

James
Look in the Mirror! (Part 3)
James 1:19-27
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For our guests, let me tell you that you've come this morning and find us in the midst of a study that we've begun in the wonderful letter of James to the tribes that were scattered as a result of the persecution in Jerusalem. I invite you to take your Bibles and turn to James 1, where we'll continue our study of this great letter.

It was three years ago that New Orleans' leading newspaper *The Times Picquein* in a methodical and compelling way reported that the very existence of southern Louisiana's leading city and hundreds of thousands of lives were at risk by exactly the events that occurred this week. *The Times Picquein* in fact won numerous awards for John McQuade and Mark Schlefstein's five-part series: Five days dedicated to the disaster that we have seen unfold before our eyes this week. The second part of the series, the second of the five articles, began with these now haunting words.

"It's a matter of when, not if. Eventually a major hurricane will hit New Orleans head on instead of just being a close call. It's happened before, and it'll happen again." [It was in that installment of the articles, the second, that McQuade and Schlefstein reported that:] "A major hurricane could decimate the region, but flooding even from a moderate storm could kill thousands. It's just a matter of time. They went on to say evacuation is the most certain route to safety, but it may be a nightmare. And a hundred thousand without transportation will be left behind. People left behind in an evacuation will be struggling to survive. Some will be housed at the Super Dome, the designated shelter in New Orleans for people too sick or infirmed to leave the city. Others will end up in last minute emergency refuges that will offer minimal safety. But many will simply be on their own. Thousands will drown while trapped in homes or cars by rising waters. Others will be washed away or crushed by debris. Survivors will end up trapped on roofs in buildings or on high grounds surrounded by water with no means of escape and little food or fresh water perhaps for several days. Hundreds of thousands would be left homeless, and it would take months to dry out the area

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and begin to make it livable. But there wouldn't be much for residents to come home to."

Remember those words were not written this week. They were written three years ago. After the last survivor is rescued, after the dead are buried, after the city is dried, there'll be plenty of time for assigning blame. The usual suspects will be rounded up. Some will say finances was the issue. Others will say it's bureaucracy; it's politics. And there'll be a host of other excuses offered. But in the end, both government officials at every level and New Orleans' influential citizens will bear the weight of the responsibility and the weight of their own consciences for having failed to act on what McQuade and Schlestein wrote. Perhaps you heard about these articles this week and your reaction perhaps was the same as mine. How could they not take reasonable preventative measures? Why wasn't there a workable plan if this was a certain event.

But you know as we think about that, and as we point our fingers of blame around many in different directions, I was reminded of the sad fact that many who claim to be Christians are equally slow to act on what has been written for us in the eternal Word of God. Churches are full of people who hear the Word taught and perhaps who read it for themselves, but they read it with as much response as all those who read those articles in *The Times Picquein*. They read the Bible like they read a newspaper, simply out of curiosity or perhaps for information. But that's not how we're supposed to respond to the Word of God. James tells us how in this first chapter of his letter. We're studying the paragraph that begins in verse 19 of Chapter 1 and runs down through the end of the chapter. Let me read this paragraph for you. You follow along as I read James 1:19,

This you know my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, *and* slow to anger. For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness in humility receive the word implanted which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But the one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.

That entire paragraph teaches one great spiritual reality. And it's this. You can accurately determine the legitimacy of your faith, whether or not you truly belong to Christ and the maturity of your faith by your response to the Scripture. James, in this paragraph, identifies for us three qualities that should characterize every believer's response to the Scripture. We've already seen the first. Several weeks ago, we looked at verses 19 to 21. In those verses we discovered that a believer must have a teachable heart. Essentially in that part of the paragraph James says stop talking. Stop putting forth your own ideas and start listening to the Word of God. Have a teachable heart.

