



## northminster presbyterian church

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roswell, georgia 30076

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**SCRIPTURE:** James 1:17-27 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

**SERMON:** How's Your Halo? (Rev. Brent Anderson)

### INTRODUCTION

Aiming not to sin. Jerry Bridges in his book *The Pursuit of Holiness* wrote that a Christian's objective regarding holiness was not to sin. As he read scripture one day, he became disturbed that in his own life, his real aim was not "to not sin at all", but rather his goal was to not sin "very much". He quickly realized how foolish this sounded. He said to himself, "No soldier going into battle makes it his aim to not get hit very much. A soldier's goal is to not get hit at all. Therefore, how can I, in my Christian life, make it my aim to *not get hit very much*?"

What he realized was that God was calling him to a *deeper level of commitment to holiness* than he had ever previously been willing to make. And even as he realized this, it still was very difficult for him to say to God, "Yes, Lord, from this point on, I will make it my aim not to sin. From here on in, I will try to never sin again."

Think about what that would mean for your life if you made it your aim not to sin "at all"... rather than not to sin "very much".

### GOING A LITTLE OVERBOARD

It reminds me of the story of a man who went to his doctor with a splitting headache. The doctor said, "Okay, let's see here... Do you smoke?" "No, not at all." "Well then, do you drink?" "No. I never touch the stuff." "Do you lie?" "No." "Cheat?" "No." "Steal?" "No." "Do you cheat on your wife or mess around with women?" "No, never." "Ahh! Well! Is it a sharp, shooting pain that you're feeling?" "Why yes, it is. What is it, doctor?" "It's your halo!" the doctor replied. "It's on too tight."

The great Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, wrote that many people think of religion as a good thing; like health insurance and regular exercise, but not "*something to go overboard about*."

Here's a question, "Is aiming not to sin a good thing or is it going a little overboard?"

My answer might surprise you. I would argue that although aiming not to sin is noble, there is something better we can focus our attention on. And I say this even in light of our New Testament lesson from James that talks about "ridding ourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness" and keeping ourselves "unstained from the world"?

Here's why. As Presbyterians, we believe that our salvation is entirely a gift of grace from God. We believe that we can't earn our salvation by doing good works; that we don't deserve our salvation; that God's gift of life to us, eternal life, is completely unmerited. We also believe that in this lifetime, we will never achieve perfection; that we are and will always remain at the same time both sinner and saint; that our faith will always be twinged with doubt; that God's blessings are the result of God's grace and not our performance.

Unfortunately, although we believe this, we tend not to live like we do. We tend to forget that there is nothing we can do to earn God's love.

We tend to carry the saying "*There's no such thing as a free lunch*" into our relationship with God and we somehow move from living in God's love and grace, to "paying our own way".

It's funny, when we first respond to God's love and grace in our lives, when we first know that we are not a Christian, we are fully aware of the abundance of God's grace. But then as we start living the Christian life, we tend to become a little fearful and stressed.

Think about your own life of faith:

- *Do you suffer from anxiety in your Christian life because you feel as if you're running on a personal performance treadmill?*
- *Have you ever fallen flat on your face spiritually - and were afraid that perhaps because you had betrayed God, God would betray you?*
- *Have you ever felt that you were better off before you responded to God's work in your life and became a Christian - because before, grace was bountiful and you didn't have to be so stressed out about doing the right thing, following the right rules, or living up to someone else's expectations?*
- *Have you ever felt so guilty about your spiritual life, that you have a deep rooted fear that if you were brought before God today, you would hear God say, "This person honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."*

To this, Jesus said "I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). So obviously there has to be a better way.

If we think we must earn God's favor by our obedience, or if we fear we may forfeit God's favor by our disobedience, it's hard to live in the freedom that Christ came to give us. Only by living under the grace of God are we free to serve out of *love* rather than *duty*, free to live in *joyful obedience*; a loving, thankful response to God, rather than *dutiful service*.

Jesus invites us to a different way of life. He invites us to trust that underneath our anxious striving, beneath our worry and our life-management strategies, *there is the reality of God's love*: a boundless, shameless love that is present and available to us at every moment. Only when we are thoroughly convinced that the Christian life is entirely of grace are we able to serve God out of a grateful and loving heart.

And this is where I have a problem with making "aiming not to sin" your goal. I don't think we should be focusing our attention on ourselves or on our sins as much as we should be focusing our attention on God and God's love as shown through Jesus Christ.

Paul in Galatians, wrote "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). Notice carefully that Paul did not say that the desires of the flesh will go away. Nor did he say we need to clean up the flesh before we can walk in the spirit. What he did say was that not fulfilling the desires of the flesh is a result, a by-product, of walking in the Spirit.

