

# The Straight Mirror in the Funhouse

*Matthew 7:21-27; James 1:19-27*

It has been a strange feature of my own personal study of James that I have been prompted to remember the struggles of other men, historical figures, as they wrestled to make hide or tail of what these passages are all about. So we've talked about Luther being tempted to throw these stark, challenging passages into his wood stove. We've remembered Zwingli and Calvin who followed Luther and believed that the words of the Bible are the only trustworthy foundation on which to build a civilization, never mind our own personal lives.

And we've mentioned in passing what a radical departure they made from all the centuries that went before them, centuries when men and women had traditionally been governed in the name of God by other men who claimed the sanction and authority of God for their decisions. The technical word for a society where government rules in the name of and with the authority of God is theocracy and the Bible teaches that there have only been three legitimate theocracies in all of human history, the Garden of Eden where Adam ruled, the Ark in the Flood where Noah ruled, and last and longest, Old Testament Israel where, beginning with Moses, judges and kings ruled all in the name of God.

The critical point being that the kingdom Jesus established with his disciples on the highways and byways and hillsides of Galilee was not, definitely not, a theocracy. On the night he was betrayed, his disciples drew their swords and tried to protect Jesus theocracy style, expecting that God would empower them to win, outnumbered through they were, just as God had done countless times for Old Testament Israel. Peter and the boys didn't lack for courage or faith.

They just didn't understand that the days of God's kingdom living by a sword were over, until Jesus told them to put their swords away. Now the difference between Moses' Law on Sinai and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not ethical. Jesus was clear about that. He said, *"Don't think that I've come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I've not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota, not a dot shall pass away from the Law until all is accomplished."*

So if anything the ethics Jesus taught are sharper, even harder to reach than Moses' Law. But what is entirely lacking from the Sermon on the Mount are any physical punishments for trespassing the holiness of God. In Jesus' kingdom, no one can be beaten or stoned or bodily harmed for a spiritual or moral failure. Because theocracies teach Judgment Day using physical symbols, making physical examples. Animals die at the altar for people's sins, hands must be washed, a diet must be kept, and any human failure to respect or observe these symbols must be physically punished.

But the arrival of Jesus is the end of physical symbols. In his kingdom, God's people wield no swords in God's name. No animals die at our worship services. Where washing and diet used to look forward to Christ, now baptism and communion are remembrances. They look back at the forgiveness Christ gained on the cross for people who would have been executed in old Israel. So God's holiness, his commandments are in effect as much as they ever were. You just heard me quote Jesus saying so.

But the primary word Jesus gave us to share with people who can't make the commandments add up is grace. A Savior has suffered and died so that none of us need suffer the pain and eternal death that waits for us on Judgment Day. We can be forgiven and loved by God and loved by God's people. And God will make a way for us out of sins we can't imagine we can live without, if we'll only believe God's word is true, and trust Jesus as our Savior, and allow his Spirit to do his work in our hearts.

This is the good news that Luther and Zwingli and Calvin found in the words of the Bible that exposed just how mad and wrong it was for medieval popes and kings to be throwing sinners in jail and beating them and burning them at the stake for personal spiritual failings that didn't involve physical criminal behavior and didn't do anyone any physical or material harm.

Because, in Jesus kingdom, the spiritual well being of believers, the soundness and wholeness of people's souls is the between them and God and the Church. So Jesus never gave the Church any physical territory to govern, or any right to do any person any physical harm. So Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, at the risk of their own lives, set western civilization on a path toward the balance Jesus taught in the gospels, "*Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar...*", law and order, Caesar is there to punish criminals and to preserve safety and order, but we should "*...render unto God what belongs to God.*"

So the Reformers taught and began to build a sacred kingdom that governs spiritual realities. but this kingdom can exist in all kinds of societies arising from all kinds of different cultures. Because we don't need to run the table, we don't need to rule society, to build that invisible kingdom that has spiritual power to heal and reconcile and straighten and make whole the dents and fractures that live in all our individual hearts. We don't need government assistance to get that done. The Church is the arena in which broken souls are redeemed to know, love, and resemble a holy God.

And Jesus is the Messenger and the Message, the Word made alive, made flesh who through his Spirit can set that process in motion in each of us and all of us together. And it was Jesus that Luther searched for and couldn't find in the first chapter of James letter. But Luther didn't throw James into his wood stove, because Luther understood that God's word had to be right whether Luther understood or not. And I've have said that I don't know whether Luther ever found

Christ in James' letter or not. But with the help of two good commentators, I found Christ all over James' first chapter.