But there's another quality that we began to look at last week, a second quality that should characterize our relationship to Scripture. Not only a teachable heart but a consistent obedience, a consistent obedience. In verses 22 to 25, here he says stop merely listening. He's already told us to stop talking and listen to the Word of God. In this passage, he says stop merely listening and start doing. Start obeying. Notice the command in verse 22, the command that consists of obedience. He says prove yourselves doers of the Word and not merely hearers who delude themselves. We looked at this verse last Sunday. The Word here refers to both the Old Testament and the new revelation that came from Christ and His Apostles. And he says, of that Word we all are to be doers. That is, we are to carry out what is commanded.

Now, don't misunderstand James. Some people read this passage and think this means they should just be energetically, phrenetically, busy doing something. The kind of doing that James is talking about here is not phrenetic activity, even spiritual activities, even ministry activities. He's specifically talking about doing what the Word commands. Be a doer in that sense.

Let me give you an example. Before we started studying the epistle of James, we took ten weeks to look at what the Bible teaches about marriage and family. And as all of us studied, as I studied it, and as I taught you and then as you heard it, all of us compared ourselves against the biblical standard, and I think without exception, all of us realized that there were places we fall short of the biblical standard in our marriages, in our relationships, in how we relate to each other. Let me ask you. Are you doing what you learned? Are you continuing to try to put those

commands into practice? That's what James is saying. Become a doer of the Word, of what you learned in the Word.

By using the noun "doer" James means that we are to be known for, we are to be characterized by one who consistently practices the Word. Be doers and not merely hearers. By the way, the word merely is the key word in that next phrase. He says don't be only hearers. Hearing is important, taking in the Word of God is important but don't let it stop there, is what he says. Don't be only hearers. When Jerome translated this Greek word into Latin, he used the Latin word "auditor", because in the First Century this Greek word translated hearer was often used to describe those who attended a lecture but who were not disciples of the one giving the lecture, so they weren't responsible to learn or to practice; they just listened. Without any sense of responsibility.

If you've been in college, you understand what this is like. I remember back when I was in school, there were always people in every class who were auditing that class. Now let's just be honest, it was pretty hard not to envy those people, because you're sitting there feverishly taking notes with the knowledge that you're going to have to go back to your room and spend hours writing a paper or preparing and studying for a test to take a test and these people they just came to listen. They showed up when they wanted to show up; they didn't have to do any of the work; they just got to listen.

James says don't even think for a moment that you can audit the Word of God. And the reason this is so important at the end of verse 22, is because there's a serious danger. If you're merely an auditor of God's Word, and all you do is listen, then you are deluding yourself. If you only listen to the Word but aren't actively involved in putting it into practice in your own life, then you have deceived yourself about your salvation; you have deceived yourself about your true spiritual condition. There's an old Scottish saying that says: "There are sermon tasters who have never tasted the grace of God." So, James wants to drive this home, to drive this point home, and to further stress the importance of a consistent obedience in the lives of all true believers, James goes to an illustration.

In verse 23, notice the illustration he gives, about the hearer only. He says for if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror. Mirrors are a part of our lives. In fact, we probably have too many mirrors. Everywhere we go we find ourselves you know adjusting the tie, looking at ourselves this way or that. We have mirrors everywhere in our lives, in our cars, in our homes, in our businesses. They're

everywhere. Mirrors made of glass coated with quicksilver like you and I have essentially today were not invented until the Thirteenth Century. In fact, mirrors made out of glass were not known until late in Roman times. In the ancient world, mirrors were made of metal, sometimes copper, silver, and if you were really rich, gold. But for most people they were made out of polished bronze. Some were simply round, a mere circle that you held and looked at yourself. Others, they've discovered in archeology, were made with handles so you could hold it and look at yourself. Others were made with pedestals so you could sit on a piece of furniture, and you could examine yourself. But the metal, the bronze, would be highly polished and frankly would give an adequate reflection of your appearance. James says the one who merely listens to Scripture is like this; he's like someone who looks literally at the face of his birth, or at his natural face in a mirror. The face you were born with.

