

“In the Mirror”

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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. (James 1:17-27)

I expect that most of us at least glanced in a mirror this morning, even if only to run a quick comb through our hair. I also use a mirror to shave, and to tie my tie. Beyond that, I might take a quick glance before I leave the house just to make sure that I am reasonably presentable.

The problem is that the mirror I use has a significant flaw in it. I can't tell you how many times I've put together a snappy, cutting-edge, fashionable ensemble, stood in front of that mirror, and muttered to myself with pride, "Peter, you've done it again." And then I go downstairs, where the fashionista triumvirate of Stephanie, Molly, and Kate takes one look at me. Then they collectively roll their eyes and say with disgust, "Peter you've done it again." And as I trudge back upstairs to try again, even the dog turns away in shame. The only logical explanation I can come up with is that my mirror has some kind of defect in it, because they are clearly not seeing what I am seeing.

That, I think, is the point of the mirror metaphor in the Book of James. James was writing to a Christian community, and his goal was to help the church to understand how a Christian is called to live. The letter delivers a great deal of moral teaching: we should "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger" ... we should bridle our tongues... we should "care for orphans and widows in their distress."

And at the center of this dialogue is an ethical lesson about self-awareness and self-improvement. The Word of God, James says, is like a mirror. If we are willing to engage the Bible -- to read it, hear it, and take it seriously -- then scripture will give us a reflection of who we truly are. In that reflection, we will be able to see both the light that shines in and around us, and also the darkness that is present in each of us – our blemishes, scars, faults,



and foibles. As we often say, a mirror does not lie – it merely reflects back what is. Scripture, James believes, operates in much the same way.

By contrast, if we do not engage scripture with reverence and openness, James says that we “*are like those who look at themselves in a mirror*” but then “*immediately forget what they were like.*” We might catch a quick glimpse of ourselves in its reflection, but we are not able to retain an accurate picture of what we saw. Or, perhaps more accurately, we end up seeing in that mirror only what we want to see, so that what we take away from that glance in the mirror of scripture is not an honest picture of who and what we really are.

The 18th Century English clergyman Joseph Benson put it this way: “[In the book of James,] the word of God is represented as a mirror, in which, if a man will look with attention and care, he will see the face of his soul, and discover in what state he is, and what character he bears in the sight of God.” Unfortunately, Benson continues, many of us take a quick glance at scripture and then immediately turn away. We get distracted by life. In his actual words, “[They] so occupy themselves in secular affairs, as immediately to forget what manner of persons they were, and continue the same in their temper and conduct as before.”

In other words, we might read scripture and its lessons about the nature of humanity and the nature of God, but as soon as we close the good book, as soon as we turn away from the truthful mirror of scripture, we immediately lose the lesson. We forget what we saw and heard, and we go right back to living just the way we always live. In closing, Benson points an accusatory finger at his audience. “Reader,” he asks, “is this thy case?”¹ Could this be what you are doing?

And most of us would have to confess that the answer is yes. That is exactly what we do. James warns the church that it is not enough for us just to read the Word of God or hear the Word of God. Once we hear it, we have to embrace it, internalize it, and then ***do something*** about it. “*Be doers of the word,*” James says, “*not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*” If we are honest with ourselves, most of us do a lot of hearing, but not so much doing.

We have even developed some strategies to help us avoid the doing. The first one is to just ***dismiss what scripture is clearly saying***. The Sermon on the Mount gives us a good example. “*If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also... if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*” That can’t be right, we say.

But then we keep reading. “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... instead, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for You cannot serve God and wealth.*” Naw, I’m sure God does not mean that literally, we tell ourselves. The messages of scripture can be hard, and challenging, and downright inconvenient. Sometimes scripture seems to set the bar so high that we want to avert our eyes. So we turn away from the mirror, and we deceive ourselves.

A more subtle strategy, and one that frankly makes us feel better is to ***study scripture***. Let’s roll our sleeves up and get some commentaries and really pore over these words. We can even look at the Greek or the Hebrew to help us in our interpretation. Heck, why don’t we form a committee to talk about it? I’ve been on some of those. That will show that we are taking this seriously.

¹ Benson’s Commentary of the Old and New Testaments, James 1:23-24, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/james/1-23.htm>.

