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Pentecost 17 B – September 19, 2021

“Yielding to Spiritual Maturity”

Read: James 2: 1 - 17/Memorize: James 2: 18 b

Peter Drucker, is a well-known author and leader in church and business leadership. He was asked to comment about leadership. He said, “Leadership is not magnetic personality. That can just as well be a glib tongue. It is not making friends and influencing people; that can be flattery. Leadership is lifting a person’s vision to higher sights, the raising of a person’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.”

James is delivering a similar message. Faith in Jesus calls us to the highest standard, putting it into action. You might want to watch the parking lot, more that the worship service for evidence of faith in people.

A couple went to a community church for a while. One morning, as they were leaving, they stopped to help jumpstart another worshipper’s car. Unfortunately, they were blocking the traffic flow. As the shouting, taunts and horn blowing increased they decided, “We don’t want to come here anymore if that’s the way these church people act.”

Perhaps you’ve heard this question: “If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Jesus gives us a very simple self-evaluation tool: “You will know them by their fruits. Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.” If we take Jesus at His Word, the evidence of faith is pious devotion, translated into action.

Is your talk about serving or generosity all you do or do you serve joyfully and give generously? Are you only polite to those you feel have the ability to help you get ahead? How do you treat others?

A George Gallop poll found that more than half of Americans who are experiencing grief turn to God, prayer and scripture for comfort. Isn’t that wonderful? It gets even

better, 94% of those who reported that, say they are highly effective at relieving their grief.

If people in need find relief in those disciplines, what would happen if we used them as fervently for inner peace, patience, compassion, understanding and tolerance? People watch actions, more than words. Let us pray that as they watch us they might be thinking, “I want to be like him or her. I want to live like she or he does.”

Many of you remember my mother-in-law, Marion. She was still driving at 95. She’d often say to us, “I have to give some of the old ladies a ride tomorrow.” We used to laugh about it, but what a wonderful perception of God’s call. She was serving Him. One 5 year study reported that people who help others were 60% less likely to die during the course of the study, compared to those who chose not to help.

Peter Gomes, a former minister of Memorial Church at Harvard University, told the story of Ernest Gordon, the former dean of the chapel at Princeton, who was captured on the River Kwai during WWII. While in a Japanese prison camp, Gordon and his fellow British captives, were initially very religious, reading Bibles, praying and singing hymns. They expected God would reward them and fortify their faith by freeing them or, at least, mitigating their captivity.

When that didn’t happen, they became angry and disillusioned. They abandoned much of the pious zeal and outward display of piety. They did not, however, lose their interest in caring for one another. As their attention turned to each other’s needs, they began to find their faith strengthened and renewed. Their religious practice became focused more on what they were doing for others, rather than on self or outward religious practices. Their compassion brought renewed inner strength and faith.

James Bender, in his book, *How to Talk Well*, relates the story of a farmer who grew award winning corn. Each year, he entered his corn into the State Fair, where it won blue ribbons. A news reporter interviewed him and learned something surprising. This farmer shared his seed corn with his neighbors. He asked him, “How can you afford to share your best seed corn with your neighbors when they’re entering corn in the same competition with yours each year?”

The farmer said to him, “Perhaps you didn’t know this but wind picks up pollen from the ripening corn all around my farm, and it swirls it from field to field. If my

neighbor's grow inferior corn, cross pollination will steadily degrade the quality of my corn. If I am to grow good corn I must help my neighbors grow good corn, also.

I believe the same is true of people. If we are looking for peace, we will share peace in our homes and work places. If we are looking for friends, we will share friendship in our relationships. If we are looking for prosperity and wellbeing, we will share it with those around us. If we want to grow love, we will share love with our neighbors. Our personal welfare is bound up with the welfare of those around us.

Jesus was once asked, "Who is my neighbor?" In response, He told the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate it. Your neighbor is the person in need. Don't let the appearance of wealth fool you into thinking a person has no needs. We all feel the same hurts, griefs and sadness's in life.

James gets into an issue: How are we treating people, especially the poor? They often face more hurdles because of their lack of resources. As Christians, we'd like to think that we act differently, and many times we do, which is never the problem.

Yet, I suspect we also remember times when we fail to act differently. We are all influenced by the world that says power and wealth are most important. We fall prey to the temptation to treat people according to how much we think they can do for us. Frequently, those who appear to be able to do more, get better treatment. Some people spend their lives climbing the ladder to the top, only to find out it was against the wrong wall.

Our spiritual maturity begins with the realization that we are all imperfect. As Martin Luther says, "We are all sinners." Scripture instructs us to beware of the pride and conceit that accompanies riches or adoration of the body or anything else. It opens our eyes to see beauty in our differences. Prejudice is basically the inability to accept that which is different from oneself. It is often based on color, but other issues can also divide us.

How foolish is it to use outward appearance to determine who or what a person is? God made us each unique and different. One of the reasons for God's variety is to teach us to be accepting and caring of one another.

We are fortunate to hear from James, who was the brother of our Lord Jesus. He was the leader of the Jewish home church and he wrote this letter to them, but also to you and me. We need these teachings, because we are all influenced by our culture. We

are prone to making judgements about people. There's a very simple word for that: sin. It goes against everything that Jesus taught us.

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus said "Love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your body." Quickly he continued, "The second is like unto it, love your neighbor as you love yourself." Jesus says the love of God and neighbor is the fulfillment of God's law. Our obedience doesn't earn us entry into heaven. It reflects our love and respect for Our Father.

Perhaps Luther's great reaction to the book of James was based on his experience with the church. It had taught him that the only way to salvation was by works. He needed to appease God by his acts of obedience. When he found he could not and that it was grace that saved him, he found the greatest gift of his life. He wanted all people to enjoy it.

God wants us to also have that gift. That's why He shared His grace through Jesus. Just as God reveals His grace in Jesus, He reveals His desire for our obedience through Jesus' life. Remember, it was Jesus "who was obedient unto death, even death on the cross..." so that we might receive His grace and live with Him forever. Let us always celebrate that gift.