### PORTA-CRIB PUPPY

It's like a baby in a portable crib, focusing her attention on her favorite stuffed animal. Let's pretend the baby is my daughter Miriam and that she loves her teddy bear – that could be used to represent sin. She's attached to that bear. She holds on to that bear for dear life, and if anyone tries to take it away, she screams at the top of her lungs!

How in the world can you get the baby to let go of her bear?

It's simple. If our family was in a situation where we could care for a dog, you would just drop a puppy into the portable crib and watch what happens. She would naturally drop that bear and reach for the puppy; the thing that shows life and love and warmth and energy. Just imagine, it's in there, jumping around, licking her face.... the puppy is alive! And after experiencing the puppy, what happens to that bear? It's as good as gone.

This is what Jesus wants us to experience in our relationship with him. This is what the Christian life is about; falling in love with God - falling in love with the God who wants our attention and love as much as that puppy does.

The Christian faith isn't about seeking perfection. Jesus said, "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17). That's the real goal of the Christian life; *knowing God, knowing Christ*.

We often think that God calls us to obedience and service. But first and foremost, God wants us to know him. Our call is to him.

There is a huge difference between living out your faith focused on “performing” and living out your faith *enjoying* the God who loves and adores you.

Look at marriages! In a marriage, do you want your spouse to make plans for Valentines Day out of a sense of duty? No, you want them to make those plans because they love you. Do you want your spouse to buy you an anniversary gift because they know that if they don't, they'll get in trouble? No. It's the thought and the love behind the gift that counts.

So why do we think we can experience the best that God has to offer us when we are living with these same inferior motives?

### THE GRACE OF GOD IN JAMES

The letter of James gets a bad rap from protestants, especially after Martin Luther called it “an epistle of straw”. His concern was that it focused so much on our effort, that it short-changed the grace of God. But a careful reading of this passage from James shows that at the foundation of everything that he says about what we should do and how we should live, there is the prior love of God at work. Even in this passage from James, we discover that God always loves us first and then awaits our response.

Before talking about how we are the first-fruits of God's creation, James talks about how “all giving and every perfect gift” come from the father above and how God gives us “new birth.” God's love and work precedes our actions and effort.

Before talking about how we should be doers of the word and not merely hearers, James talks about God “implanting the word within us” and how this word has the power to save our souls. God's love and work precedes our actions and effort.

James always highlights the prior work of God *before* talking about our response through action.

Does your Christian life feel like a lifeless marriage? Are you unsure of how to get your life and your faith back on track?

No matter what the reason for your discontent, whether it's because you've been busy or lazy or you've been striving too hard, simply consider this: God is here! God is here among us! God is present, wagging God's tail among us, wanting you to know and experience his love; wanting to share his life with you. God wants you to join him through life and simply to return some of the love and joy he wants to share with you. It's that simple.

Open yourself up to God's presence. When you come to church, expect to meet God here. When you read scripture, look for what God is trying to show you about himself, listen for what God is trying to teach you about yourself, feel what God is trying to teach you about his love for you. And allow all these things to enter in and transform you from the inside out.

### WHAT WE WANT FOR OUR YOUTH

At our church's last session meeting, I led a devotion in which I asked the session to look at a ball of clay and I said, “This is a young person. In many ways it is similar to a young person. And in many ways it is different from a young person.” The reason I did the exercise was because I wanted them to think about how important it is the way we mold and shape them. I wanted our session to see how important it is that we intentionally model the Christian faith before our young people. Because, whether we know it or not, they are watching us. They are watching and learning from the ways we live out our faith.

And after talking about the importance of having faithful adults who are willing to share their lives and live out their faith before our young people, I had the session write down what they hoped would be the end result of this ministry; what they hoped would be accomplished by our youth ministry. They came up with a lot of good answers. Let me read you a couple of them.

- My hope is that they will know how much they are loved.
- That they'll have a sense of God's joy and peace even in hard times.

- That they'll know that they have a community of faith that will carry them and that they can turn to and fall back on.
- That they will live lives of love.
- That they will know God is as close as their heartbeat, offering strength and comfort when they need it, and that they'll realize they're not alone, that Jesus is with them.
- That they'll stand up for justice and be a beacon of hope and love in the world.
- That they will have a faith that will last and will help them to know when the culture is trying to use or exploit them.

I share these hopes. But here is what I hope most of all. I hope that our young people will take the time to cultivate their relationship with God in such a way that they will know that they belong to God, that they are loved by God and that God isn't concerned about their performance, because God knows that their performance and their morality will be a natural by-product of their relationship with him. And my hope for this congregation is that we will be the kind of people who will continually point them back to God, who will name and claim and bring them back into the presence of a loving God, *where they can find true life, true love and true freedom.* **Amen.**

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### **James 1:17-27**

17Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. 19You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21Therefore 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. 22But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25But 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. 26If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27Religion 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.

### **Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

1Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." 14Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." 21For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."