This kind of thing really annoyed the theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who was never afraid to speak hard truths to the church. He believed that biblical study is important, and he affirmed that we should bring the very best of our analytical skills and ability to the quest for understanding what scripture is saying. But if we are not careful, he warned, we can miss the point, or dodge the point, by making the study itself the goal. If we want to, he said, we can find “thirty thousand different ways” to read each passage, but that just confuses and clouds the picture so much that we will never be able to see ourselves reflected in the mirror. Do not make the mistake of looking at the mirror, he said. Look at the reflection in the mirror. Look at the honest picture of yourself in that mirror.²

To drive the point home, Kierkegaard compares the study of scripture to a person who receives a letter from someone they love deeply. The love letter, unfortunately, is written in a foreign language. Longing to know what the letter says, the one receiving the letter goes to the library to get dictionaries and grammar books to help them translate it. But the person in love would never confuse that scholarly task with the end goal. They would never think that the study and work was the point. The study and work was only a means to the ultimate end of knowing and understanding what the one you love is trying to say to you.

The same is true with scripture. The Word of God is a love letter to us – one that conveys important truths and seeks our benefit. But, too often, we lose ourselves in the task of study and discussion, and we make that the goal. Once again, we turn away from the mirror, and we deceive ourselves.

Last but not least, another way that we avoid the honest reflections of the mirror of scripture is to **rationalize what we are seeing**. As the popular philosopher and author Noam Chomsky once wrote, “There are very few people who are going to look into the mirror and say, ‘That person I see is a savage monster’; instead, they make up some construction that justifies what they do.”³

What he is talking about is “rationalization,” a psychological defense mechanism with which we deal with difficult or unacceptable emotions by explaining them away. For example, someone who was up for a big promotion but did not get it might convince herself that the process was rigged, that she never really had a chance. It was not that she needed more experience or had not yet proven herself worthy, it was because someone else was cheating or acting badly.

Some of our rationalizations are basically harmless. They may not be completely honest, but they can make us feel better. It is a way to cope, to be gentle with ourselves. But rationalization is harmful when it prevents us from confronting something about ourselves that needs to be addressed – behaviors that are holding us back, hurting others, or taking us down dark roads that lead to bad places. Sometimes, when we look into the mirror of scripture, the reflection of ourselves that we see is something we would rather not see. Like all mirrors, it reflects back every blemish, every stain, and every flaw with uncompromising honesty. This may be hard news, James says, but the honesty is a gift, because it shows us where we need to do some work, where we need some grace, and need some healing.

But that healing will never come unless and until we are willing to gaze into our reflection and accept the truth of what it shows us. If we want to be the best versions of

² “Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word,” Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University (2012); <http://sorenkierkegaard.org/for-self-examination.html>.

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/339156-how-people-themselves-perceive-what-they-are-doing-is-not>

ourselves, scripture can help us get there. It can help us get clean, help us get healthy. To use James' words, it can help us wash away all the "sordidness and rank growth and wickedness," but in order for that to happen we have to "welcome with meekness [and humility] the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."

It is not enough to read it, but then dismiss it. It is not enough to analyze it as we would a novel or a history book. It will not work if we hear it and then just rationalize away the lessons it is trying to teach us. Do not be merely hearers of the word who deceive themselves. Be "doers" of the Word who are willing to see themselves honestly in the mirror of scripture, and then actually do something about what they see in that mirror. If we are strong enough and committed enough to gaze into "the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – we will, James says, be blessed in what we do.

In closing, let's return to that mirror I look into every morning. Maybe it is broken, given that, when I put together a bold new color combination, others are clearly not seeing what I am seeing. Or maybe the problem is the person I see in that mirror. Maybe I am not the fashion prodigy I imagine myself to be. It may even be that I am just a little bit color blind. We are still working through this.

But if you remember anything from this sermon it should be this: the mirror of scripture is not broken. The Word of God always reflects the truth, even when those truths are hard for us to see. But even the difficult truths are never meant for our harm. They are always given with love for our benefit. And if we are brave enough to look honestly into that mirror – if we are willing to accept the truth of what is reflected back to us and commit ourselves to actually doing something about it, then God promises that we will be blessed in our doing.

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