

The Sharper Image

In the name of him who does all things well, dear friends in Christ: Though I have never asked for it, about once a quarter I receive a catalog from a mail order outfit that calls itself “The Sharper Image”. Maybe some of you receive it too. If you’re not familiar with it, the kind of merchandise you find inside this catalog consists mostly of various accessories and high-tech gadgets – overpriced accessories and gadgets, I might add – that promise to put you on the cutting edge of style and fashion. There’s all kinds of stuff: hats, watches, sunglasses, binoculars, briefcases, even air filters. And there’s a certain “James Bond” quality about a lot of the products. No, nothing’s lethal, no fountain pens that emit toxic gas or death rays hidden in digital cameras, nothing like that; still, some of the items suggest a piece of equipment that Q might provide agent 007 before some particularly dangerous mission. They’re the sort of things that are supposed make you appear “cool”. Hence the name: “The Sharper Image”. The idea is that if you buy their stuff you too will instantly begin to elicit that response that James Bond gets when he confidently strolls into a Monte Carlo casino. People stop what they’re doing and gasp. They think, “Wow. Whatever true class is, that guy’s got it.” I should probably add that I’ve never made a purchase from that catalog – I’ve seen no need to. I mean, if you have the kind of style that I do naturally, what’s the point? How do you improve upon perfection? On the other hand, maybe I receive it because one of you keeps ordering it for me and you’re trying to tell me something.

Anyway, on a bit more serious note, whether the products in that catalog (or any catalog) are able to deliver the promised improvement in image—which is highly doubtful, there is something to be said for wanting to make a favorable impression on people. Presenting a sharp image – making an effort to put forth your best possible appearance – is a good thing. And if we agree it’s important for mere outward appearances, which are, as they say, only skin deep, then let me suggest that it’s even more important in a spiritual sense. We as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, those who have been redeemed by him from sin and death by his sacrifice on our behalf, should naturally want to project the results of his saving and sanctifying work in us to the world. And that is what James (not James Bond but *Saint* James) is saying in his letter to the church – a portion of which we heard earlier. You might say that his little book is the New Testament version of “the sharper image” for the Christian person. Having been saved by grace through faith in Christ, James encourages us to strive to reflect more sharply the image of Christ who redeemed us.

And this often misunderstood by Christians who read the Epistle of James. Lifted out of context, it is sometimes mistakenly assumed that much of what James says runs contrary to the Gospel because he writes so much about the good works and behavior of Christians rather than about their trust in Christ’s saving work for them. But the thing to see is that James is consciously writing to people who have already been delivered from their lives of ignorance and sin by God’s mighty work upon them. Through the power of his Word, they’ve come to trust in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the salvation he earned for us on the cross. This is made abundantly clear when James writes, “*He* chose to give us birth through the word of truth.” James gives all the credit to God when it comes to our salvation – God, who he tells us, is the source of every good and perfect gift from above. And chief among these gifts is God’s own Son sent as a sacrifice for our sins. So James doesn’t deny the Gospel. What he wants us to do is build our lives upon it. His concern is that we not simply stop and say, “Okay, I trust in Jesus. I’ve been forgiven. I guess that’s all there is to it. I’m saved. I’m done.” No, he wants us to take very seriously the ongoing process by which we are transformed in the here and now, by degrees, to reveal ever more clearly Christ-like attitudes and behaviors. He wants us to be in a readily apparent way the first-fruits of the new creation. He wants us to project a sharper image of Christ.

How is this done? Well, if you want to improve your appearance, the place you start is at the mirror. You have to take a good look at yourself. You can’t go with what you think you look like or what you imagine you’d like to look like; that would be self-deceptive. You need the objective truth. And that’s the good thing about mirrors: they don’t lie. They reveal every blemish, every wrinkle, every extra pound, flabby muscle, and wayward hair. They tell it like it is even when we don’t want to hear it, or rather, see it. But that’s

where you've got to start if you want to improve your image. You need to know what's wrong so that you can do what's possible to make yourself more presentable.

The same thing is true in a spiritual sense. You have to start by looking in the mirror. And according to James that's exactly what we have in God's Word. It's a mirror that we can look into to see deeper than skin level. In God's Word we can see right into our souls. Reflected in the mirror of God's holy law we can see how our souls appear through his eyes. And like the mirror in your bathroom, it's brutally honest – it holds nothing back. Every dark stain of sin, each evil thought and action, it all comes into perfect view when reflected by the mirror of the Word. And just as a person carefully studies his or her face in the mirror to find little flaws and imperfections that need to be corrected, so we should look into the mirror that reflects the blemishes on our souls, so we can take the appropriate action.

