

Resolutions

James 1:17-27

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January 4, 2015

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. 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.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speech, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 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.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 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.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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Before I read this morning's scripture I want to let you know why I have chosen it for today. I chose it because it is the New Year and – if there is such a thing in the scriptures – this part of James' letter serves as a motivational speech to those in the faith as we think about what lies ahead.

Listen with me for the word of God...

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My guess is that for many of us, a New Year starts with looking in a mirror.

Sometimes it is literal mirror.

We stand there and notice the extra crow's feet around our eyes, or the growing love handles around our waist, or the increasing size of our foreheads due to a diminishing hairline – and we think, "I have to do something about that."

Sometimes the mirror we look into is figurative.

This is the time of year when we reflect back on life in order to look forward. It is a time to contemplate the things we did well and the things we would do differently. Based on these reflections, maybe this year is the time we need to reorder our priorities – to have the ways we spend our time and money reflect the things we hold to be most important. Maybe this year is the time to tend to a broken relationship. Maybe it is then time to find the courage to stand up for ourselves.

It happens on a more macro-level, too.

We've just lived through a week filled with end of year reflections and beginning of year prognostications. Whether it is the state of the economy, what we've learned about the unfinished work our country has left to do around issues of race and class, the continuing threat of violence by radicalized religious groups, or what decisions we face as a global community that has to learn to coexist on a planet with precious resources and an expanding population – there is no shortage of opinion about what we should do; what our goals should be; how we can meet the challenges that face us.

For many of us, the beginning of a New Year starts with taking a look in the mirror – and then deciding how to respond to what we see.

I've always found that there is a certain hopefulness that comes when we turn the page from one year to the next. That is promise of New Year's resolutions: that in spite of the challenges that face us – as individuals or as a society – change is possible; that we can improve; that the future has yet to be written. And, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we believe that, too!

There is nothing inherently religious about New Year's, or about New Year's resolutions – but there is something inherently Christian about having hope when we anticipate the future.

What a Christian brings to the table, however, is a clearer understanding of where that hope resides.

Maybe you have a better track record with keeping your New Year's resolutions past February than I do, but what my experience tells me is that my efforts to improve my life tend to fail for two main reasons:

1. They are focused on what I want instead of what God needs.
2. They depend on me being the hero – where it is my effort that can secure the future for which I hope.

That is a common problem you know – for people like us who are accustomed to achievement – and for Christians like us who understand that we have a part to play in how faith gets lived out in the world. The temptation is to believe that whatever hope there is in the future depends on us; and can be earned by our effort; and, if achieved, is the result of our hard work.

Our forbearers in the Christian faith call that kind of thing “works righteousness.” People like John Calvin and Martin Luther and John Knox have some pretty sharp words and warnings when it comes to what part our effort plays in God’s future and our salvation.

One of those forbearers in the faith, Martin Luther, actually considered this morning’s scripture from James an example of work’s righteousness. In some writings from his early ministry, Luther – who never minced words – said that James should be ripped out of the Bible because it gave the follower of Jesus Christ the wrong impression that if we just worked hard enough, and did enough, we could both be saved and help save the world.

Luther called James’s letter “the epistle of straw” because he thought these kind of ideas in this letter were flimsy and without grounding in a right understanding of God’s sovereignty and grace.

At first glance, it does seem that James is suggesting that the future depends on us, doesn’t it?

Be doers of the word: don’t be angry.

Be doers of the word: watch your tongues.

Be doers of the word: look after the orphans and widows.

The future is on us.

We are the doers – and we had better do our job.

Luther might say,

Where is the grace in that?

What role does Jesus Christ have in that?

Where is there any acknowledgment of the human condition in that?

History is littered with examples of what can go wrong when we think the future depends upon us. Even those of us who make up the Church – with all of our good intentions – have fallen miserably short when we think it is up to us to secure God’s future for the world.

I’m reminded of a quote by Fredrick Buechner: “Jesus made his church out of human beings with more or less the same mixture in them of cowardice and guts, intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any one of us. The reason he made his church out of human beings is that human beings were all there was to make it out of. In fact, as far as I know, human beings are all there is to make it out of still. It’s a point worth remembering.”¹

If the future is up to us, it isn’t going to be much of a future.

¹ Buechner, Fredrick, *Secrets in the Dark* (p. 163)

If the change we think is needed when we look into the mirror depends only on our hard work, then it is no wonder our resolutions have a short self-life.

The gospel gives us a hopeful vision of the future.

In the gospel, the future – which is not just some spiritual place, removed from this world – but a vision of what this world will be like when it finally resembles God’s intention at creation – in the gospel that future has a place for us, made by Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh.

The good news of the gospel is that God stands in the future with the same promise to be faithful that we have experienced when we look back at our past. And we are invited to participate in the ways that God will be faithful to his promises – without the burden of having those promises depend upon our faithfulness.

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When he wrote his letter to the early Christians, James encouraged them to look into the mirror – but perhaps for a different reason than why we are accustomed. James encourages us to look into the mirror, not to search out our faults, or to think about the things we can do to improve; James encourages us to look into the mirror to remember who we are.

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers... For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the [mirror of 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.

Who do we see when we really look in the mirror?

We see a reflection of someone who is loved by God and saved through God’s grace in Jesus the Christ.

James wants for us to remember that – and to carry that image with us in our daily walk.

He knows that too often we look into that mirror only to forget how richly we have been blessed by God’s grace. And he knows that when we forget whose we are then we might also forget how God calls us to live.

God’s Word has secured our future.

God’s Word is the reason we have hope.

God’s Word offers a grace that can unburden us from past mistakes and open to us the possibility of real change.

The future is not in question.

The question is: how are you going to respond when you are confronted with such good news?

What will you do to show that gratitude?

Whose lives will you impact because of the good news of God's grace?

The challenge of this morning's scripture – as it guides us into this New Year – is that there should be concrete answers to actions to these questions.

Because faith is about much more than simply hearing.

True faith – and true gratitude – are accompanied by action.