Some of us want to get away from that. You know like the guys that I know my face ain't no star, but I don't mind it for I'm behind it; it's the folks in front get the jar. You know, there's a sense in which we understand that. But it's like somebody who looks at the face of his birth, or his natural face, the face God gave him in a mirror. Now there's the illustration; what's the point. The point comes in verse 24. For once he has looked at himself and gone away he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. This is how a person looking in a real mirror at his real physical reflection, resembles someone who looks at himself in a reflection in God's Word, but remains a hearer only and does nothing about it. The emphasis here is on the fact that he goes away and immediately forgets what he saw. You see, the point is that the impression left by looking at himself in the mirror was only momentary. It was temporarily absorbing, but it produced no practical results; it was essentially useless. This happens to us.

Let me give you an illustration from every day life. How many of you have awakened in the morning, looked at yourself in the mirror, and as you looked carefully, once your eyes sort of opened a bit, you realized that there in clear view on your face was a large flaming red pimple. Now, you make a mental note. Note to self. Be sure to treat this or to cover it up before I go out in public. But you get distracted, you forget. Later that morning, you go to the restroom, perhaps at the office, or at the place of business, and you discover to your great dismay that you forgot to care for that spot. By then of course, it's only grown bigger and more noticeable, and you've got to try to alleviate the situation.

Now, this is James' point. If you're only a hearer of God's Word, it's like looking in the mirror of Scripture, and you get a good look at yourself and you see the changes you need to make. But then you go away, and you forget until the next time you look in the mirror of the Word the

changes that you needed to make. That's what James is saying. And when you do this, it becomes a habit. In fact, the verb tense of gone away in verse 24, implies that this has become this person's continual reaction to the Word. This is how they act. They look in the Word, they go, they go, that's California, that was, that was a flashback from the past. They say, they speak like that in California. They look in the mirror of the Word and they say, there are changes I need to make; I see this, I see this in my life; I see the reflection of my real self and I don't like it; I need to make changes, and then they walk away from the mirror of the Word, and because they don't immediately make effort to change they forget what they looked like; they forget about the changes that need to be made until they gather again on the Lord's Day, and they hear themselves described again. They see themselves reflected in the Word of God again.

There's an amazing picture of this spiritual reality back in the book of Ezekiel. Turn to Ezekiel's prophecy for a moment. Ezekiel 33. Of course, the prophet Ezekiel ministered during the period, during the period of the exile, the Babylonian exile. And in Ezekiel 33:30, he speaks about the exile, those who have faced the worst of circumstances, now found their city destroyed and find themselves in captivity, in the empire of Babylon. Listen to what the Lord says to Ezekiel. Ezekiel 33:30,

“But as for you son of man, your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another, each to his brother, saying come now and hear what the message is which comes forth from the LORD. They come to you as people come and sit before you *as* My people and hear your words, but they do not do them, for they do the lustful desires *expressed* by their mouth, *and* their heart goes after their gain. [Here are people who say to each other in captivity, have you heard what Ezekiel is saying? Let's go listen to Ezekiel. He's got a message from God. Let's go hear him, and they go and they hear, but they don't do. In fact, look at the next verse that describes their whole approach to the Word of God.] Verse 32, Behold, you are to them, like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument. For they hear your words, but they do not practice them.”

God's saying they're spectators. It's as if you have a beautiful voice, and they love to hear you, they love to hear you speak; and they love the lyrics of the song, and they leave saying, wasn't that a beautiful song. Wasn't that a wonderful message? And they make absolutely no change. They're mere hearers. That's what a mere hearer is like. It's like someone who looks in a mirror and then walks away and forgets what he saw and the changes he needs to make until he sees

himself in the mirror again. In verse 25, back in James 1:25, James turns to examine the doer in detail. He's been looking at the hearer only, the mere hearer, and now he turns to the doer. Verse 25. The one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer, but an effectual doer; this man will be blessed in what he does. Here James leaves the illustration and he gets to the point of the comparison that he is making. But before we look at the point of the comparison, notice how James describes the Word of God in this verse. He calls it the perfect law. Perfect in the sense that finding a better one would be impossible. Reminds you of Psalm 19:7, the law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul. Or Paul in Romans 7:12, the law is holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. But he also calls it the law of liberty. In other words, when you and I obey this law, we don't feel bound by it. We don't feel restricted by it. We feel free. We feel at liberty. This message is found throughout the Scripture.