But could you imagine looking in the mirror, discovering something horribly wrong that you could easily correct with a toothbrush or piece of tissue, and thinking to yourself, "Ugh! Gotta fix that!" and then stepping away from the mirror, forgetting all about it, and walking out the door to face the day? Does that sound like something you would want to do? Of course not! And that's exactly the point St. James is making when he speaks of being doers of the Word and not hearers only. When you look in the mirror of God's Law (that is you hear it), and you see a problem in the way you live your life, and then you fail to do anything about it, it's like going out into the world in the morning with your breakfast smeared all over your face, your hair in tangled knots, and your clothes turned inside out. You just wouldn't do that because you wouldn't want to be seen that way.

But that doesn't always stop us like it should. Why not? Simply stated, we engage in self-deception. There are times when we know exactly what we are going to see when we look into the mirror of God's Word – so we don't look. We stay away from our devotions, Bible reading, Sunday worship, and so forth, because we know the reflection we will see will be unpleasant. It's the "if I don't look, there can't be anything wrong" approach. You're only fooling yourself. If you are a parent, you may remember teaching your children that that method was an unacceptable way to get ready for school. "You can't go out like that! Did you even look in the mirror this morning?" And yet, there are times we try it ourselves in the spiritual sense. Or we may look in the mirror of the Word and pretend the problems we see are not noticeable. "After all", we think, "no one else can see into my soul." But this is a two-fold deception. First, while it's true that other people can't see the stains on your soul as clearly as you, it doesn't follow that they are completely blind to them. Can you say that you've never noticed someone else's "thought to be hidden" sin? It doesn't take X-ray eyes, does it? Yet we deceive ourselves when it comes to our own "hidden" sins. And then, even if they are truly hidden from others, there's no deceiving God. He sees everything, and it is to him that we must ultimately answer for our spiritual appearance. Better to stop deceiving ourselves, and work on correcting the problems we see staring back at us.

St. James goes on to give us a couple examples of the disfiguring faults we are likely to see when we take the time to study ourselves in God's mirror. The first is anger. He writes, "*Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life God desires.*" It should be stated that anger has its proper place. Even God gets angry. In the face of injustice and cruelty, especially when directed toward the weak and helpless, God's anger burns hot and sure. But God's anger has three characteristics that human anger often lacks. First, it's always righteous anger in response to evil. It is never motivated by evil itself. It does not come from envy, pride, or selfishness. Second, it is slow to awaken. God does not fly off in rage at the first minor offense. If he did, we'd all be in deep trouble. Instead, God patiently endures our almost constant provocation, choosing to bear with us in our weaknesses. Finally, God's anger is quick to dissipate. When he acts in judgment, or when we seek his forgiveness, his anger is gone. He holds no grudges.

When human anger is like God's, it's entirely appropriate. Unfortunately, it rarely is. Instead, we get angry immediately over the tiniest of things, and then we brood over our little fire of anger like a troop of boy scouts on a cold, wet camp out, feeding and fanning it to make sure it keeps burning. Any one of you can name people you know whose lives seem to be consumed with such anger: people who are just mad at the world, and who seem to go out of their way to find other things to get mad about. You've got to admit that it's an ugly way to live. And when we look in the mirror and see the same symptoms in ourselves, we should be horrified.

The second blemish James mentions that we are likely to see is what he calls an “unbridled tongue.” “We often underestimate the enormous power of that little muscle. But it can with very little effort destroy careers, ruin lives, break up marriages, and deceive souls straight into hell. Words spoken in anger cannot be retracted. They continue to wound their targets long after they are released. Like radioactive fallout, they can emit deadly rays for many years after the initial blast. In fact, the pain inflicting half-life of some cruel words can last the whole life of a person. Then there’s gossip and rumors, both true and false, which are a plague in every community and organization humankind has ever known. And we know that from personal experience. But how often are we ourselves the originator or carrier of the plague? How often have we failed to test what we say by the so-called “three gates of gold”: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? If it doesn’t pass those gates, it shouldn’t come out of the mouth – and yet we all know that sometimes it does anyway.

