

April 22, 2018
Building a Life that Actually Matters
James 1:19-27

Have you been at a formal dinner and noticed a glob of ketchup stuck on someone's chin? You want to get their attention. But you don't want to attract other people's notice. You feel so badly for them. As they get up to speak, you know they may have some worthwhile things to say, but how can you take them seriously with a bright red smudge on their face???
Has that person ever been you? How did you feel?

In this passage, James says, look in the mirror (1:23). Take a look at yourself. What do you see? Not just the physical image (hopefully there is no ketchup on your chin 😊). Who do you see – emotionally? Relationally? Spiritually?

Read James 1:19-25. James' point is that your face may be physically clean; but there may be other things – not so nice things, even nasty things – showing up in your life. Do you become angry easily? Do you say unkind words? Do you talk too much and listen too little? There are a host of things we could add under the heading of "*moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.*" We can all fill in the blanks.

"*Look in the mirror,*" says James. "*What do you see?*" When you do that, you can just walk away. You can leave the ketchup smear there. After all, **you** don't have to look at your face all day. But we do care, because what we look like says something about who we are. What we see – spiritually, morally, relationally – speaks to who we are.

We know we should not **judge** just by appearances. James knows that. James is going to go on to say, "*Suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in shabby clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, 'You can sit on the floor' – well, doesn't this discrimination show that you are guided by wrong motives?*" (James 2:2-4). We agree with James (I hope).

We care more about what people's **character** looks like. And that is what James is really asking us to think about. In a fascinating Old Testament story, the prophet Samuel is instructed by God to anoint one of Jesse's sons the new king of Israel, replacing the war hero, Saul. Samuel first sees Eliab, Jesse's eldest son. He thinks, "*Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord.*" But the Lord says to Samuel, "*Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). God leads Samuel to David, the youngest son. It's David's heart – his character – that God sees. That is what is important.

We can – and need to – look at the heart of people. We want to know the broker with whom we have invested our money has our best interests at heart. We want to know the auto mechanic giving us an estimate is not taking advantage of us. We want to know our lawyer is concerned about our needs first, not their own. We want to know our doctor knows what they're doing, and will refer us to a specialist when necessary.

Now is the hard part – people can (and need to) look at **our** hearts as they deal with **us**. Are we people of integrity? People others can trust? People of good character? Or is there ketchup smears on our souls? James warns us: don't just walk away from the mirror. Deal with the dirt. You may not see it when you leave the mirror, but other people will. We must be people of godly **character**, who live the word and do it.

A firm foundation

You can be true to anything, if you've nothing to be true to. However, when we all just do what each of us thinks best, community doesn't work well.

As the people of Jesus, part of our good news is we have a foundation, a moral compass that, when we live by it, creates a great community AND helps us live full and meaningful lives. In Scripture we have ethical guidelines and principles we can use as standards for living our lives and relating to others. Biblical principles are woven into the fabric creation and our hearts and minds by God Himself. And they just work.

We may object. Aren't God's guidelines are all negative ("Thou-shalt-not"s)? In fact, Scripture gives us a very positive and constructive basis for living. When Jesus was asked, what is the greatest commandment – what is the be-all and end-all foundation of life – He replied positively in terms of things we **can do**, not things we **can't do**. He said: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Those two principles are expanded in teachings like the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. If those two concepts guided everything we did and every word we said, what a wonderful society we would live in. What a wonderful church. What a wonderful home. What a wonderful life.

There's an old recipe for a rabbit dish that starts out, *"First catch the rabbit."* That puts first things first. If we are to have full and meaningful lives, lives with character and integrity, we have to put first things first ... *Love God and love our neighbour*. If those principles form the foundation for all our words and all our actions, we will live be people of good character. We can look in the mirror with integrity and hope.

Building character

In an opinion column on a news site, the author noted how politicians love to create a threat – real or imagined – and then draw popularity and support from the fear and outrage of the masses. It can be fake news. It's blatant manipulation. And it works.

