

1

Imagine what it might be like to have never seen your own face. Long before mirrors and selfies, the only options for seeing oneself would have been a trip to still waters to see one's reflection. About 8000 years ago, someone in the country we now call Turkey figured out how to take volcanic glass-like obsidian stone and polish it into a reflective surface. This early form of a mirror created a portable way of looking at oneself, no longer dependent on a trip to a pond or lake to look at oneself reflected in the water. Thousands of years later, other polished metals served as mirrors, such as bronze, copper, or silver. During the past centuries, as glass making became more refined, flat surfaces of glass were coated with metallic coatings on the backside, making the mirrors we're familiar with today.

The authors of the Bible were familiar with mirrors, for Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 about looking in a mirror and seeing dimly, possibly due to the inadequate mirror technology of his day. The biblical writer James compared those who hear

God's teachings but don't follow the guidance to those who look at their faces in a mirror, walk away, and forget what they saw reflected in the mirror.

The letter by James is an invitation to control our behaviors by avoiding angry outbursts, by controlling our tongues, by caring for those in need, and by avoiding arguing and fighting with others. The letter invites us to look into the mirror of God's teachings and to see how our actions reflect the love of God rather than serving our own interests.

You may recall the story of the evil queen who looked in the mirror for her own self glory, asking, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" She always expected the mirror to speak back wonderful words about her own beauty, but when the mirror suggested that Snow White was lovelier, she became enraged. That began a plot of destruction.

Instead of looking into the mirror to see one's own interests, James suggested we look in the mirror to see care for those who enter a place of worship, regardless of what they look like. When we

see someone in fine clothes, he said, and another in raggedy clothes, he advocated that rather than playing favorites to those who look like ourselves in the mirrors, that we treat everyone with the same kindness and respect. “Be doers of the word” and not just hearers, James wrote to the early church. “Care for the orphans and widows in their distress,” and today he might say, “Get vaccinated and wear a mask to protect those around you.” Look at yourselves in the mirror and remember who you are—one of God’s children. Remember that everyone is part of God’s family, for we are all reflected in the same light of God’s love.

That’s still our mission as the church today, isn’t it? To reflect God’s light, to reflect God’s love into the world by caring for others, just as a mirror reflects light. That’s something author Robert Fulghum discovered while attending a seminar in Greece.

On the last day of the conference, the discussion leader walked over to the bright light of an open window and looked out. Then he asked if there were any questions.

Fulghum laughingly asked him what was the meaning of life. Everyone laughed and got ready to leave. But the leader held up his hand to ask for silence, saying, “I will answer your question.”

He took his wallet out of his pocket and removed a small, round mirror about the size of a quarter. Then he told this story:

“When I was a small child during World War II, we were very poor and lived in a remote village. One day on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible. So I kept the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round.

I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun could never shine. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

I kept the little mirror, and as I grew up, I would take it out at idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game, but a metaphor of what I could do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light

— be it truth or understanding or knowledge — is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world — into the dark places of human hearts — and change some things in some people. Perhaps others seeing it happen will do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”¹

When James wrote about looking at oneself in a mirror, he used the Greek word κατανοέω (kat-an-o-eh-o), which means to consider or observe. It’s a casual glance, not very intent, one easily forgotten. This is the kind of look that James suggested many use when looking into a mirror and forgetting what they saw, similar to rogetting God’s teachings.

James chose a different word when referring to looking at God’s teachings or laws, when not just hearing but doing. He instead used the Greek word

παρακύπτω (par-ak-oo-p-to), which means to stoop down to look at something. This kind of looking requires that one bends forward, bowing, the body bent over. It’s a humbling way of looking, reminiscent of bowing in prayer. It’s an intent and careful gaze, used to inspect something closely.

Sometimes we think of praying and outreach as two separate things, but James ties these spiritual practices together. By caring for others, by stooping down and paying attention to the needs of those around us, we’re bowing in prayer. Worship of God and serving others go hand in hand as we look in the mirror and see God’s light reflected. As we reflect God’s light from the mirror into the world, we serve others and we worship God. Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the voice that we hear call? Listen and follow that voice. May our ears be tuned to hear God’s call to serve others, and may our reflections shine forth God’s loving light into the world.

¹ Adapted from Robert Fulghum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, (Random House, 2010).