Okay, so there it is: you’ve looked into the mirror and you’ve seen it. There’s the festering sore of anger. There’s the gangrenous tongue dripping with venom. There’s who-knows-what-else you see. The question is now, “How do I fix these problems?” These obviously aren’t the sorts of things that a little make up will cure. That’ll only hide the problems. Nor can they be fixed by simply trying to do better in the future. That won’t heal anything. In fact, that can make the problems worse.

Let me explain why. I just recently read again a story called *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. The setting is Victorian England. Dorian Gray is a particularly handsome and stylish young man of the privileged class who is the favorite subject of a certain artist. This artist paints an especially fine portrait of Dorian, pouring every bit of his skill into the project. The result is a stunning likeness that captures the perfection of young Dorian’s innocent appearance. When Dorian first sees this painting, he’s delighted. But he soon comes to realize that the painting is a sort of curse. He understands that it will always remain the same but that he will change, and as he does, as he gets older and his beauty fades, the perfection of the painting will mock him. It will only remind him of what he once was but now is not. With feelings of despair he utters a heartfelt wish: “Oh that the painting would change; but that I remain the same.”

He is granted his wish (hey, I didn’t say it was a true story). Anyway, as it turns out the painting changes with more than just his age. It actually becomes more of a mirror of his soul. His sins show up on it in the form of deceitful eyes, greedy, clutching fingers, and bloated, sagging cheeks. Blessed as he is with perpetual youth and innocent looks, Dorian leads a life of vice and reckless abandon. He treats other people as his playthings. He uses women and throws them away when he grows tired of them. He takes no care for their feelings or anything else. He knows that nothing he does will look bad on him. Meanwhile the portrait, which he keeps hidden in his attic, becomes uglier and uglier. Now, of course, up to this point, the story is just another way to look at what I’ve been talking about: about how we all present one face – our best face – to the world, but how inside we are unclean and filled with sin. There comes a point in the story, however, when Dorian is finally horrified himself at what he sees in the portrait. Just knowing what’s really inside him robs him of all joy. He resolves to try to make the painting look better by improving his behavior. He refrains from certain sins. And after he’s done this for a while, he rushes back to the portrait hoping to see some sign of improvement. Instead, he finds the portrait is even worse – far worse. At first, he doesn’t understand; but then it comes to him that on top on all the other sins he’s now added the pride of self-righteousness.

That’s the problem with trying to improve our spiritual image on our own and by our own efforts. We only make things worse by adding the sin of pride to the sin that’s already there. And so, in the story, Dorian comes to this inescapable conclusion: “If I sin the portrait gets uglier. If I try to do better, the same thing happens. There’s only one thing left to do: destroy the portrait.” He attempts to do this with a knife, slashing it across the canvass; but in the process, he kills himself: he is, after all attacking his own soul. The next day they find his body lying next to the torn painting. Except for the knife slash, the painting is as beautiful as the day it was painted. It’s Dorian’s dead body that now bears all the marks of his sin. This is what the Lord God has said: “The soul that sins must die.” Just as we did not create ourselves or save ourselves from death and hell, so also we cannot improve ourselves in a spiritual sense. We can only die and let God raise us up again in Christ. That will happen in an absolute sense one day, and we look forward to it; but for the time being God has given us another way. It is the death of repentance and confession. What made us Christians in the first place was God’s Word convicting us of our sins and showing us that we were under his wrath and judgment. That’s what opened our hearts to receive the good news that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, took that

wrath and judgment upon himself. In Baptism then we were united with Christ. We died with him. We were buried with him. And we rose with him to live a new life.

And the way we live this new life is by everyday looking into the mirror of God's Law again; and seeing without self-deception what we are in God's sight: sinners. Filthy sinners. Ugly, blemished, malformed sinners who cannot get better on our own. That's what causes us to despair of ourselves and die the death of repentance all over again. At the same time, it opens up our hearts to turn to Christ who is our righteousness before God. The more we see of our sin, the more we see the need to rely on Christ – to hide ourselves in him. That's how we grow to trust in him more. And as we do that, as we rely more on him, more of him will be seen in us. His image in our lives will become more distinct – and that is the goal. So may God who sends all good gifts from above give us the grace also to do this, that each of us may bear the sharper image of Christ Jesus our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!