### The Main Thing: Good Religion!

Sermon Preached by Rev. Chuck Cole at St. John’s UMC Staunton 01/19/2020

### Hearing and Doing the Word

19 You must understand this, my beloved:[[g](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+1&version=NRSV" \l "fen-NRSV-30268g)] let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. 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.

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves[[h](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+1&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-30272h)] in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. 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.

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

Two weeks ago we considered our theme verse for our Main thing series Matthew 6:33

33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

We saw in this a call to seek first Him and his Kingdom and his righteousness while trusting him for the provision of our other needs and wants because he is trustworthy. He will meet our other needs and wants as we seek his kingdom and righteousness but above all he will mold and shape us meeting our deepest and truest needs in the process.

In short as CS Lewis said

You aim at heaven you get earth thrown in, you aim at earth, you get neither.

Last week we considered how the audience of our actions is crucial in our ability to persist and direct our energies properly in seeking the Kingdom. Our scripture last week called us to live out our discipleship before an audience of one - the Lord Almighty. As his reaction and pleasure is determinant, what we truly care about, his values become ours, what brings him pleasure becomes our focus and our joy and we are then seeking him and his kingdom and not our own. As we live out our discipleship for him aiming at heaven we will get earth thrown in.

This week we have a call to listen to look intently into the mirror of the word and do what is says.

In 1963 the New York Zoo had in its Great Ape House an exhibit entitled ‘The Most Dangerous Animal in the World’, it was a mirror. So when you looked at it you saw your own reflection as if you were the exhibit.

The hope surely was that you would not just say ‘huh’ that’s interesting and move on as if you had never seen it. Rather you were intended to reflect on it and be different in a good way and that that difference would show itself in what you did. In a similar way our passage this morning calls on us to take seriously the mirror of the Word to show us who we truly are in ourselves, who we truly are in Christ, and what our discipleship should look like in response.

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves[[h](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+1&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-30272h)] in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, ongoing away, immediately forget what they were like. 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.

We are called to look into the mirror of the Word, the Law of Liberty in James words, and see who we are and persevere accordingly.

What does the mirror of the word reveal to us? First it reveals to us the wonder of our salvation. When we read the word we should be like the dog I saw in a Facebook meme.

There is a big black dog with a huge smile on his face looking up at his owner, it seems like he has jumped on the bed and is thrilled to be snuggling gup next to his owner, it is like he just jumped into bed with his owner overjoyed to be there and the caption says:

This is how I should be when reading the word of God: “Tell me again the story of how you rescued me”.

That is what the word of God truly is if we are in Christ it is the story of how God has rescued us and will rescue us. It tells us of who we are in him because of his Grace not because of anything we have done. It shows us the reason why he has rescued rescues and will rescue us and what his love desires for us and the world in that salvation.

It tells us we are first of all sinners saved by Grace adopted members of his family

Ephesians 1

In love 5 he[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+1&version=NIV#fen-NIV-29212b)] predestined us for adoption to sonship[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+1&version=NIV#fen-NIV-29212c)] through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace 8 that he lavished on us.

Romans 8

15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba![[m](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+8&version=NRSV" \l "fen-NRSV-28117m)] Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness[[n](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+8&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-28118n)] with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

We are a people created for a purpose as 1 Peter - which by the way we are studying on Tuesday nights -

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

10

Once you were not a people,

 but now you are God’s people;

once you had not received mercy,

 but now you have received mercy.

We are a people chosen by God for a purpose, this is true of each one of us, we are royal priests designed to worship and praise and declare the good works of the King.

In short as we look into the mirror of scripture we realize we are not who the world says we are and so we should act according to who we are in him not what the world says we are.

So we need to hear the word over and over again. To remember who we are but also to see those places where we need to grow in him where thinking about that sign we might be a danger to ourselves or others.

So our passage continues setting out two standards by which to judge our discipleship

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

In our common usage the world Religion is mainly thought of as a set of ideas or rituals but the Greek word translated religion here is Threskeia which means outward expression of belief not the content of it. If we do not control our tongue or other parts of our behavior - not only refraining from the negative or failing to proactively do the positive our Threskeia our religion is worthless. Harsh much - but this is important.

Our Threskeia - our religion - is meant to proclaim the Good Works of God and to as the Spirit uses us bring by his grace salvation and life and if it is not doing that we are not who we are meant to be and the purpose for which God has created us is not being fulfilled then our religion our Threskeia is worthless.

I am sure each of us desires not to be worthless but rather to live worthily of the one who gave his life for us.

How do we have true Threskeia? Our passage declares then for us what true outworking looks like and it has two parts:

First, keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world – keeping ourselves Holy - set apart for him not like cloistered monks but engaged with those around us for God.

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. 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.

Do not let the world fill you with anger, fear, sadness, bitterness, unforgiveness, unrighteousness, selfishness, licentiousness, lust in its many forms all of which fail to produce righteousness.

In the words of a friend this means

Hang out with people who fit your future, not your history.

We are the company we keep. This means individuals, but I would contend also entertainment, news we allow ourselves to read, what we feed our hearts and souls shapes us. So feed yourself what moves you closer to him and to better Threskeia. Associate yourself with what belongs with who you will be and this will make you more like what you truly are.

Do not let the world shape you, those rocks that might cause you to react sinfully in whatever way respond confident in the grace of Christ as he would have you. Open your hearts to the Word which God has implanted in our hearts.

Above all else, give yourself a steady diet of the Word of God individually and in community and be honest with it and yourself. Let it fill and change you.

An example of this kind of Threskeia was recounted by a subway rider in LA. He and his son were coming home from a Dodger’s game and they boarded a Subway car. Five rows ahead of them was an elderly white homeless man who was muttering to himself. The car stopped at the next station and an African-American man couple boarded and sat down across from the homeless man. Who started shouting at the man “F-ing N-word” over and over again. The African-American man stood up and the witness was concerned there was going to be an altercation. Be he pulled out a box of raisins from his pocket, gave them to the man, sat next to him and talked to him gently till he was calm and then returned to his seat.

The man could have been enraged or gotten upset by the man but instead he was moved by compassion. He did not allow the man or others actions to determine what his Threskeia would look like but instead acted worthily.

The second element that our passage Caring for widows and orphans - in other words the vulnerable.

This is Threskeia that reflects God’s heart, the heart of the loving rescuer. Work at the rescue mission, volunteer at the local crisis pregnancy center, foster parent, advocate for vulnerable people (though do not stop there).

An example of worthy Threskeia is John Gebhardt. He is a soldier who works in a military hospital in the Middle East and a little girl was being cared for in his hospital whose entire family was executed by insurgents. The insurgents intended to execute the little girl also, and shot her in the head...but they failed to kill her. She was cared for in John's hospital and is healing up, but continues to cry and moan. The nurses said John is the only one who seems to calm her down, so John has been sleeping in a chair holding her all night. The girl is progressing in her healing I would assert in no small part because of John Gebhardts far from worthless Threskeia.

How can we as St. John’s do this collectively - that is a question that we need to answer if our Threskeia collectively is to be useful. What does this aspect look like for us?

As God’s people whom he has rescued let us live out our faith powerfully worthily.

Let us as disciples strive to look in the mirror of the word and let it shape our religion our Threskeia, our working out of God’s rescue of us, so that we keep ourselves from being polluted by the world and care for the orphan and the widow. Let our lives be such that we imitate our rescuer God and let our discipleship not be worthless but be truly useful. Amen.