the time to hear the positive word that God speaks to us, and about us, that word can have

a powerful, transformative effect on us, on its way through us to the world that God also so loves. Our response to God's compliment of grace and truth is our own complimentary works of grace and truth.

May God open our ears that way may hear God's voice. And may we listen, really listen; because we know that God's world surely needs us to really, really listen.

In the name of Jesus, God's amazing compliment made flesh. Amen.

## GREAT THANKSGIVING

You give us lives that are a beautiful reflection of you, and you give us capacities to work diligently, to create newness and beauty, and to reach out to love others no matter what. By your Spirit our hearts feel strongly, even when they break over injustice and oppression, and we are made to be unafraid of loving deeply, with feet that move toward the poor, the badgered, the disrespected, the powerless, those with courage to stand up. Through your prophets, through faithful people, through holy scripture, and through Jesus you call us to live for that day when your will to be fulfilled on earth as it is in heaven, and you place in our hearts the assurance of things hoped for. So with your people on earth and all the company of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn?

He calls forth the deepest adoration of our souls. He lived as an agent of the kind of divine grace that swallows up our imperfection and weakness, that takes all that we are and all that we're not and makes that into a redeeming force in the world. On the night in which he gave himself...