I love Psalm 119:45. The psalmist says I will walk at liberty; literally in the Hebrew, it says, I will walk in a wide place, for I seek your precepts. The law of God is not restrictive; it's freeing. But it's only freeing for those who understand that it's perfect, who understand its value. One commentator puts it this way, it is when the law is seen to be perfect, that it is found to be the law of liberty. So long as the law is not seen in the beauty of its perfections, it is not loved. And men either disobey it or obey it by constraint and unwillingly. But when its perfection is recognized, men long to conform to it and they obey not because they must, but because they choose. James further discusses this law of liberty in Chapter 2 beginning in verse 8 through 2:13. We'll look at that in detail in a few weeks or months, maybe. There he calls it the royal law, the royal law. It's a new law. It's Jesus' new perfect exegesis of the moral law of God. It's Jesus saying here's the law condensed into two very simple principles: love God with your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself.

As James Mu says, "God's law does not refer to the law of Moses as such, but to the law of Moses as interpreted and supplemented by Christ." What Paul says in Galatians 6:2 is the law of Christ. But that brings us to the crucial question. What is the point of James' comparison between these two types of professing Christians, the hearer only and the doer. What's the point? What is the key difference between these people?

Now there are several conflicting points of view about this illustration. A few people think that the key to unlocking these few verses is what these two people are looking at. These people say well the hearer is looking at his face, and the doer is looking at the perfect law. That's one view of this passage. It's a matter of what they're looking at. They're looking at different things.

Another view says that no they're both looking at the same thing, but the main distinction is how they look at it. These people are quick to point out that there are two different Greek words here for look. One that's used for the hearer and one that's used for the doer. So, they say, the hearer, you see, just sort of glances at the word of God in passing and moves on. And the doer he really intently, intently gazes into the Word. A third group thinks that the only distinction in this passage is the results. The doer obeys and the hearer only doesn't obey.

Now, let's think about those views for a moment. Take the first one, that the key is what they are looking at; they're looking at different things. There is no difference in this passage in what they are looking at. Both the hearer and the doer are looking into the Word of God. That's James' whole point. One obeys when he hears, and the other doesn't obey when he hears, but both are hearing the same words. So, there's no difference in what they are looking at. They are both looking at the Word of God. Take the second view. It's how they look. Well, I hate to tell you this, but there's no obvious difference between they look or examine the Scripture. It's true, there're two different Greek words here used for looking. But if you really study these Greek words, one, the one that's used of the listener, does not have the idea of a sort of superficial glance, and, in fact, is usually translated consider carefully, contemplate. If you compare the two words for looking, it's actually the word used of the listener that describes more careful observation than the word that is used for the doer. But, in reality, the two words are synonyms. They're similar. So, that's not the point of the passage. It's not what they are looking at, they are both looking at the Word of God. It's not how they're looking, they are both examining carefully the Word of God.

The third view is closer to the truth. The key difference is that the hearer doesn't practice the Word of God and the doer does. But why is that? What's the real key? What makes the difference between somebody who carefully contemplates the Word of God and does it, and somebody who carefully contemplates the Word of God and doesn't? Look again at what James stresses about these two people. Verse 24, the mere hearer quickly goes away and forgets. And verse 25, the doer abides and is therefore not forgetful. That means the key to doing the Word is locked up in the Greek word translated "abides" in verse 25. It's the opposite of "gone away" in verse 24.

Now, the Greek word "abides" literally means "to remain with or decide, to continue near". Its most secular use in the First Century was to refer to a slave who remained with his master. So, in this context, we could say the doer remains beside the word as its servant. James Hebert says the doer bent over the mirror and gripped by what he saw, he continued looking and obeying its

precepts. This feature marks his crucial difference to the first man. He was abiding in the Word. Now when you take the sweep of Scripture into account, I believe that what James is referring to by abiding in the Word, is the skill of biblical meditation. James remember was absolutely engulfed in the Old Testament and in the teaching of Christ. There are many passages we could look at, but I want to turn to one that's, I think, the most clear on this issue.

