

**“MIRROR, MIRROR”**

Rev. Becky Stephens

**Text: James 1:17-27****God's Word: Luke 4:16-21****James 1:17-27**

*<sup>17</sup> Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. <sup>18</sup> He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.*

*<sup>19</sup> Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. <sup>20</sup> Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. <sup>21</sup> 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.*

*<sup>22</sup> But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. <sup>23</sup> For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. <sup>25</sup> But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.*

*<sup>26</sup> If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.*

I have always loved sports even though I was not always good at them. As a youth, I played pick-up games of softball with my church group. I could hit pretty good. The problem came in outfield. You see, I'm left handed, but I only had a right handed glove (which went on your left hand). So I would have to catch the ball with my left hand (which I could do), but then I would have to take my glove off and then throw the ball with my left hand as well. Not a good set up when you have the bases loaded and time is of the essence.

And then I played basketball. I don't recall that I really had any great intentions of playing basketball; it's actually kind of funny the way it happened. At the beginning of my sixth grade year, my gym teacher (who also happened to be the girls' basketball coach at my school), was promoting tryouts for the team. I knew they were worried as to whether they would have enough 6<sup>th</sup> Graders for a team or not. So I tried out for the school team.

The tryouts for the school team took four days. People were dropping like flies. I made it through the first two days with no problem, but the third day was a different story. We were

doing lay-ups, some from the right side of the basket and some from the left. I dribbled in and laid the ball up nicely on the left side, but coming in on the right side was not so pretty. I botched the form and lay-up something fierce, and as I ran back to my place in line, I looked at the Coach, who said, "Stephens, you gotta work on the right side." I was crushed. I thought my chances of playing ball on the school team were ruined. I had been feeling pretty good about my abilities, and then all of a sudden, the mirror was in front of me and it wasn't a very pretty picture. That evening I went home and got my ball out of the garage and started doing right hand lay-ups over and over and over again. First, I worked on my form, making sure I was dribbling comfortably with my right hand and always getting to the basket such that I could lightly stretch my right hand up and push the ball towards the backboard. Once I got comfortable with the form, then I started working on actually getting the ball into the basket. I didn't stop practicing until I was completely satisfied that I had made significant progress on the right-handed lay-up. Sure enough, the next day, I returned to tryouts, and when it came time to do lay-ups, I put the basketball in the hoop as nicely on the right-side as on the left. "Good job, Stephens" Coach said. "You been practicing?" "Yes." I said. I'm pretty sure my overnight improvement on the right-handed lay-up sealed the deal for the Coach, and I made the Junior High basketball team. But it took Coach pointing out to me the sheer ugliness of my right-handed lay-ups for me to get to a level where I made the team. Truth be told, so many had dropped out that by the end of the 4 days, we only had 7 girls on our team. So I probably would have made it anyway.

How often does this happen in our lives? We're feeling pretty good about our abilities, thinking we've got it all together, and then all of a sudden we get a good dose of perspective. I, personally, deal with this on a fairly regular basis, as I'm sure all of us do. Certainly, "being put in our place" is never a very fun experience, but what we do in the midst of such experiences can make all the difference. In the case of my early basketball career, I took a rather embarrassing moment and decided I needed to do a little work, so I went home and practiced for a few hours.

That practice ended up making a world of difference, enough that I made the team when I might not otherwise have. Coach held up the mirror, I saw I had some work to do, and so I got busy. The same must be true in our Christian lives as well, James tells us. We cannot simply see ourselves in the mirror and walk away forgetting what we have seen. We must see and remember, and then we must act to improve, becoming more Christ-like. Our entire lives as Christians must be shaped after the example of Christ, because this is the mirror that stands before us.

Think back with me for a minute to Jesus' time. "Mirrors," if you can call them that, were not exactly commonplace like they are today. The wealthy might have had heavily polished metal that would function somewhat like mirrors, but that was pretty much it. People in Jesus' time probably did not have much of an idea of what they looked like except from their shadows or maybe from reflections in the water. Even if they were lucky enough to see their reflection in

the shined finish of metal, they still were not getting a very clear picture of themselves. Today, we have mirrors everywhere. I went around my house this week just to see how many mirrors I have. In my house with just me and Olivia, we have 11 mirrors. (3 are hand held). We have a very clear picture of ourselves, but it's probably fair to say that we see ourselves in the mirror so often that we rarely actually take real notice of what we look like. I imagine that quite often, as James says, we walk away from the mirror and immediately forget what we were like. Perhaps it's so easy for us to forget about our appearance in part because our standard is only ourselves; what we saw in the mirror a few hours ago, or maybe yesterday. But what if our standard is God in Jesus Christ, and the image being reflected is our whole lives, not just our outward appearance.

