

Sermon: MIRROR, MIRROR  
James 1:17-27

Who can forget Disney's vain and nasty Queen seeking her daily dose of flattery?

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?"

But after many years of reassurance, one day the mirror said, "O Lady Queen, though fair ye be, Snow White is fairer far than thee."

Not what she wanted to hear! But that's the thing about mirrors—they tell us the truth. No wonder the letter of James compares the Old Testament law to a mirror.

A little background first. James is a late letter in the New Testament, written in part to clarify the earlier writings of Paul. You see, Paul says we are saved by grace apart from the law. That's true, of course, but some Christians twisted Paul's message and said, "Faith is all that matters. We don't need the law. We don't need any rules. Our faith saves us, and we can live as we please and do as we want, and it won't matter to God."

The Letter of James is an antidote to that shallow discipleship. Says James, "Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of saying you have faith if you don't prove it by your actions? Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all—it is dead and useless." (James 2:14,17 NLT)

How do we gauge our progress as Christians? How do we evaluate our lives to see if we are pleasing God, to see if we are becoming more like Jesus? We need a mirror, James says, and fortunately God has given us one. It's called the law. Not those Old Testament ritual laws forbidding bacon and oysters and blended fabrics, but those enduring, God-given rules about how we treat one another, how we build character, the guidelines about how we grow into righteousness—that's our mirror.

Here's how James says it: "And remember, (the law) is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don't obey, you are only fooling yourself. For if you just listen and don't obey, it is like looking at your face in a mirror but doing nothing to improve your appearance. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you keep looking steadily into God's perfect law--the law that sets you free--and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it." (NLT)

James says that the law holds up a mirror for us, a mirror in which we see our "natural face." (That's a literal rendering of the Greek.) That may mean that we see ourselves as we really are, without pretense or disguise. Think of it as your morning face: unwashed, unshaven, no make-up—just the real you hanging out there.

There's a story about a woman who gets on an elevator and finds she is sharing the elevator with Robert Redford. She tries not to stare, doesn't know whether or not to speak. But as the doors open for her floor, she blurts out, "Are you the real Robert Redford?" To which Redford replies, "Only when I'm alone."

Good answer. There's a presentable face we show to the world and then there's the person we are when no one is looking. The mirror of the law shows who we really are. It's a tricky thing taking one's own measure. If I compare myself to the right people, I look pretty good.

I mean, compared to Lex Luthor, I'm a paragon of virtue. I don't rob banks or kidnap Lois Lane or carry concealed Kryptonite.

I don't chase cute little Dalmatian puppies so I can make myself a fur coat like Cruella DeVil.

Put me beside Darth Vader and I'm a saint!

But our yardstick is not Darth Vader. Our yardstick, says James, is the law.

The law says: Don't take what isn't yours. In fact, don't even covet what isn't yours. Hmmm...

The law says: The widows? The orphans? The foreigners in your midst? All those folks who can't take care of themselves? It's your job to take care of them. Ouch!

The law says: Love God so whole-heartedly, so single-mindedly that nothing ever competes with that love. Okay! I surrender.

In the mirror of the law, I'm not looking so good. But seeing where we have missed the mark—discovering where we fall short—gives us the opportunity to change and grow. That's the whole point.

James has nothing but disdain for people who look into the mirror of the law, see themselves reflected there, and fail to act on what they've learned. James says, "It is like looking at your face in a mirror but doing nothing to improve your appearance. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like." (James 1:23-24 NLT)

Don't you hate it when you come home after a meeting and discover there's a smudge of printer's ink on your cheek or a blob of mustard on your shirt or a piece of spinach stuck on your front tooth? Had you only known, you could have fixed it. You could have cleaned up and offered a better self to the world. That's the value of the law. It shows us our own moral shabbiness, not so we can feel bad but so we can do better. We can move from being hearers of what's right and become doers of what's right.

All right, the law mirrors our shortcomings. That's clear enough. But when James says the law reveals our "natural face" he may also have in mind that the law shows us who we were meant to be. In that mirror we see ourselves as God intended us, we see the person we might yet become.

In World War Two, the Royal Air Force relied heavily on British Spitfires and Hurricanes. Those planes were fast and maneuverable, but when hit by enemy fire, the cockpit often exploded into flames. In the few seconds that it took to eject from the craft, the pilot could be severely burned. Many brave young men found themselves horribly and incurably disfigured after the war. Rejected by wives or former girlfriends, ostracized by neighbors, these pilots too often lived in lonely isolation, eking out an empty existence on a government pension, their lives as tragically ruined as their faces.

In the book *In His Image*, Paul Brand and Philip Yancey tell about one pilot whose story turned out differently. The soldier's name was Peter Foster. While defending London from German bombers, his plane erupted in a fireball. Foster escaped with his life, but like so many others his face was almost burned away. Even after repeated surgeries, his face remained a mass of puckered scars, the kind of face from which people avert their eyes.

Peter Foster's story had a different ending because of one person: his fiancée. The young woman told Foster that she loved him for his true self, not his outward appearance. She stood by him through his convalescence. In fact, they were married even before he left the hospital. Foster survived and went on to live a healthy, rewarding life. He credits his wife with the healing of his spirit. Looking back years later, Foster said, "She gave me a new image of myself. She became my mirror."

A loving, forgiving, hopeful God does that for you and me. God offers us a new image of ourselves, a glimpse of who we might yet be, a promise of the glory still to be revealed in us.

Christian, you are saved by grace, yet it matters how you live. Your deeds, your conduct, your works of love are a witness to the world and a daily offering to God. If you wonder how you're doing—if you suspect you're falling short—look into the mirror of the law.

But here is a mystery! If we look deeply enough into the law we see through it, we see all the way through to the living Savior who is the fulfillment of the law. In the mirror of his eyes, we see our need, we see our calling. And although it is almost impossibly wonderful, in his face we see what God will surely make of you and me.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*