

“Mirror, Mirror on the Wall”

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[James 1:17-27 and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

In 1996, The Walt Disney Company, well-known for its theme parks built in Florida, California, and in a few countries around the world, built something else. Very close to Walt Disney World in Florida, they built an entire town. Being a Disney town, this town would not be like other towns. Though it was built in 1996, it was built to look like it came from an earlier era, with clapboard exteriors, pastel colors, front porches and picket fences. Every detail of the town, down to the placement of each tree, was planned out beforehand. Each prospective property owner had to sign a covenant, outlining regulations of the appearance of houses and lawns, down to which house colors and shrubs were allowed, and on which day the lawn is required to be mowed. The Disney Company had control over exactly what businesses could be established. And, though this town – called “Celebration” – is in Florida where it’s unlikely to snow very often, fake snow comes out of the street lamps in December. In an early promotional video, Disney called the town “a place that takes you back to that time of innocence.” The residents of Celebration, Florida, have a community that is unlike any other, their very own utopia, where they can escape the world around.

So, was *that* what James meant by “keeping oneself unstained by the world?” In Celebration, Florida, one doesn’t have to worry about many of the cares of the outside world. You are taken “back to that time of innocence.” Is that what we, as Christians, should do – create our own community, separate from the outside world? This has certainly been suggested – and tried –

by many people over the centuries. Many monastic orders have long separated themselves from the world in order to focus solely on God. Some groups today live nearby, but in their own communities, mostly separated from the rest of the world. And there are those today who would surely jump at the chance to live in a Christianized version of Celebration, a place where only the most dedicated Christians are allowed in and you can be sure that anything that is not distinctly Christian is excluded. This seems like a way to “keep oneself unstained by the world” and perhaps it is the calling of others, but it is not our way. The Presbyterian Confession of 1967 says “To be reconciled to God is to be *sent into the world* as his reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God’s message of reconciliation and shares his labor of healing the enmities which separate [people] from God and from each other.” We are *sent into the world* that God loves, the world that Jesus came and lived and died and rose again to redeem.

If we take a look at the rest of the passage we read from James, we’ll see that he says we should be “doers of the word, not merely hearers.” He says that coming to worship and reading your Bible and praying – all of that is good, but it isn’t enough! We are called to actually *do* what it says in the Word. We are to step out of our self-imposed borders to help those in need of our help, to share our blessings with those who have less than we do, to share the Word of God with those who haven’t heard the Good News. I love the way James says it – we are to be “doers of the word, not merely hearers.”

Yes, I like the way James puts it. The book of James is a book full of practical instructions for us all. And *that* is exactly why plenty other people don’t like the book of James. Martin Luther famously referred to it as “an epistle of straw,” with “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” To Luther, the book of James sounded like “works salvation,” rather than the gospel of salvation by faith alone. If we are saved by faith only, as Romans 3:28 says (“a person is justified by faith apart

from works”), then why is it that James goes on about things Christ-followers should be *doing*? I think that there are two things at work here. First, there are four more words in Romans 3:28 than are commonly quoted. The verse ends with “prescribed by the law,” so that the verse reads “a person is justified by faith apart from works *prescribed by the law.*” I think *that* is true. We are saved by faith alone. We are not saved by doing certain things as prescribed by the law. That is a legalistic approach to salvation, and it is not one that Jesus gave us. There is no checklist of a number of good deeds we have to have completed in order to earn salvation. However, the second thing is that James is not saying that there *is* such a checklist. When he tells us that we should be “doers of the Word,” he *isn’t* saying that as a legalistic approach. He is saying, to paraphrase that old song, “They will know we are Christians by our *actions.*” Actions are love in motion. How can we claim to be followers of Christ if we are not doing the things that Christ told us to do? No, we shouldn’t go out and check things off like a heavenly “to-do list.” We *should* be joyfully serving others as Christ joyfully served others, and doing so is simply *proof* of our faith. It is not separate from faith. In fact, James said in chapter 2: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?... faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” A dead faith is no faith at all. For James, faith and works are inseparable. If you truly have faith, then you will be doing the work of our God. Good works proceed from faith. They are done in thankful response to the gift of God’s grace.

