

“Reflection vs. Deflection”  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 8:22-30

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“Who do you say that I am?” was Jesus’ question to the disciples. Perhaps it’s a question that continues to be with us today. Oftentimes we still have people asking that question, “Who is Jesus, anyway?” So the answer is important. It seems very important to me. In some ways it almost seems like as the disciples have seen the healings and been part of them, that there’s a way in which they have been healed to the point where they can see enough, they can hear enough to know that Jesus is the Messiah.

You kind of expect Mark to be over with that. That’s good news. God has sent one to lead us, to show us the way. *Messiah* actually means to *anoint ruler*, the anointed ruler from God, the one that God sends into our lives – as much as sometimes I think it is hard for us to hear that idea – to rule over us. In these days of individualism it’s hard to think of anybody giving anybody rule over our lives. But I would argue that if we really look at our lives closely enough we recognize how many of our decisions are made, what feels like, in the dark. It is as we have one who brings the light – or as James says, from the Father of lights – brings that light to us, is the one we can follow, that we can acknowledge as ruler.

That’s a huge thing to do, and I think that most of us in some way have grappled with that in our lives. Most of us come here at least wanting that to be the case. If it’s still something that’s a real struggle for some of us, I’d love to talk more about that, but not right now. I would love to have that conversation about what it means and why and who he is. But I’m going to assume that to some extent we acknowledge that Jesus was sent by God, or as James, chapter 1, verse 17 says, “every generous act, with every perfect gift.” What he’s saying there is that all that’s good comes from God. And I would like to translate “perfect gift” into “the fullness of grace.” I think that’s an appropriate translation of what’s there. All that’s good comes from God, as does the fullness of grace.

I believe that the ruling nature of Jesus, allowing him to be the one we follow, allowing him to be our King, allowing ourselves to accept him as the Messiah, opens us to and allows us to know the fullness of God’s grace. That’s where James starts, because that’s where, in many ways, our whole

faith journey starts as we accept Jesus as the one through whom and in whom God is at work, coming to show us the way, to be on the way with us, the one that we can follow and begin to understand a difference.

The whole book of James, I think, is about that difference. It's about how, not only do we see what God has done, not only do we hear about what God has done, but we find that we can allow it to enter in to our lives. Even here, as we go on in these verses, it says to rid ourselves of sordidness and evil, of immorality and evil. Now when I hear that, I think that I've got to do that so I can have this grace. I don't think that's at all what James is really trying to say. In fact I would take that and look at what comes immediately afterwards.

The word "rid" means to take off. So it's like taking off my jacket. By doing that, I've gotten rid of something that made me hot. There's a way in which James is calling us to do the same thing, to get rid of the sin that changes our lives. But to do that, I think, is impossible by ourselves. That's why the second half of that verse is so important. He says, "...by the implanted word of truth." It's not something we do on our own. It is something that we have to open up to, we have to accept, we have to let in. But as we let it in, as we let God implant that word of truth in us – the reality of Christ as the one who leads us, the one who's King, the one we follow, the one that's Messiah, the Christ – as we allow that to be implanted into us, we begin to be changed.

James uses the image of the mirror: of going to the mirror and looking in it and walking away and doing nothing. There are times where we might want to see what we look like, to change something about our appearance, but if we go and look then do nothing, nothing changes. Oftentimes, I think it's a little more like: I know my hair is turning white; I don't need to look in the mirror to see it. But if I don't look in the mirror, I won't see that my collar is turned up or I still have toothpaste on my face. James is helping us see that we have that mirror that God's grace coming to us is about changing who we are.

The struggle is always between the grace God gives us and what we do. Are we earning God's grace? Let me say it this way: God's grace is always there for us. It's not something we earn, but it is something we can participate in. We can think about it and say it's a wonderful thing. We can hear all about it, we can acknowledge it's there, but until we say "How do I

let it in and who does it lead me to become? How are my decisions part of God's grace?"

That's what God is doing, I think. I think that's what James is doing—helping us see that God's grace changes the kind of decisions we make. He gives us an example. One example is anger. What is anger? It's surprisingly hard to define. But I think that anger has to do with when our world doesn't fit in some way. We have expectations or assumptions or particular meanings, particular privileges we expect, all kinds of those things, but then it's threatened, or doesn't live up to it, or it's challenged. What's the nature of anger? Oftentimes, unless you're a lot different than me, that initial anger leads me to react without thinking. Because it's all about me. Because it's about the way I hold on to things, it's about my world.

Well, one of the things that Jesus is doing is helping us recognize that it's not all about my world, it's really God's world. If something doesn't go right, it's not all about me, there's some way it's about God, too, and I can take a step back and say, "God, what's this about? How do I respond?" I can even see that I want to respond in a particular way. I have a gut reaction. My first reaction needs to be, "God, what's up?" not outward with the first thought I have, or the first thing that wants to come out of my mouth. It's an invitation into the grace of God and to see that that grace begins to change the very way we live together. We begin to hear more, and out of that hearing, do. Rather than out of the very gut reactions I might have that are often based on something as simple as that idea of looking in the mirror. There are times when I think something is a particular way and I have particular reactions to it. I could think that somebody dismissed me and get upset about it, and find out later that they didn't even see me. How much that changes the whole thing. If I simply react out of the way I think things are, that's my thinking, that's why the imbedded word of truth is so important, because it's not my thinking that's being imbedded, it's not my truth, it's God's. I believe it is God who works, then, through us in changing the way we see things and helping us see the reality of love and grace, the very hope we have in Christ. And that's why James goes on to talk about what is religion. What does it really mean?

As we accept Christ as Messiah, as ruler of our life, more than just hearing and seeing, but letting that word be implanted in us, that changes us. It changes the way we do things. Generally, that way we do things is partly

described as religious. Unfortunately that's become a bad word these days. But I would remind you that religion originally is about caring about God. The idea is that it's in some way caring about God and caring about what God cares about. Now in the process of doing that, we have put all kinds of trappings around it, and those trappings have been called religion. But at the core, it's about caring about God and caring about what God cares about. And as we do that and recognize that God has done that through Jesus, allowed us a way of knowing what God cares about. It's interesting what comes out. That we care for the most vulnerable among us, and that we see how the world would lead us into the mud hole and that we would come out dirtier than we want to be. The wonderful thing is that not only does God encourage us not to go through the mud, but there's a way to get cleaned off, that we can see Christ, acknowledge him as Messiah, and follow, and in that we are cleansed and we are given new life. In fact, one of the ways it's described here in James is a birth.

In some ways we can talk about this over and over again. The wonder of grace the new life in Christ, the things that indicate where we're at, how it's going, our behavior, whether it's becoming something that's expressed in and through us, but it always gets down to one thing. That God is present and our choices matter and we can join in living in the kingdom. It's always the invitation. Amen.