Turn to Joshua 1, Joshua 1. Of course, at the end of Deuteronomy Moses the man of God has died. Joshua, his assistant, is now going to be given the responsibility for the nation. Joshua is no young man here; he's probably about 90 years old, given this responsibility to lead two million Israelites into the land and to conquer it. And so, God comes to Joshua to give him some very specific encouragement and direction. And He says this to him in verse 8 of Joshua 1. This book of the law, the revelation that I gave Moses, shall not depart from your mouth. Now that could have a reference to teaching the law. In other words, you're to teach the people of God, but in context that doesn't make sense. This is probably a reference to the importance of Joshua reading the law. In the ancient world, they didn't read to themselves they typically read out loud. It made for quite the nightmare at the public library down the block. But that's how they read. So, this is probably a reference to their reading. He's saying, Joshua, the revealed Word that you've received you are to constantly read. It shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night. So that for the purpose that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.

Now notice at the beginning of the verse you have reading, at the end of the verse you have doing. What is the bridge between knowing the word, or reading and accumulating information and doing it. Look again at verse 8. You shall meditate on it day and night. There's the bridge between knowing and doing. Abiding in the word through meditation. Reminds me of Psalm 1:2. The righteous person is described as someone who meditates in the law of the Lord, day and night. Acts 2:42, the early church at Jerusalem says they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching; continually devoting themselves to it. Colossians 3:16, Paul says let the word of Christ richly dwell within you; abide in you; meditate on it. First John 2:24, As for you let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning.

So, let's go back to what James is saying. The one who looks intently into the perfect law of liberty is the one who reads, hears, takes in the Word of God. The one who abides in it, remains or continues in it, is the one who doesn't stop with taking it in, but who meditates on, who thinks about it, who seeks to apply it. Meditate, to abide in the Word of God. Notice the end of verse 25. That one doesn't become literally a hearer of forgetfulness, but a doer of work. You don't

forget when your mind is saturated with the Word of God. I love the illustration of the cow who eats the grass and then, sits down somewhere under the cool tree to bring that grass back up to ruminate on it, to digest it a little more, that's meditation.

But I love even better the illustration of a teacup. Imagine for a moment that the hot water is you, the teabag is the Word of God. When we read and study the Word of God it's like taking that teabag and dipping it into the water, and then pulling it out. That's the person who merely hears. The water's only slightly tinted in color, and it's pitiful to drink. Meditation is putting the teabag into the water and letting it steep. Letting it saturate your mind, coming up with ways to do it, coming up with ways to apply it to your practical life. If you do that, you become a doer of work. A doer of work is someone who simply puts into practice what the Scripture demands.

Now notice the emphasis here is not on what he does, but on what he has become. He has become a consistent doer of Scripture. John Calvin writes we must observe that the knowledge of God which we're invited to cultivate is not that which resting satisfied with empty speculation only flutters in the brain, but a knowledge which will prove substantial and fruitful whenever it is duly perceived and rooted in the heart. As James says, when you become a doer of work, the end of verse 25, this man will be blessed in what he does. Blessed of course conjures up the first verse of the Psalms. Blessed is the righteous man who doesn't do these things and who lives in the word of God. Psalm 19:11, in keeping of Your commands there is great reward. Psalm 119:2. How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart.

Or the words of our Lord in John 13:17 if you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. Blessed both now in our doing and in the future at the return of Christ. You know what James is saying here? This is a test of the genuineness of our claim to belong to Jesus Christ. Do we respond to Scripture with a consistent obedience? Notice, I didn't say a perfect obedience, but a pattern of obedience. If there's not a pattern of obedience in your life, then your claim to be a Christian is a lie. You have deluded yourself. You have deceived yourself. There's also some very practical help here in verse 25. For us who want to respond properly to the Word of God.