I can blame all my problems on Rachel Notley. Or Justin Trudeau. Or Donald Trump. Or immigrants. Or my parents. And once I have an "enemy" I can sit back and feel righteous indignation and anger. I can post nasty memes. Nothing more.

Or maybe my issues are, at least in part, my fault. I need to take some responsibility. I need to accept I have problems. The ketchup is on my face/soul. I have to ask Jesus to forgive me, and help me forgive those who may have hurt me – so I can move on.

Jesus can deal with the past. He can forgive us, renew us, and restore us. He can help us forgive those who have hurt us. We may need professional help. He can work through counselors and psychologists who can help us walk through tough things and come to terms with them. We also absolutely need Jesus. Jesus can also help us deal with *"the moral filth and everything else that weighs us down"* and move forward.

When Jesus helps us heal the past, in partnership with God's Spirit, we can create something new in the present and future. We can make choices now to change the present and future. We need God's wisdom so we choose wisely. James encourages us – look before you leap, think before you speak, take responsibility for your words and actions so you do not get yourself into a compromising situation. Then you won't need to be blame anyone else.

How do we do that? Charles Swindoll talks about "gumption:" *"Gumption means being disciplined one day at a time. Rather than focusing on the whole enchilada, take it in bite-size chunks. The whole of any objective can overwhelm even the most courageous. Writing a book? Do so one page at a time. Running a marathon? Those 26 miles are run one step at a time. Trying to master a new language? Try one word at a time. There are 365 days in the average year. Divide any project by 365 and none seem all that intimidating, do they? It will take daily discipline, not annual discipline."*

Your character shines through the windows of your soul

James writes, *"Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says,"* or in the KJV, *"Be doers of the word, and not hearers only."* We know people who have heard all the right things, who can even say all the right things, but when it comes to doing the right things ... forget it. Actions speak louder than words; we need to put our money where our mouth is; we need to walk our talk. In the words of Nike (and James) we need to "just do it" (James 1:25). That's character. Character takes responsibility to do what is right, and does it.

It takes courage to **do** what is right. But doing the right thing, even if it means being different from the crowd, is always the right choice. Your conscience is clean. You can look in the mirror. Your character and integrity shine through. Your example inspires others to live "right" too. Paul says, *"Let us never get tired of doing what is right, for if we don't get discouraged and quit, after a while we will reap a harvest of blessing"* (Galatians 6:9).

A child was looking at the colourful glass figures illuminated by sun in a stained glass window. Mom was explaining who each saint was and what they had done. "So," the child said, "A saint is someone that the light shines through!" May God's character shine through us!

A saint immortalized in a window can't do anything except inspire the occasional child who comes to church. We're not stuck in windows – yet. We bring God's light into the world, to places where people are not in church. James goes on to say, *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: _____."* How would you fill in the blank? To pray and accept Jesus as Saviour? To know you are going to heaven when you die?

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

The risen Jesus doesn't want us to either (1) assimilate, give in and become like everyone else, or (2) hide away in some holy huddle. People often go to either of those extremes. As people of the cross AND the resurrection, (3) we are called to be Jesus' forgiven and empowered people in the world. We need to worship well **and** we need to care for the hurting well. We need to think well **and** live with His character, His wisdom, and His power, in such a way that the world is changed in us and through us. We are a strong, loving community of His people **and** His good news of grace, love, and mercy in our world.

He has given us His Spirit so we can live **IN** His world, as His people, as His presence, bringing His hope and His good news. When we look in the mirror, we are invited to see ourselves as His ambassadors, His good news to a confused and confusing world.

It is a challenging day-by-day, moment-by-moment walk to *"keep in step with the Spirit"* (Galatians 5:25). We will blow it. But we need to keep confessing our failure, and aspiring to walk the walk with integrity and character. He will help us.

Will you "just do it?" Will you ask the Spirit to help you walk the walk?

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