

# Wiseguy

Studies in the Book of James

Text

James 1:19-27

Topic

Title

*"Mirror, Mirror of the Lord;  
He's the Fairest of Them All"*

## Introduction

There are some great 'mirror-moments.'

I've already alluded to the classic line from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. If you're paying attention, and a big fan of the Disney version, you know the actual dialog is, "**Magic** mirror on the wall."

(In the original Brothers Grimm story, translated into English, it is indeed: Mirror, mirror, on the wall, Who in this land is fairest of all?).

Trivia aside, the Evil Queen's look into the mirror sets the malevolent tone for the story.

*Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* is a novel by Lewis Carroll, the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Set some six months later than the earlier book, Alice again enters a fantastical world, this time by climbing through a mirror into the world that she can see beyond it.

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, the Mirror of Galadriel was a basin filled with water in which one could see far away visions of the past, present and future. It was used by Galadriel, the Lady of Lórien.

Galadriel could not predict what the mirror would show and did not guarantee that its visions would come to pass.

The best pop-culture mirror-moment has to be the Fonz in *Happy Days*. Season One, episode one, he steps up to the bathroom mirror with comb in hand, only to see himself perfectly coifed. He then uttered his famous, "Eyy!"

The term, "Eyy!" came from an improvised moment due to Henry Winkler's refusal to constantly comb his hair. Network executives at ABC insisted he run the comb through his hair, but when it filmed he instead stopped himself and said the line. It received huge laughs from the audience and the scene was made part of the opening sequence.

There are some great mirror-moments in the Bible:

1Co 13:12 For now we see in a **mirror**, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

2Co 3:18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a **mirror** the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

By far, the most well-known mirror-moment is when James said,

Jas 1:23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a **mirror**;

Jas 1:24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is my hope we all have more mirror-moments once we understand a little more about what James was saying.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 The Mirror Shows You There Is Work To Be Done, and #2 The Mirror Shows You The Work God Has Done.

### #1 The Mirror Shows You There Is Work To Be Done

(v19-24)

Do you remember autostereograms? Probably not by that name. Popular in the 1990's, they were those posters of colored dots that allowed some people to see 3D images by focusing on 2D patterns.

You stare at the poster without focusing and, eventually, you will see a hidden three-dimensional image within the pattern.

They are popularly called *MagicEye*.

Obviously the apostle Paul knew nothing about *MagicEye*. But when he said, "we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a **mirror** the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord," it has the feeling of seeing something come into focus.

In our case, Jesus comes into focus and, the more He does, the more like Him we become.

If I'm going to look more like Jesus, *I'm going to need to do a lot of staring!*

James invites us to look long into the mirror.

Jas 1:19 So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;

Jas 1:20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

It's super-important we keep in mind the original audience James was writing to. They were his "beloved brethren" - Jews who had received Jesus Christ as their Messiah. They were being severely persecuted for their faith in Jesus, and had been "scattered" - forced to flee their homes. We would consider them refugees.

I don't need to tell you that the immediate human reaction to persecution is anger, here called "wrath." I think we can assume that many of these Messianic Jews were swift to speak out against their persecutors; slow to hear godly encouragement; and quick tempered.

When he used the word "produced," James was introducing an illustration. If they were to be compared to a plant, the fruit they were producing was "the wrath of man." It's a fruit not at all palatable to God; and not very attractive for a Christian.

James reminded them that their circumstances were the perfect garden to "produce the righteousness of God."

Righteous, and righteousness, are terms we don't always fully understand. In everyday life, we might say something is "righteous" the way Crush does in the Nemo movies - as a superlative to describe the rush he gets from riding the ocean's currents.

In the Bible, righteousness is "behavior that is morally perfect." William Tyndall, the great Bible translator, originally translated the Hebrew word into English as *right-ways*. The Bible's standard of human righteousness is God's own perfection in every attribute, every attitude, every behavior, and every word.

That's why the Bible can declare, "there is none righteous, not one," and that "all fall short of the glory of God."

If we are to have any hope of Heaven, God must declare us righteous. He does declare us righteous - when we believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus takes upon Himself our sin, and God imputes to us His righteousness.

James' use of "righteousness" implies that a saved person can lead a life that is pleasing to God.

A believer can always go the right-ways, and avoid the wrong ways.

Instead of "wrath," the natural reaction, they could produce the fruit of the Spirit.

Are you in a tough testing? Are you producing wrong-way wrath, or right-way fruit?

Jas 1:21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Don't ask me why, but the other day Pam and I were watching a show about just how filthy cities used to be in the Middle Ages. This particular episode was about London. It was making us turn-away and gag.

