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Mirror Mirror

James 1 v 19-27

Introduction

The Word of God is like a mirror.

I didn't understand this illustration for a long time. I didn't get what was bad about looking in the mirror and then forgetting what you look like.

Mirrors

For thousands of years very few people knew what a mirror was. The most anyone ever saw of themselves was their reflection in water, which doesn't really show you any detail. Even when people had mirrors in early times they were just polished metal, and so you only had a limited view of yourself as others saw you. When proper, effective mirrors were first available they were very expensive, and only a few could afford them. But now we can make much more effective mirrors, and so cheaply that everyone can have one. If you don't have one you can even use the camera on your phone to act as a mirror.

I once decided to dig into how mirrors work. It seems fairly simple at a high level: mirrors reflect light. But what's actually happening down at the atomic level, with photons being absorbed and ejected, and wave functions determining the direction they go, is hugely more complicated. I know a bit more now, but there is still a lot I don't understand.

But what was James' point about the mirror? He talked about those who look into a mirror and then go away and forget what they look like. I think it took me a while to get it because I'm a typical man. I look in the mirror, say "yep, that's me" and carry on. But for many people a mirror points out their flaws. In fact a song I was listening to this week says:

> *Look in the mirror, see the truth*
> *The ugly side of you*

So the normal thing to do when you look in the mirror is to see that your hair needs fixed and reach for the hairbrush. Or see that your face is dirty and reach for the soap. You see what's wrong and want to fix it.

I guess I'm James' example then, because I look in the mirror, see all the things that need sorted, and just walk away and forget about them.

So how does that relate to God's Word?

The Word

You know, for thousands of years very few people had access to the Bible. The most anyone ever saw of God was his nature reflected in his creation, which doesn't really show you any detail. Even those who had the written Word in early times only had the Old Testament, or only certain books, and so you only had a limited view of God and yourself as God saw you. When the full Bible was available it was very expensive, and only a few could afford one. But now we have the whole text of God's Word, and we can print it so cheaply that everyone can have one. If you don't have one you can even use an app on your phone to bring up the verses.

As a believer I want to dig into God's Word. It seems fairly simple at a high level: God made man, man fell, God sent a saviour. But the more you delve into the Word, the more you discover about God's character, how he deals with people and how he wants his people to live. I know a bit more now, but there is still a lot I have to learn.

But why did James compare the Word to a mirror? Well, one of the things it does is show us who we are. It tells us we are fearfully and wonderfully made. But it also tells us we are sinners. It points out our flaws. We don't like that. So it's tempting to close the book, walk away and forget what it tells us. It's tempting to listen to the preacher on a Sunday morning, nod our heads and forget what he said immediately we walk out the door.

We don't like the idea of confronting our flaws. We don't like change. And yet James points out how wonderful the changes can be. What can the Word do?

- It can save us
- It can free us
- It can bless us
- It can protect us

Let's look at what James said in the section we read.

The Word Saves

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the

righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

[James 1 v 19-21]

OK, so James is writing to Christians here. He calls them brothers and sisters, so they're saved people. But he's telling them to change their behaviour, so becoming a Christian isn't the end. If you have believed on Jesus to forgive your sins then your are made righteous in God's eyes; your destination is secure; but there's a journey to take before we reach that destination. The journey is to become more light Jesus every day. We call it sanctification, which just means becoming more holy.

Are you quick to listen and slow to speak? Or quick to speak and slow to listen? This doesn't sound like religious instruction, does it? It's just basic manners. But I hear people every day who want to be heard. Who will even talk over someone to get their word in. And sometimes that's me! It's basic, but it reveals our priorities. Who is more important? Me, or the person I'm talking to? Honouring God means caring for those who God loves. Considering them before ourselves.

And what about anger? It seems like we're supposed to get angry about everything these days. Here's a video of a person doing something bad - you should be angry at him. Here are some people who are different from us. You should be angry at them. Look at what James says though: human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Ask yourself the question God asked Jonah: are you right to be angry? James says we should be slow to get angry. That gives us time to consider if we are doing the right thing. And it rarely is.