This is the mirror that James is holding up for us: who we are as those claimed by God. This passage from James begins with a very powerful statement about God. All we have is from God, who is constant and unchanging, the same God who has given us new birth in the word of truth. James reminds us of the God from whom all blessings flow, and urges us to live lives worthy of those who have been transformed by the very word of God. If all we do is hear this word, it is no different than walking by the mirror in the morning and forgetting what we look like before we even make it to the door. But for those who pause, who see themselves in relationship to God and God's word; this is when the transformation really happens, our whole lives are shaped by the goodness of God, and we are out in the world at work in God's holy name. That, says James, is true worship. Not just sitting and hearing God's word, but acting on it: caring for the widows and the orphans and looking out for the best interests of those who are the most defenseless in our society. When we are doing this, we become not merely hearers who forget, but doers who act, and we see in the mirror who we really are as members of the body of Christ, which is something we do not easily forget.

So here is the mirror that is before us: a God who gives generously, a God who is constant, and a God who has brought before us the word of truth so that we might be changed through God in Christ Jesus. And then, even beyond the God of the heavens, there was his Son who came to this earth and through his life taught us how to live ours. The first time Jesus taught, he was in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, and he said this to the people, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* Jesus very clearly laid out his mission and his purpose as God's Son on earth as he stood in the synagogue on that day, and again the mirror is before us. This is the "perfect law of liberty" of which James spoke because that is what Jesus offered: freedom from sin, freedom from oppression and illness, freedom to the poor, the outcast, and the lost, true liberty in the name of God. When a mob wanted to stone a young lady, Jesus stopped them, offering her liberty even as he told her to "go and sin no more." Jesus healed a paralytic man, offering true liberty through the forgiveness of sins and freedom to walk. Jesus cared for those who were defenseless in society, even as he cared for the rich and powerful. The question for us today is do we reflect such care and compassion in

our own lives, or is it as if we have stood before the mirror and forgotten what we saw before us? When we truly see ourselves in the light of Christ, then we cannot help but be changed.

Let's go back to my basketball career for a moment. It's funny the things I remember from playing basketball in junior high. One of my most vivid memories comes from the conclusion of a practice one evening. After running drills and practicing plays, Coach lined us up on the baseline and told us to run five suicide sprints. For those of you who don't know what suicide sprints are, the name is quite appropriate. You run baseline to foul line and back, then to midcourt and back, then to the far foul line and back, and finally all the way across the court and back. That's one sprint. Coach wanted us to do five of those. He blew the whistle and off we went. I chugged up to the foul line and back, then up to half court and back, and then on my way to the far foul line I tripped over my awkwardly large feet (My Dad affectionately calls them size 10 sled runners) and went careening across the floor, landing spread eagle on the hardwood. Coach walked over to me and looked down at me on the floor. Through a chuckle he asked, "What happened, Stephens?" I told him I had tripped, and he chuckled again and told me to get up and finish. But I will never forget that fall and Coach standing over me. It was another instance of the mirror being held before me. Though it had been a few months in the making, I realized then that even though I loved basketball, it wasn't for me. I didn't try out for the team next year; instead, I became involved in my high school choir and ended up accompanying one of the choirs. I made a radical change that has ended up shaping my whole life. For you see, in my first appointment of 3 small churches, there was not a choir director, nor an accompanist. Thank goodness for those experiences that have carried over.

In the same way, to truly reflect Christ in our lives; to see ourselves in light of the perfect law of liberty means our lives will be radically changed. In fact, our whole outlook on life may very well be transformed. Perhaps we will begin to see the bit of Christ reflected in others and we will be inclined to love rather than to judge. Or maybe we will begin to feel a bit empty when we are not at work in the name of Christ. Still today, there are the orphans and widows who are in need of care, but there are also many others who stand helpless in the face of countless situations and God has called us to act in response to these needs. Like Jesus, we should use our voices to stop violence and oppression. Like Jesus, we should offer a hand of compassion to the sick. Like Jesus, we should give generously and share good news with the poor. And above all, we should share the message of forgiveness and love that Christ offers to all people. This is worship that is pure and undefiled before God, acting on the word of truth in the world. Are we ready to reflect Christ in our lives? Are we ready for the change that would require? It is never easy to have to look at ourselves and admit to the need for transformation, but remember the words of James, "they will be blessed in their doing." When we choose to reflect Christ in our lives, we will be blessed in our doing, but even more than that, many will be blessed in seeing the living, breathing body of Christ at work in this world today.