These words, "filthiness and overflow of wickedness," are like that. Whatever they exactly mean, you don't want their stench and defilement attaching themselves to you.

Were some of the Messianic Jews reverting to gross pre-salvation sins? Maybe.

I think what James meant was something a little different. The phrase "lay aside" tells us that James was likening their situation to laying aside, or *removing*, their garments.

Not their physical garments; their *spiritual* clothing. In terms more familiar to us, he was saying **put-off the old man**, and **put-on the new man**, created in Jesus Christ when you were saved.

"Able to save your souls" describes an on-going work of salvation. Salvation is three-phased in the Bible, involving your past, your present, and your future:

- When you receive Jesus, and are born again, you are saved for eternity. That's the all important phase one.
- As you walk with the Lord, you are being "saved" as you grow in Him, becoming more like Him. This phase of salvation is called sanctification.

- When you go to be with the Lord, your salvation is complete, as you are glorified.

You *are* saved; you *are being* sanctified; you *will be* glorified.

James was encouraging them in phase two - to cooperate with God and be sanctified by enduring persecution as a Christian *can* and *should*.

Jas 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

James had illustrated their response by comparing them to a plant bearing fruit - either wrath, or righteousness.

He had compared them to a man choosing to wear either filthy garments, or those that spoke of righteousness.

Now he says they are like poets. The word "doers" can mean those who build something, or put something together. It is also the word you'd use of a poet, writing poetry.

I like that, because in the Book of Ephesians, Paul says we are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (2:10).

The word for "workmanship" is *poem*. We are God's poem; and we are poets ourselves. As we allow ourselves to be led by God, we are collaborating on the great poem of our lives.

Some of you collaborate online. Several people have access to the same document, and you each work on it until it's deemed finished by the main author.

In this context, to be a "hearer only" means you're not collaborating. You're intently listening to the poet, but making no contribution.

In today's church vernacular, you're a pew-potato. We all know what a couch-potato is. Some ingenious minister coined the term pew-potato to describe disengaged Christians who are basically hearers only.

James says you're "deceiving" yourself. Maybe an illustration will help.

Let's say you want to get in shape. You join one of the gyms here in town. Every few days, you put on your exercise clothes, and you go to the gym. You find a comfortable table in the snack bar, order a latte, and sit there for an hour or two, reading articles and blogs on fitness, and nutrition.

Are you going to get fit? No; you're deceiving yourself. All the equipment is there, but you must utilize it in order to see results.

**Jas 1:23** For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror;

My mirror challenge to you: I challenge you to go out tomorrow, to work or to school, *without looking into a mirror*. Go on a mirror-fast. Do it for several days.

Isn't it terrifying just contemplating it? Bed-hair alone gives me a shudder.

**Jas 1:24** for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.

This guy uses the mirror, but doesn't do anything about what he sees in it. He sees that he needs a shave... He sees that, unlike Fonzi, his hair needs combing... You get the idea.

James says the hearer is observing his "**natural** face," then "forgets what kind of man he **was**."

In other words, he is content reacting to life as a "natural" man, as the man he was before salvation, rather than desirous of things that are more supernatural, that will change him to be more like Jesus.

This section started with James suggesting that those he was writing to were not responding to their persecution the right way. He ends it by suggesting that it was because they were not really interested in becoming more like Jesus.

In the remaining verses, James is going to talk about looking into the mirror in the way that changes you from glory-to-glory, to be transformed more into the image of the Lord.

## #2 The Mirror Shows You The Work God Has Done

(v25-27)

Have you ever seen the mirror comedy skit with Lucille Ball and Harpo Marx? She's dressed just like him, and every time he does something, Lucy mimics it, as if Harpo is looking in a mirror.

Before the election, you may have seen a variation on the mirror skit, as Jimmy Fallon, dressed to look like Trump, had a conversation with Trump as if the president-elect was talking to himself in the mirror.

There is an element of both those ideas in James' use of the mirror as an illustration:

- Like Lucy, we are to see the real thing, then imitate it. The real thing is Jesus, as He is presented in the Bible.
- There is a dialog going on, as God the Holy Spirit applies what we see in Jesus to our own lives, and we decide whether or not to yield to His leading.

Jas 1:25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

Without any explanation, instead of saying "he who looks into the mirror," James calls it "the perfect law of liberty."

His original audience needed no explanation. They would know he meant the Law of Moses, summarized in the Ten Commandments.

Regarding His law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, God had promised the Jews that, one day, He would internalize it, and they would be supernaturally endowed in order to keep it perfectly.

The promise was recorded in the Book of Jeremiah.

