

## Sermon: Doers of the Word

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu at St. Giles, Ottawa, Sep.1, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Narcissus, according to Greek mythology, was an impossibly handsome young man, whose fate was foretold by the seer Teiresias to his mother that her son would live a long life, a near immortality such that 'he never knows himself'. In his teenage years, Narcissus never found anyone that could pull his heartstrings, instead, he left in his wake a long trail of distressed and broken-hearted maidens, and a few young men fell by the wayside too.

Then one day, solely by chance, he saw his own reflection in a pool of water, and fell in love, with himself. Naturally, this one-way relationship went nowhere, and Narcissus, unable to withdraw himself away from the pool, wasted away and died of starvation and thirst, all the while gazing lovingly, at himself. Immortality, at least of a kind, was assured when his corpse turned into the flowers which now bear his name. It is a tragic yet somewhat comedic tale, a warning to anyone who maybe obsessed with their own appearance.

The cover art in this week's bulletin, a painting titled Narcissus by the Italian master Caravaggio, depicts the beautiful young man in a rigid stasis, with his arms in awkward position, staring into a darken pool of water. This medium of oil paint on canvas is perfect, perfectly illustrating the fact that Narcissus is going nowhere, frozen in time. The contrast of light and darkness is unmistakable—while Narcissus is in the light, he desires for the dark. It is a subtle and implicit commentary by Caravaggio on the human condition without God.

A condition as described by James in his epistle (1:15), "*then, when desire has conceived, it engenders sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.*" The desire of Narcissus, namely his own image in the mirror, deceived him and lured him ultimately to his own doom. The Letter of James speaks of another type of deception in verse 22-24, of those who look at themselves in a mirror, but upon going away, immediately forget what they were like. It's a metaphor used to describe hearers of the word who are unwilling or unable to do.

Let's unpack this metaphor a little bit more. Those who 'look at' themselves in the mirror, observe themselves carefully. They study their face in details, and becomes familiar with their features. In the same way, those who hear the Word do so attentively and at length, in order to understand what they hear, to understand and know the will of God. Now I don't want to belittle such a process, for even reaching such an understanding is a tall task.

Anselm of Canterbury, the noted 11th century Catholic theologian, was the first to formulate the well-known phrase 'faith seeking understanding', or "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand". To Anselm, the process to 'understand' God is akin to sanctification—a life-long process with twist and turns along the way.

But let us suppose you do come to such an understanding, imperfect and incomplete as it may be. Upon coming to this understanding of the perfectly good will of God for you, then proceed to sit on it, doing nothing. It would be, as James further illustrates in verse 24, "*for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.*" For them, it is 'out of sight, out of mind'.

This is ludicrous, some might say, but no less ludicrous than the followers of Jesus who listen carefully to God's truth and do not put into practice what they have heard, what the Lord commanded. Hearing and listening to truth is not an end in itself, any more than gazing at one's face in a mirror (or a pool of darken water) is an end in itself. The purpose of listening to the truth of Christ is to act upon it—be doers of the Word.

Here is a theological truth that I think we could all appreciate: Theoretical knowledge of spiritual truth is inseparably tied to experience. Experience helps us to refine and advance the knowledge we hear, so we would not be trapped like Narcissus, falling in love with himself, forming a perfect echo chamber with himself, never to break free.

Social media is supposed to be a wonderful tool, allowing us to reach out to many others, in dialogue with others. However, one must be mindful of actively blocking views of others whom we find disagreeable. Perhaps an even more sinister problem arises out of the hidden algorithm of these media platforms (trade secrets for most companies) that channel the views of those similar to oneself, to oneself. Overtime, it creates perfectly aligned echo chambers where the conservatives only talk to other conservatives, progressives only talk to fellow progressives, and the conspiracy theories

enthusiasts are off to their own bubble, happily dialoguing amongst themselves. A person, a group or a society that finds themselves ensnared in such a divisive way, is no different than Narcissus falling in love with himself, unable to look away.

Doers of the Word are different. For they are first and foremost the recipients of the Living Word of God, in Christ Jesus, and the recipients of the inspired words of God in the Holy Scripture. Doers of the word, according to James, are active people: they give generously (v.17); they are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger (v.19); they actively rid themselves of all sordidness and wickedness (v.21); they care for orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself unstained by the world (v.27). In short, as verse 25 summarizes, *“doers of the Word will be blessed in their doing.”*

Actions do speak louder than words, yet one must be mindful to avoid the pitfall of works righteousness—that is a form of self-righteousness that believes that our salvation can be earned and/or sustained by doing good works.

As a Presbyterian minister, being part of the Reformed tradition, any reflection on the Letter of James, particularly on doing good works, would be incomplete without mentioning Martin Luther. It is unavoidable to mention Luther’s displeasure over the epistle’s inclusion in the biblical canon, questioning its authenticity, its apostolic lineage, even calling it “an epistle of straw”. For to Luther, James’s insistence on doing good works is in direct contradiction to the Apostle Paul’s assertion in Galatians 2:16, that *“a person is justified not by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.”*

However, I think given the context of his time, that is how Luther suffered under works righteousness as a monk, and how he protested against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther’s view on James may have been a bit skewed. For the Letter of James does not teach works righteousness, rather to James, faith and works are the two sides of the same coin.

The key to understand this integration of faith and works lies in James’s use of the the word ‘hearer’. For ‘hearer’ is an allusion to the *Shema*, a foundational verse of the Hebrew Scripture, of Deuteronomy 6: *“Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”*

It is a passage, a doctrinal stance that any law-abiding Jews or even Christian Jews would understand, and hold dear. The word '*shema*' in the Hebrew lexicon, is typically translated as 'to hear'. But it carries a second, equally important meaning: that is 'to obey'.

This double meaning is no stranger to us, even in the English language. Take for example, when I ask my kids to 'listen to me', I don't merely mean for them to simply hear me. My hope is that the words they hear would not travel from the left ear and out the right, but would instead take root in their mind, their hearts, and would act accordingly. In essence, I hope they would listen and obey what I have asked them to do.

So to James, doing the Word is a natural extension of hearing and obeying the Word, that works arise as a natural outgrowth of genuine faith, like I said before, the two sides of the same coin.

Allow me to conclude my theological reflection with this following story: A man dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay" the man says, "I attended church every Sunday" "

That's good, says St. Peter, " that's worth two points"

"Two points only?" he says.

Well, I gave 10% of all my earnings to the church"

"Well, let's see," answers Peter, "that's worth another 2 points.

Did you do anything else?"

"Two points? Gosh. How about this:

I started a soup kitchen in my city  
and worked in a shelter for homeless people."

"Fantastic, that's certainly worth a point, " says St. Peter.

"hmmm...", the man says, "I was married to the same woman  
for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points!"

"THREE POINTS!!" the man cries,

"At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

"Come on in, by the grace of God!"

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**