

Look in the Mirror
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James 1:19-27 NRSV

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore 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.

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 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.

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion 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.

Core True religion enables us to see ourselves honestly and adjusting accordingly.

Call Visit someone in their affliction; Ask God: How am I stained by the world?

Compel To feel a sense of freedom and release from having to “front,” or posture, or maintain some image.

Intro: How do you feel about mirrors?

Mirrors are one of those amazing inventions that we take for granted. They are so easy and inexpensive to make now, we see them everywhere. And they show us exactly what we look like. But imagine a time when they weren't so commonplace. In the first century, the best mirrors were of polished Corinthian bronze, but they could reflect back an image any where near as clear and vivid as we have today. Most people would see their reflection rarely, if at all. Imagine living most of your life not really knowing what you look like!

When we look in the mirror, we usually have an implied question. We look because we want to know something. Do I look presentable enough to go out? Can I skip a shower or is my hair so crazy it's take a shower or put on a hat? If I am going to an interview, do I look professional? Do I look good enough to feel confident? What impression will people have of me?

We are a long way from, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” But then, maybe we aren't. Maybe our relationship with mirrors says a lot about our insecurities, and about our desperate need to be seen as good, valuable, and of worth.

The best thing a mirror can do is [reveal what is true](#). And that is why James thinks of a mirror when he wants to describe true religion.

Our Problem with the Word "Religion"

The word "religion" has gotten a bad rap. If it is used at all, it is often has adjectives like "bad" or "dead" in front of it. Religious people are assumed to be strict rule followers, rigid and unyielding in their behavior and their judgements. Movies and television shows now regularly depict the villains as religious people who use pious words to justify evil actions. Even many Christians distance themselves from the word saying, "I follow Jesus, but I'm not religious."

With all these negative connotations, we get caught by surprise when James calls his readers to practice "pure religion" and live according to "the law of liberty." People of pure religion treat others fairly, with no partiality or preferential treatment on the basis of wealth or status. They are careful with their words, using them to bless and build others up, never to curse or tear them down. The truly religious visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and keep themselves unstained from the world (James 1:27). Their interior life of faith is congruent with their exterior life of good deeds and right relationships. In short: They walk the talk.

[Religion = Re-Ligament, or Reconnecting](#)

James teaches of the real value of Religion: Reconnecting and Reunifying ourselves to ourselves.

[True religion enables us to see ourselves honestly and adjusting accordingly.](#)

James first describes the disconnection, how we get caught up in a false image of ourselves by indulging in anger and offense. James is not only calling his readers to the resist resorting to violence. He is even condemning violent speech. James recognizes how we can work ourselves up into a rage. There is an energy to this that make us feel powerful, in control, like we are getting our own back. But James says that's self-deception. Our anger does not lead anywhere good. He calls them to reject this path as wickedness, and to embrace nonviolence – that is, meekness – instead.

But what about "Righteous Anger"? What about Jesus? Jesus got angry! Jesus got angry and turned over the tables of the moneylenders in the temple! I'm like that! Me too, Jesus! I'm mad too! *It's almost as if James has heard this argument before!*

You can almost hear him chuckling to himself, as he thinks about how we are so quick to take offense, to lash out when we think we've been slighted That's not righteous anger. "Your anger does not produce God's righteousness." What does it produce?

Tim Keller wrote a wonderful little book called *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*. In it he describes an unhealthy human ego. He says that unless we develop the art of self-forgetfulness, our egos inevitably become swollen, empty, and fragile.

Unexamined and unchecked, our anger inevitable produces swollen, empty, and fragile egos. If your anger is sparked by personal offense – by how someone has treated *you* - then it's not righteous anger.

True Christians are those people who never get offended.

Does that feel impossible? How can I possibly live my life unoffended? For the James, the answer is simple: Live the same way Jesus lived.

How did Jesus live? Jesus lived a life of faith. His trust in God, and in his own identity as God's beloved, enabled Jesus to live *congruently*. That is: Jesus' outer, public life was completely congruent with his interior, private life. As Jesus regularly took time to be alone with God, going off by himself to pray, he remained anchored in his identity as the Beloved Child of the Father. From this secure, grounded space of unconditional and unchangeable place he lived out a public ministry marked by wisdom, compassion, and courageous love. In other words, Jesus looked into the mirror of God's love, and never forgot who he was. He could do this even as others wanted to pull him into endless theological debates or violent political movements or the continuous clamor of people wanted yet another feeding, another healing, and other miracle.

When James urges his readers to "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers," he is calling them to look in the mirror, see what is true, make the adjustments, and so live with complete congruency – inside and outside looking exactly alike. He is calling them to live out the pattern of life Jesus modeled to them. Quick question: *Who else do you know who is not afraid to look in the mirror, and as a result lives with beautiful congruency?*

James thus uses the image of a mirror to make his point, saying: We can't have our encounters with God be like looking in the mirror only and then immediately forgetting what we see. When God's word comes to you – the word that confirms that you are God's Beloved Child and nothing and no one can ever take that from you – then live that way. When God's word comes to you and sets you free from the need to posture, to front, to puff your ego up and try to prove to others how important you are, live in the that freedom. Look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, says James. Remember who you are now, in Christ. Then you can practice self-forgetfulness as Tim Keller describes it: Completely free of the need to be offended, to be angry. Then you will be rid of wickedness. Then you will be saved!

The more we learn to see ourselves as God sees us, the more freedom we will experience. To feel a sense of freedom and release from having to "front," or posture, or maintain some image. This is how James' understanding of true religion reconnects us to ourselves and to God.

But it doesn't end there. Once we reconnect with ourselves and God through faith, there is a final, critical step to becoming full free. **We need to reconnect with others – specifically, the one for whom God's heart breaks.**

James is never content to live this a "Just between me and God" or as "Jesus and me" experience. True religion doesn't just reconnect us to ourselves, to our true selves in Christ. True religion doesn't just reconnect us to God to give us assurance of our personal salvation. True connect always and necessarily reconnects us to others. And not just the world in general, but those in the world who are most at-risk of being exploited by the agendas of those with swollen, empty, and fragile ego.

True religion always causes our hearts to break over the things that break God's heart.

That is why James says: "Religion 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."

If our faith in Jesus Christ doesn't push out into the world for which Jesus lived and suffered and dies, then it isn't true religion. If it doesn't stir in us a holy restlessness to see vulnerable people protected and made secure, then it isn't true religion. If the saving word of God in our lives doesn't compel us to see others saved, then it's just a continuation of the lie Jesus confronted when he told the disciples to beware the teaching of the Pharisees (Mt 16) and later told the people to listen to the Law Teachers but don't imitate them (Mt 23).

If we want our religion to reconnect us to ourselves, to God, and to other then we have to put it look into the mirror every day, allow the Holy Spirit to lovingly point out how we are "stained by the world" and its ego obsessions, and then we need to adjust accordingly.

Visit someone in their affliction; Ask God: How am I stained by the world?

Let us pray.