Jer 31:33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

My mind is processing all sorts of information, on its own. My heart is beating, on its own, without me having to work at it.

If God's law is in my mind, and written on my heart, then, spiritually speaking, I have been endowed by God to follow it, to keep it, as a by-product of being saved.

Why don't I keep God's law all the time? One reason is that I still find within me the flesh - that propensity to fulfill my natural appetites in sinful ways.

Another reason I don't keep God's law all the time is because I try to keep it in my own strength, as an outward rule or ritual, rather than understanding that I have been endowed with power to keep it from within.

I get that from James calling it "the perfect law of liberty." The law of God is, of course, perfect; there is nothing wrong with it.

But that isn't all that James means here. The "perfect law..." describes what Jesus has done; He perfectly fulfilled or completed the law.

The law was a written code you can't keep. Try and live by the law, as for example the apostle Paul did, and it makes you miserable. He once said, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? (Romans 7:24).

Paul couldn't keep the law no matter how hard he tried. He needed help; and that's what we get in Jesus. He went on to say, "Who will rescue me...? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 7:24-25).

Because He kept the law perfectly, on our behalf, we can now enjoy the "liberty" of living the right way, by the endowment of power given to us by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Look into the mirror of God's law and you will be miserable, for it exposes all your faults. But look into the same law perfectly kept by Jesus on your behalf, and you will be blessed, for it reveals His righteousness.

You and I need constant reminding that the principle way to live is not by rules and rites and regulations. It is by the leading of the indwelling Holy Spirit, as He shows us the right way.

Let me give you a poor illustration; but it might help. Most of you plan to, or you'd like to, retire. For 20 or 30 or 50 years, you work hard, subject to time constraints, and other pressures. Then, one day you wake up and (theoretically, at least) are free to do what you want to do.

James was suggesting that his beloved brethren retire from trying to keep the law and, instead, enjoy the liberty of being empowered by the indwelling Spirit of God to always do what is right.

In their case, it meant they could be set free from producing wrath, and instead love their enemies and persecutors in the power of the Holy Spirit - just like Jesus could and did while He was on earth being persecuted.

Messianic Jews needed constant reminding to not return to the rites and rules and rituals of Judaism as a means of righteousness. One reason they needed this reminding was the temptation to avoid persecution by returning to Judaism.

Nope; not an option. Instead, the right thing to do was to suffer persecution, to endure it, and bring forth the fruit of the Spirit.

Jas 1:26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.

This seems disconnected at first, but it is not. James has been describing the change from keeping the law externally, and being empowered internally to keep it.

Externally, you can seem very "religious." The Pharisees seemed incredibly religious - putting others to shame. But your "tongue" reveals, ultimately, what is in your heart.

This also ties-in to the opening verses of our text. There were those, expressing wrath, who were not bridling their tongue. It should wake them up to the fact they were reverting to the flesh, instead of relying on the Spirit.

Jas 1:27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

In the first century, widows and orphans were especially needy. There were no government programs to help them; it was all left to the religious people.

One author wrote, "the practical outworking of the new birth is found in acts of grace and a walk of separation."

Acts of grace, to James, were extremely personal. I get that from his use of the word, "visit." It's one thing to hear about the needs of "orphans and widows in their trouble," and give towards helping them.

It's another thing entirely to "visit" them - to get hands-on in a personal way.

This doesn't mean every one of us has to visit widows; or take-in orphans.

But it does mean *some* of us do need to do that... And that **all of us** need to be hands-on in some area of ministering to others.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee said,

Christians should be getting out where the people are. I feel there is a grave danger in our having a religion of the sanctuary but not a religion of the street. We need a religion of the street also. We should be in contact with the world in a personal way, with tenderness and kindness and helpfulness.

Just remember to "keep [yourself] unspotted by the world." Its safer in the sanctuary. Life on the streets can get messy.

By "streets," I don't mean ghettos, or the third world. The "streets" are anywhere you live and work; anywhere there are sinners who need the Gospel.

You can become just as defiled in a white-collar job in a skyscraper as you can working with addicts in their makeshift camps.

If you've been born-again, you have a new nature - a divine nature. It loves to obey God; it loves to go the right-ways.

It's not a burden to obey God; it's a blessing.

But it is hard, because the devil is the god of the world system, and he uses it to attack you - to tempt your flesh, and to persecute you.

As these pressures mount, you can revert to your natural reactions. You might, for example, be angry, and say things you shouldn't.

James says, "Don't." Instead, stare at Jesus, as He is revealed in God's Word, until the right-way of reacting comes into focus. Then, by faith, walk according to your new nature.