And then James wants us to get rid of all the moral filth and evil that is prevalent. He's not talking about terrible crimes here, than one in a thousand commit. He's talking about stuff that's all around us. Stuff that the world does, but a Christian shouldn't. Now some will say that's impossible without the Holy Spirit doing a work within us. And they're right. But if we just sit back and wait for God to change us, nothing is going to happen. The journey of sanctification is a struggle, a battle, an uphill journey. It is by God's power but it's also by our effort. And James points the way: humbly accept the word planted in you. Read, learn, know the word of God. It can save you.

How can it save you? Of course, it can point out our sin, point the way to Jesus and show us how we can be right with God. But it can also save our souls from the sin that surrounds us while we're still on this earthly journey.

The Word Frees and Blesses

It can also free us. Look at the next section:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it —not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

[James 1 v 22-25]

Do you read your Bible? Great, reading or hearing the Word is good. But James is asking us, "is that all you do?" If so you're just kidding yourself on. Are you a Christian? Then be a Christian. Do what the Word says.

It used to be that people would comment on someone - she's a good Christian woman. They didn't mean she was always going to church and reading her Bible. They meant that she was always being kind and helping people. Perhaps there was a lack of understanding of what it means to be a believer, but at least they saw that a Christian should be living out the Word, not just reading it and knowing it.

Sadly, the word Christian has recently been used in a way I'm not happy with. "Britain is a Christian country" some people say. But they don't mean that Britain is kind and caring to those less fortunate, giving to those in need. They mean that as a country we should exclude those who have other beliefs. These are self-righteous people. They believe that they are good and others are bad.

That's why we need to look into the mirror of the Word. It shows us who we really are. Looking into the perfect law will show us that we are imperfect. That we need fixing. So how does that give us freedom? Well, it shows us we have no chance in fixing ourselves. And it shows us that God wants to fix us. And it shows us how. *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved*. Isn't that freedom? But also in that daily struggle of the spirit against the flesh, the old man against the new, the victory doesn't depend on our strength. Only in our willingness to fight. The battle is the Lord's, but you have to put on the armour. James says don't forget what the Word tells you. Do it. There is not just freedom in looking into the Word, there is blessing in obeying it.

The Word Protects

There is also protection to be found in hearing and obeying the Word of God. James continues:

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

[James 1 v 26-27]

What does it mean to be religious? To believe in God? To go to church? To listen to hymns on your radio? The idea of someone being religious or holy can make us think about someone apart from others, not participating in daily life, like a monk, maybe. But that idea of being somehow on a higher level can so easily fall apart. It can just take a harsh word, a lie, a piece of gossip. James has a lot more to say about controlling the tongue, but that's for another time.

So what does God want? He wants people who know the Word and do it. Who are kind and caring and keep from getting involved in sinful behaviour. And in obeying the Word we are protected by the Word from the pollution of the sin that is around us.

Summary

So it's a simple message James is preaching here, isn't it? Read the Word, know the Word, obey the Word. And people will notice.

What would it be like to attend your own funeral? Or to read your obituary? What would people say about you? Do you think it would change your behaviour now to hear what people might have to say?

There was a man who did read his own obituary. His name was Alfred Nobel. He was a chemist, inventor and engineer, and had made a fortune with his inventions. But in 1888 his brother died, and a French newspaper made the mistake of thinking that Alfred was the one who had passed. So they wrote his obituary. When Alfred read it the next day he wasn't just shocked to find out that he was dead, he was also shocked to find out how he would be remembered.

The paper had called him "The Merchant of Death". He had invented dynamite, and the paper said he had made his fortune out of finding faster ways to kill people.

Alfred didn't want to be remembered like that. So he put his fortune into a foundation that would give out prizes every year for great advances in chemistry, physics, medicine, literature and peace. And it worked! If you ask anyone these days who Alfred Nobel is, there's a good chance they'll say he's the peace prize guy.

We don’t need a mistaken obituary to show us what we’re like. The Word of God does just that. And the recipe for a successful Christian life is simple: do what it says.