

“Looking at Ourselves in a Mirror”

James 1:17-27

In the middle of today’s second reading, 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; 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” (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. To this end, we can always find a mirror, and perhaps that’s why we take mirrors for granted. We use them for practical purposes and for décor. When driving, good drivers check their side mirrors and rearview mirrors for safety reasons. We use mirrors to reflect light. And we use mirrors before going on a date to see how we look.

Our mirrors might be full-frame, wall-mounted, self-supported or full-length. They might be square, rectangular, oval, circular or trapezoid.

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

But what about the mirror that the apostle James used 2,000 years 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 first century. Artifacts dating to 6,000 B.C. tell us that the early communities used polished stones as mirrors before going to their equivalent of Walmart.

We need to 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, 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 (see Exodus 38:8). The prophet Isaiah, writing in the sixth century B.C., refers to "mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls" (Isaiah 3:23). And the apostle Paul refers to a mirror in his famous essay on love in 1 Corinthians 13: "For now we see in a mirror dimly ..." (v. 12).

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 many would do. It's that spectacular!

The largest natural mirror is Salar de Uyuni. At 4,000 square miles, it is the world's largest salt flat, about 100 times bigger than the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah. And when water from the mountains floods this plain, the sky seems to join the earth in an impression of infinity. It's one of the most remarkable scenes in the world.

“The Salar de Uyuni is spectacular, no doubt. But the mirror described in today's reading is even more amazing. Let's take a look.”

The most amazing mirror is the word of God. But why is it so incredible?

It's amazing because it's perfect.

The apostle James calls it “perfect” (Greek *τῆλειον/teleion*), and according to the 20th-century Scottish writer, 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” or 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. 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, end or purpose is to fashion vessels of perfection who *are* what they are designed to be (the *imago Dei*) and who *do* what they are designed to do (reflect the *gloria Dei*), 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. You stand in front of the mirror and take a look. "Oh, my goodness! That can't be right!"

Yes, we talk to mirrors. The wicked witch says, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" And the mirror is, like: "Have you seen yourself this morning?"

"The Andy Griffith Show" is a sitcom that has been in reruns for 60 years and is still going strong. Floyd the barber tries to enlist Andy's help in a deception. According to one source, "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 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, we 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. And like the barber of Mayberry, we fail miserably.

It’s amazing because we must lean into the mirror to see better.

As the late, great Yogi Berra, catcher and then manager of the New York 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*. The meaning of the Greek word for (“having looked intently,” v. 25) is similar. The word 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” (Luke 24:12).
- “He *bent down to look in* and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in” (John 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 bend to the will of God and are obedient.

Finally, it’s 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.

- “And God, who knows the human heart ...” (Acts 15:8).
- “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 Samuel 16:7).
- “Would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart” (Psalm 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 we 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.

We 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 into the mirror and let us act on what we see. When we do, we will be better for it and so will our congregation and our families. As James writes in verse 25, “They will be blessed in their doing.”

May the peace of God . . .

#644 – Although I Speak with Angel’s Tongue