Jesus himself said the same thing as James – that we should not just hear his words, but put them into action. In the passage from Matthew 7 which inspired a great children’s song, Jesus said “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock....And everyone who hears these words of mine and *does not* act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.” James says that when we hear God’s word,

but do not act on it, we deceive ourselves – we are like those looking in a mirror and immediately forgetting what we are like. Rev. Noel Schoonmaker writes “It’s like looking in a mirror to find that our hair is messed up, we’ve got a smudge on our face, and we have little green bits of broccoli stuck in our teeth, and then walking away without doing anything about it.”¹ God’s Word should show us where we have a smudge on our hearts, and inspire us to better reflect our loving God.

So, how do we do the works of God – how do we act on Jesus’ words – and remain “unstained” by the world? We remain unstained by the world by continuing to follow the words of Jesus instead of drifting off track and following the actions of others. Being unstained doesn’t mean being totally separate from others. James couldn’t have meant that in the same passage where he tells us to serve others! If we are to be doers of the Word, we must go out into the world. If we are to remain unstained, then we must root our actions in the Word. Serving others is going to involve getting a little dirty – avoiding that is not what James meant by “remaining unstained.”

At the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) this summer in St. Louis, participants were called to get a little dirty by taking their witness to the hot summer streets with a march for social, racial, and economic justice. Nearly 1,000 assembly-goers marched to the City Justice Center with about \$50,000 raised at the opening worship service, with that money going to pay the bail of around three dozen people accused, but not convicted, of low-level offenses. Unaffordable cash bail for low-level offenses has contributed greatly to the mass incarceration epidemic in the U.S. Assembly-goers were given a chance to speak up against this injustice. Erin Counihan, co-organizer of the march, said “People are ready for the church to take action. I think the church showing up in the community is crucial now.” Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, Stated Clerk

¹ http://day1.org/8258-noel_schoonmaker_doers_of_the_word

of the PC(USA), said “Today, we know we have to put up or shut up.”² In other words, we must be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive ourselves.

Yes, we must act on the word of God, instead of worrying about getting ourselves a little dirty. Actually, according to Jesus, remaining unstained is more of an issue because of what is on the inside of *us*, rather than what is in the world around us. He tells us in our lesson from Mark that we are dirty on the inside, more so than on the outside. The Pharisees had a very ritualistic approach to many things, including hand-washing. They complained when Jesus’ disciples did not follow the same rituals they did. Jesus set them all straight by telling them that it is not what goes into the body that we must concerned about. It is all of those things which come from within. As Jesus said, “it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” Remaining unstained means that we must guard ourselves against those things which come from within. We must always be on guard for the evil intentions which live inside all of us. We should be much less concerned about being stained by the world than by what is inside each of us.

The Pharisees were more concerned about ritual purity than about purity of the heart, and Jesus called them on it. Then, I think He calls out all of us about those things which are within us. And James calls us to live unstained lives, lives of service to others, lives of being doers of the word. He gives us a particular example of how to live lives worthy of the gospel, and that is “to care for orphans and widows...” Those particular categories were two of the most vulnerable in their society. Both groups were left on their own, without anyone to care for them, so James says that Christ-followers should take care of them. These are, of course, not the only people we should

² <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2018/6/19/hundreds-presbyterians-join-march-st-louis-justice/>

be caring for; it is just one example that James gives us. We serve God by taking care of all of God's children. We serve God by following the words of Jesus, not out of a legalistic obligation, but out of the joy that we find in and through Jesus. We share the love and grace and mercy of our Lord with others, seeking to remain unstained by living out the call of God on our lives. In doing so, what is on our insides will be even cleaner than what is on the outside as we reflect what our creator God made us to be. So, let's spend some time looking in the mirror, and then let's work on what we see so that our living is a truer reflection of the grace and love of God. Amen