*THE MOST AMAZING MIRROR IN THE WORLD*

James 1:17-27

August 29, 2021

In the middle of today’s New Testament lesson, the apostle James makes an interesting and perceptive comparison. The points of reference are two types of people. James says, “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 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” (vv. 23-25).

The operative word in this reading is “mirror.” And since James pins his point on this word, hoping we will understand the metaphor, let’s start there.

Studies show that people check the mirror upwards of 40 times a day. For some, looking in a mirror is simply a matter of gathering data; for others, it’s to confirm the worst. We use them for practical purposes and for décor. When driving, good drivers check their side mirrors and rearview mirrors for safety reasons. And we use mirrors before going out for the evening to see how we look.

We don’t think much about the technology of mirrors, no more than we think about plastic wrap, toothpaste, or floss. They just are.

But what about th mirror that the apostle James used 2000 ago? It certainly was not a piece of glass coated with silver nitrate. James might have been aware that the Romans were experimenting with the use of glass in the first century, but his mirror was probably a piece of polished bronze or copper. Whatever it was, there’s no doubt that his readers knew what a mirror was. Mirrors had been around long before James wrote his letter to the Christians of the diaspora. Artifacts dating to 6,000 B.C. tell us that early communities used polished stones as mirrors before going to their equivalent of Walmart. (The material we know about; we’re just guessing about the occasion.)

We need go no further than the Bible to understand the use and history of mirrors. In the book of Job, perhaps the earliest of the biblical texts other than the Pentateuch, we read, “Can you, like him, spread out the skies, unyielding as a cast mirror?” (Job 37:18). the women of the Exodus had mirrors, and on one occasion donated them for the making of a bronze bowl for tabernacle worship (that’s Ex. 38:8). And the apostle Paul refers to a mirror in his famous essay on love in 1 Cor. 13: “For now we see in a mirror dimly . . . .”

The simplest mirror is water., as Narcissus in Greek mythology discovered. Nature lovers are thrilled when, in the early morning hours, they come across a woodland pond or alpine lake that is as still as glass, reflecting the pines and mountains above the clear water. What would you do if you stumbled on a scene like this? You’d whip out your smartphone, take a photo and post it on Instagram. That’s what you would do. It’s that spectacular. And minus the Instagram, I have done just that, recently.

And while your friends are admiring these remarkable photos, you can deliver the punchline: “That lake that morning was spectacular, no doubt. But the mirror described in today’s New Testament lesson is even more amazing. Let’s take a look.”

The most amazing mirror in the world is the Word of God. But why is it so incredible?

***It’s amazing because it’s perfect.***

James calls it “perfect,” and according to the 20th century Scottish divine, William Barclay, it’s perfect in at least three ways:

1. It is God’s law. Humans may pass bad laws, and we can all think of a few. This amazing “mirror,” however, is the “perfect law” because it comes from God.
2. It cannot be bettered. This law comes from God! Who would be so silly as to write another law that supersedes the law of God? This is as good as it gets, and it can’t get better. In fact, it is the law of “liberty” and freedom. Following this law one is truly free. And liberty is what we all want, is it not?
3. It is directed toward an end. That’s the meaning o the Greek word for perfect. A jar designed to hold a pint of milk is perfect insofar as it holds the milk! No cracks or leaks. God’s law is perfect because its goal, its end, its purpose, is to fashion vessels of perfection who are what they are designed to be: the *imago Dei* (The image of God, right?)and who DO what they are designed to do: reflect the glory of God—put God on display. But if you look into this amazing mirror and walk away, that’s not going to happen, is it?

***It’s amazing because it’s a mirror that makes us talk.***

Have you noticed this? We tend to talk to mirrors, or to our *doppelganger* in the mirror. Happens all the time: You get up in the morning. You have sleep lines etched in your face like you slept all night on a waffle iron. Your hair looks like it has been supercharged with 500 volts of electricity. And those bags under your eyes look like they’ve just come off the baggage claim at LAX. You stand in front of the mirror and take a look. “Oh, my goodness. That can’t be right! Nothing good ever gonna come of that!”

Yeah. We talk to mirrors. In an Andy Griffith Show episode, Floyd the barber tries to enlist Andy’s help in a deception. According to one blurb, “Floyd has pretended to be a rich man in letters to his female pen pal, who then suddenly decides to visit. Andy hastily arranges a deception so that Floyd can continue the ruse.”

When Floyd tells Andy about his problem, Andy is in the barber chair and Floyd is brandishing a straight razor. He is upset, mostly at himself. Three times in this particular scene he dashes to a mirror on the wall and shouts, “Floyd Lawson, you are nothing but a liar, a cheat, and a scoundrel! I hate you!”

But then he and Andy hatch a scheme to continue the deception, even after the woman appears in town. It turns out badly, and Floyd yells at the mirror again.

Like Floyd, you and I often see ourselves in the “perfect law” of God, and perhaps we yell and stomp about for a while. Sadly, too often we then turn away and, like Floyd and Andy, try to carry out our devious schemes anyhow. And like the barber of Mayberry, we fail miserably.

***The Word of God is amazing because we must lean into the mirror to see better***.

As the late, great Yogi Berra, catcher and then manager of the Yankees used to say, “You can see a lot by looking.” Yes, you can. That’s why we often lean toward the mirror to get a better look at ourselves. James says, “having looked intently.” It’s similar. The notion doesn’t refer to a casual glance. Instead, it implies bending over, or stooping, to get a better, perhaps the best look. Here are a couple of verses where the same word is used:

“But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; *stooping and looking in,* he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened” (Lk. 24:12).

“John *bent down to look in* and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in” (Jn. 20:5).

True practitioners of God’s Word are those who humble themselves, who are on their knees in an attitude of contrition and repentance, who lean in to see closely what the Word has to say to *them*.

And, the Word of God is an amazing mirror ***because it’s a two-way mirror, and God is on the other side.***

God knows the thoughts and intents of the heart. Here are some passages about that:

Acts 15:8 says, “And God, who knows the human heart . . .”

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, for the Lord does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.’” (1 Sam. 16:7).

‘Would not God discover this? For God knows the secrets of the heart” (Ps. 44:21).

And then there is this telling passage in Jeremiah: “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it” The answer comes quickly: “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings” (17:9, 10).\ The Word of God is perfect because when you and I stand before the “perfect law” of God, we’re really standing before God Himself, who sees us as through a two-way mirror, and God sees all. To look in the mirror is a good thing, but only if we then take action according to the data the mirror has furnished. Otherwise, looking in the mirror is a waste of time. And, as in real life, it’s pretty obvious to others when you go out into the world without taking care of personal hygiene. It’s not pretty.

A Christian who avoids the mirror of God’s Word is not a pretty sight, either. In fact, it’s rather ugly, and we have seen a lot of ugly Christians in the news these days.

You and I become better versions of ourselves and the world becomes a better place when we look into God’s mirror—the perfect law – and act on what we see. James alludes to looking in the mirror when he applauds those who are able to bridle the tongue. He refers to acting on what we see when he argues that a Christian who takes care of orphans and widows in distress is a practitioner of “true religion.”

This is our call to action: let us look to the mirror, and let us act on what we see. When we do, we will be better for it, and so will our neighborhoods, communities, and our part of the world. Like that lake where heaven meets earth in the water’s reflection, God’s Word is a mirror that elevates you and me to that “thin place” between heaven and earth, where mortals like us experience James’s Christ-like condition: “They will be blessed in their doing” (v. 25).

Amen.