

Looking Into the Mirror

Psalm 15
James 1:22-27

Cynthia (not her real name), ended all contact with her brother after he sent her a text message. She checked her phone at an airport gate and saw this: “Hey, if you haven't left yet, I hope your plane crashes.” She knew he meant it; it was the culmination of years of fighting. She could not remember how it started, though she did remember a number of what she called “lowlights”. Both of them had contributed to the war of words. Both of them had lied about the other. Both of them had savagely criticized the other behind his or her back.

University of Pittsburgh professor and psychologist Daniel Shaw shared Cynthia's, and twenty-plus others', case studies of sibling warfare in a paper he published in 2019. To his surprise a producer at KDKA radio called and asked him to come on to talk about his work. He was shocked they had found the paper and could not imagine why they wanted him to go on-air about such a difficult topic. Yet after he and the host had chatted for only a few moments, the phone lines lit up. As Shaw said to a Pittsburgh Gazette reporter a few days later, “Something happened, and they never forgave each other, so now they were calling in ... to talk about how they had decided to forgive or how they hadn't spoken for 20 or 30 years. I think we could have listened to them all day, there were so many. And they were in such pain.”

Shakespeare wrote, “Slander, whose edge is sharper than the sword,
whose tongue outvenoms all the worms of the Nile,
whose breath rides on the posting winds and doth belie
All corners of the world.”

Or as James puts it, “If anyone thinks they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is vain.” The central theme of the book of James is, **Do** your faith. Seek holiness, by all means. Keep yourself “unstained from the world.” But if our religion in its entirety consists only of hermetically sealing ourselves off from the rest of the world, we are not, in fact, followers of Christ.

Scholar Donald Burdick calls James 1:22 the key verse of the entire letter. It reads, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” In our verses James gives two examples of how to do Christianity: visiting orphans and widows, and taming our tongues. While obviously not meant as an exhaustive list of everything we ought to do, these are two excellent ways to imitate Jesus. In my boyhood my family frequently moved. I was proud, and terribly sensitive to any perceived insults, any misuses of the tongue aimed at me. I believe that every time we moved I got into a least one fight as I stood up to those who would bully me verbally in the new place. In those days, so long as you took it off of school property, boys could get away with these, um, *contests*. But for all the physical damage I did—and received—nothing hurt as badly as those insults. The tongue *is* more venomous than all the asps in Egypt.

James gives his theme a positive spin in 1:25: "But whoever looks into the perfect law...and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, they shall be blessed in their doing." This "looking into" uses the same Greek verb John the Gospel writer used to describe himself stooping to *look into* Jesus' empty tomb. The word conveys both the physical effort of looking, and the flash of insight that results from looking. We are to look intently into Scripture to understand its meaning. Here, James calls on us to study God's "perfect law". This refers not just to the Old Testament law, nor even the whole of the Pentateuch, but to all of God's revelations to us. Both Testaments of the Bible, the fruits of our prayers, the guidance planted in our consciences by the Holy Spirit: all these and more communicate God's law, God's rules to govern our behavior.

One underappreciated method of revealing right behavior is socialization. From infancy we learn by imitating others. A baby watches everything and without thinking about it tries to do what she sees others doing. Our granddaughter is learning how to wave goodbye. Her mother, father and big brother are teaching her how by waving at her. They need say nothing. She just move her arm in a vague imitation of their actions. In the church, we learn how to behave as followers of Jesus by watching what other followers of Jesus do. If the members of the church visit orphans and widows, we will too. If they bridle their tongues we will too. If they do not do these things, we very likely will not, either.

Genuine Christianity is a life-changing force. It changes our behavior. It

therefore changes what others witness us doing—and not doing. As Burdick puts it: “(Our walk with Jesus) should be more than superficial; it must spring from an inner spiritual reality that expresses itself in love to others and holiness before God.” My friend Elizabeth serves as senior pastor of the Danville, Virginia Presbyterian Church. She started there about a year ago. In a recent call she told me she had finally sorted out which pastors' group she would join. One is dominated by complaining and gossip. (Sadly, I have often found this to be characteristic of pastors' groups.) The other has clear rules and boundaries about what can and cannot be said at meetings. Unsurprisingly, it feels much more healthy, even joyful. Even less surprisingly, that is the group Beth chose.

To return to the paper by Daniel Shaw, he did not simply document how siblings mistreat each other over the course of many years. He cited the psychological literature to give a brief overview of why siblings fight in the first place. It has to do, of course, with the rivalry for their parents' attention and affection. And once we “mature” (air quotes) into adults our feelings about our siblings are often wounded by differences in how our lives appear to be going. Who has money and who does not? Who seems happily married and who does not? Who lives in the nicer home? Who seems more content? Those on the short side often struggle not to feel bitter toward those on the long.

In the church we see all these dynamics. And we can throw in one more, perhaps one of the most potent drivers of all destructive behaviors: the power

dynamic. Who has it and who does not? Who gets to decide? Who just has to accept what others decide? I am aware of a church currently embroiled in a hot fight over whether to use “real” plates and napkins, or paper, at their dinners. But as we all know that is not really what they are fighting about. They are fighting about who wins, who chooses, who has the juice. To all of which God says, “Stop it. Tame your tongues. Clean up your acts. Walk like I walked when I was among you.”

Our spiritual parent, God, loves unconditionally. The Bible assures us again and again that God loves every single one of us exactly the same, with literally inhuman intensity and permanence. The Bible also tells us God has a special heart for those on the short side. The dynamics that cause jealousy and anger in our hearts have no power over God. We need not see each other as rivals. We are, instead, brothers and sisters. And we have the biblical and theological framework that can teach us how to repair even the most broken of relationships. That framework has three parts: confession, repentance and forgiveness.

Over the years I have occasionally heard from parishioners that they wish I would not be so confessional in my daily life and in my preaching. While I recognize that some need to believe their pastor is a really great Christian, I cannot easily live with myself if I do not confess when I have failed to walk like Jesus. And if I do not confess—preferably directly to the person or persons I have harmed—I stall the healing process. From Moses' brother Aaron after he made the golden calf to King David after confronted with his adultery with Bathsheeba to the Apostle Paul's humble

request for forgiveness after losing his temper yet again, the Bible overflows with examples of spiritual leaders confessing their sins. We need to follow their example.

Because confession permits the next step in the process to occur. Repentance is the turning away from our sins and turning toward holier behavior. When we genuinely repent, we show that we wish to repair relationships injured by our sins. Daniel Shaw writes of Jermaine (also not his real name), who in a counseling session with his sister said something every counselor hears: “You say you're sorry, but you don't act like it.” Repentance is acting like it. In the case of Cynthia's brother repentance would entail sending only supportive texts. In Jermaine's sister's case repentance would mean using counseling actually to effect changes in her own behavior. In our case as followers of Jesus, repentance would mean putting in the effort to turn ourselves around and to actually walk in his footsteps.

Because confession and repentance together lead us all the way home to forgiveness. We need to practice all three. Because truth be told, we cannot completely control our tongues. We will never become perfectly holy. We will hurt each other. But we can heal those wounds. And doing so witnesses to the power of God more clearly than anything else it is within our power to do. As the old saying has it, “Your actions speak so loudly I cannot hear your words.” Church, do your faith. Curb your tongue. Imitate Jesus with as much holiness as his Spirit can muster within you. Heal relationships. Bear witness to the truth of your beliefs. Confess, repent, forgive. And you shall be blessed in your doing.