

LESSONS FROM THE LOOKING GLASS

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Text: James 11:22-25

These days many churches vie with one another for having the highest standards of orthodoxy. While I bless them on their quest, I got to thinking that preparing to launch the Fall season is a wonderful time to reflect on how we *live out* our faith . . . as opposed to how we think out our faith. It is also a wonderful opportunity to impress you with a fancy word: *orthopraxy*.

Orthopraxy is a compound Greek word. The first word in the compound is *ortho*, which is quite familiar to most of us. It means “right, correct, or straight.” An orthodontist is a dentist who can “straighten” or correct teeth. *Praxis*, the second word of the compound, sounds similar to the English equivalent—*practice*. Orthopraxy or orthopraxis is simply “correct practice” or “correct behavior.” In some religions, it matters little what one believes, as long as the correct works and rituals are performed.

The Book of James is all about orthopraxy. We read: **But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.**” (1:22) James also describes “**religion that is pure and undefiled**” (v. 27) in the context of practice. As a matter of fact, the emphasis is so much on practice that not everyone has been a fan of this letter. Some have taken potshots at James claiming that the view of Christ was not well developed. Probably the most famous detractor of the letter was Luther himself who, as I recall, dismissed it as a book built on straw. Some have criticized it saying that it had too much of an emphasis on works, and was not in harmony with Paul’s emphasis on grace. Seriously?

On a very personal note, I sheepishly confess I that have a relationship with this letter that harkens back to my super-Christian days in college. It is the only book of the Bible that I once had memorized, from start to finish. I forget now why I did that, but there must have been something in the ethos of living out the message that had an appeal to me. (And don’t you *dare* put me to test after the service today!)

There are countless nuggets of truth in this epistle, and we could easily spend our time going through this letter by expounding on one point at a time. Today, however, I wanted to reflect on one particular image that James used that got me thinking. I am hoping that this might provide us with a big picture orientation as we reflect on living out our faith.

I was struck by this image used of the mirror, or the looking glass. We read, “**For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.**” (vv. 23-24) Did you even know there were mirrors back then? Probably they were more akin to some polished metal.

So I need to explain *why* this image captured my attention. If you have been around for any length of time you have heard me speak about the True Self and the false self. You have heard me speak about knowing yourself. So then, you might ask, “What does all this inward thinking have to do with outward living? It almost sounds like we are talking about two different universes.”

I would like to suggest that we are *not* talking about two unrelated universes. As Richard Rohr says, **"Everything belongs!"** Our inner life *does* relate to our outer life! Using the imagery of James, there is a healthy way and an unhealthy way to look at oneself in the mirror.

One of the Greek myths is a mirroring story: the story of Narcissus. One day, after an unhappy love affair, he wandered into the forest and stopped by a crystal clear pool, for he was thirsty. He knelt down to drink; and, looking down in the water, he saw there a sight which entranced him - a beautiful face - eyes wide, curving lips, and a noble nose - so beautiful that he caught his breath - and he forgot his thirst and he leaned ever closer - so moved and fascinated by the face in the water that he desperately wanted to kiss the face - but every time he tried to touch the beautiful face, the face would dissolve in the stirring of the water. And so Narcissus would kneel there by the brook, forlorn until the water stilled and he could see the face again, and then once again yearn with all his heart and soul and mind just for the beautiful one in the pool - which was, of course, his own reflection. And from then on he never loved anyone else, ever, for he never moved on from this obsession with his own self. And he died the long and painful starving death of the self-absorbed person looking in the mirror all by himself, at himself, in the deep, lonely pool of the isolated. This is a depiction of falling in love with the false self. This is a depiction of how that love affair eventually sucks the life right out of you. It is clear that one so self-absorbed can never be any value when it comes to meeting the needs of the world.

When we encourage contemplative spirituality here, we most certainly do *not* encourage staring at the looking glass, and falling in love with yourself - with your false self - which leads to destruction. We encourage staring at the looking glass, and falling in love with your True Self - which is essentially falling in love with the beauty that God sees in you, falling in love with the Beloved in you, falling in love with the Christ in you.

So how does this relate to being relevant in the world? When you use the looking glass properly - when we truly learn how to see the image of God within ourselves - we instinctively and unavoidably become more adept at seeing the image of God in others. As James points out, we then more readily see the image of God in the widow, and the orphan, and the poor.

The secret is to develop a healthy pattern of looking inward, and then looking outward. As James says, **"For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like."** (vv. 23 - 24) People who are *not* "doers of the word" are so because they have quickly forgotten that they are made in God's image, and so are incapable of seeing God's image in others.

In chapter 3 James exhorts us to tame the tongue - not to delight in verbally destroying others. The thinking is the same. When we curse others, we unwittingly **"curse those who are made in the likeness of God."** (3:9) The same is true on a societal level. When we describe whole groups of people as vermin, we show clear disregard for those **"made in the likeness of God."** We become like those who immediately forgot who they were. (1:24)

To consider the potency of changing one's perspective, I am reminded of an organization founded in Baltimore just over two years ago called The Looking Glass Project. Using photography as a medium and anthropology as the lens, this group gives underrepresented youth in Baltimore a chance to experience the world outside of their

city. Cameras are used to inspire, to see things from a new perspective, foster artistic expression, self-reliance, and financial responsibility. New worlds are opened up as people break out of the perspectives that draw people into a downward spiral.

Curiously enough, the church uses this sacrament of The Lord's Supper as a similar tool – a tool that takes the focus off of ourselves, and helps us identify with the self-emptying Christ. We practice this sacrament with some regularity to develop a healthy pattern of looking inward, and looking outward. As we leave here today, and go out into the world, let us not be quick to forget what we learned by looking within. Let us not forget who we are, and whose we are. More than a good idea, it is imperative if we want to have a **“religion that is pure and undefiled before God.”** (v 27) It is imperative when it comes to seeing the Beloved in others, and making a difference in the lives of others.

Amen.

James 1: 22 – 25

“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; “for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. “But 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.