Last time we looked at several faulty approaches to the Word. The emotional approach where you just sort of look to have your emotions propped up. Or the mystical approach where you think God actually speaks to you out of the Scripture in a way that has nothing to do with the original meaning of the words. There are a number of others that we talked about. So, what is the proper approach. Well James gives it to us in verse 25. Look at it.

Here's how you should approach the Scripture. Here's the road map. Stop number one. Look intently. That means read, study carefully. We're not talking about superficial devotional reading where you pull your Bible out for four minutes and check it off the box; you've done it for the day. We're talking about learning the principles of inductive Bible study so we can really examine the truth of Scripture and see ourselves accurately reflected in it. Look intently.

The second stop to a right approach to the Scripture is to abide. Don't stop looking and thereby forget. Instead, thoughtfully meditate on what you have learned from your study. Run it in your mind. Think about it deeply. Think about how to apply it, in practical ways in your life.

Third stop to proper use of the Scripture. Not only look at it intently, not only abide in it through meditation, but become a doer of work; apply the truth you've learned, and seek to do it. Seek to obey it. James says Christ will bless that kind of response. Now, with genuine change as you seek to obey, God will do what you can't do, He will change your heart. And in the future you'll receive the blessing of eternal reward when He returns.

One author writes about the lucid observations of Doctor A. T. Schofield. Dr. Schofield used to point out that there were three kinds of dogs in the city of London. Now stay with me, this does have a point. This isn't post-modern illustration. He said there're three kinds of dogs in the city of London. The first kind are the wild, masterless dogs that roam the streets and steal meals from garbage pails and often come to a terrible end in the humane shelter. He said the second kind of dog are the chained dogs that can't be trusted for more than a few feet. And then the third kind of dog he said are those that know and love their masters and respond obediently to his voice. He said the first of these has liberty but no law. They can go wherever they want, but they have no law; nothing controlling their passions. He said the second kind have law -- they have the chain -- but they have no liberty. He said the third kind enjoy the perfect law of liberty.

He went on to say that all men seem to be like one of these three kinds of dogs. The masses are utterly lawless when it comes to the authority of God; they do whatever they want to, whenever they want to do it; they are dominated by sin; they're characterized by lawlessness. He said then secondly there are many who are like the dog on the leash. They have law but no liberty. These are the legalists in religion. Like the Pharisee who being ignorant of God's law set out to set up a righteousness of their own and they absolutely chained themselves; they have no liberty. He said but the Christian who knows the truth of New Testament deliverance is like the third dog. He needs no chain because he is guided by his master's eye and his master's voice and in that obedience, finds perfect liberty.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for Your Word. Thank you for the wonderful resource that You have given us in it. Lord, forgive us for being mere listeners. Help us to learn what it means to be doers of the Word. Lord, by all means, don't let us leave a message about being doers and leave unchanged.

Lord, I pray especially for those who are here this morning who don't know You; perhaps they're a part of a church; perhaps they're visiting. Perhaps they've been connected with this church for many years, but if they are honest with themselves, Lord, there's no consistent pattern of obedience. Help them to see, Lord, even today remove the façade and help them to see that they are deluding themselves. They're not the real thing. I pray that today would be the day You would draw them to Yourself that they would repent, they would turn from their sin and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; commit themselves to follow Him, as disciple; as learner.

Lord, I pray for those of us here who know you, who have already experienced the wonderful gift of eternal life, Lord, help us to have teachable hearts, to be quick to listen. But, Lord, don't let us stop there. Help us to have a consistent pattern of obedience to what we learn from what we hear. Help us to respond even as we studied today in your Word, to look intently, to study it diligently, with all the tools and resources that we have at our disposal. Help us to abide in it, to meditate on it, to think about it, to let it permeate our hearts and minds. And then Lord, help us to obey it, to become doers of work, those who obey its commands.

Father, and as we seek to obey, we plead with You to do what You promised, what only You can do, and that is change us at the most basic level. We pray that You would accomplish all of these things for the glory of Your name and for the exultation of Your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.