Christ is "*the lowly brother who boasted*" because he trusted his Father to lift him out of poverty. And Christ is "*the rich brother who boasted in his humiliation*", the Crown Prince of the Universe who gave it all away to make us rich in what really matters. Jesus is the "*Blessed...man*" who endured "*temptation*" and won for us "*the Crown of Life the Father gives to those who love him.*" Jesus is the "*the good and perfect gift from above, coming down from the Father of Lights*".

Jesus is the "*Word of truth*" who, when we trust him, he "*brings us forth*", the first sprouts of a new heaven and earth. And Jesus is, in our passage today "*the Word of God implanted*" who alone "*is able to save*" our "*souls*". So James, far from being the Old Testament Pharisee Luther suspected him to be, James places his older half-brother between the lines in everything he teaches this readers and us to do. He teaches us this week, "*Therefore, having put aside all filthiness and rampant wickedness, in meekness, receive the Word implanted which is able to save your souls.*"

Now this is entirely different than James just scolding us and telling us to be good. What he's teaching here is that is that belonging to Jesus, having God's Spirit write God's Word in our hearts will involve our choosing to learn a different way of life than what the world thinks is fine and grand. It is filthy, James warns us, to ignore God's commandments and covenants to suit our own wants and needs and desires. It is wicked to know what God's word says and to decide that it doesn't apply to us.

But when we find ourselves wanting and thinking and acting like that, the solution is not to be stronger and try harder and do better. The solution is to become meek, James tells us, and to open our hearts to the wisdom and goodness and power of what James calls "*the Word of God implanted.*" And we said last week that part of what James is after here is mystical. Jesus is the Word of God, who through his Spirit can live in our hearts and change us in ways over and above what our own minds can learn and understand. But receiving "*the Word of God implanted*" is also intellectual.

It says in Psalm 119, "*I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you...Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*" And the notion here is that, ever since Moses put pen to paper, God has commanded his people to study his word, to make time and place to take to heart how different and necessary are the principles that govern his kingdom.

There is no such thing as a mystical experience with Jesus that doesn't involve our learning in detail the principles God gave us to govern our own hearts and personal behavior, our own marriages and families, our own church and ministries, and our behavior in society at large, how

we work and spend and speak and vote. The point being that God has a heart, full of love and grace for sinners, a love we can count on, *“without change or shifting shadows”* James taught us. But God also has a mind, full of wisdom and insight and purpose and direction that he has commanded us to learn. And it’s no use pretending we love him when we won’t make time to listen to any of it.

Solomon wrote in the Proverbs, *“Cease to hear instruction, my child, and you will stray from the words of knowledge...He who turns his ear from the law, even his prayer becomes an abomination.”* James tells us, *“...in meekness, receive the Word implanted that is able to save your souls.”* Meekness is the willingness to be small, openness to being taught. A meek person is not afraid to be human himself, is willing to forgive others for being fallen and human, willing to view others as fellow travelers on the straight and narrow, willing to assist others and to learn from others as God allows.

With that in mind, James exhorts us to *“...become doers of the word and not merely hearers, deceiving yourselves. For if a person is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who studies his natural face in a mirror and goes away and, immediately, he forgets what he was like.”* The point here is that each of us defines and evaluates himself by the ideology we trust most. James sees the world as a sort of fun house where there are all sorts of mirrors, mirrors that make us short and round, mirrors that make us tall and thin, big head or huge feet or whatever.

And what James wants us to know is that there is only one mirror that will give us a true picture of who we are and where we stand with God and that is God’s objective word which plays no favorites and tells no lies. And it’s quite possible to take God’s word in small doses, to cherry pick a passage here or there, and to never take to heart what God really wants and who we really are. *“But,”* James says, *“the one who looks intently into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, not becoming a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this person shall be blessed in what he does.”*

God’s law, Christ’s gospel, commandments and promises both in all their detail, are the only way you and I will ever understand with any certainty who we really are, where we really stand with God. It is the law, James teaches us, that is perfect. Our hearts are fallen and prone to all sorts of folly. And strangely, against all intuition, it is God’s law that sets us free. It is *“the law of liberty”*, James tells us, in the sense that if we wrestle with it, the mystic presence of Jesus in our own hearts will teach us to become our true selves, the people we were meant to be before sin waylaid us all.

But the trick is to be willing to go through the trial and error of actually attempting what God’s word commands us to be. The attempt of what is humanly impossible is what forces us to trust Christ when our own devices fail. Make no mistake about it, to wrestle with absolute truth will take faith. We won’t understand it a’right first time out. The truth may make a fool of us at first.

And even when we do understand, our hearts will rebel at what the Word requires of us, to love God first and most, to keep his priorities over and against what we feel, and the world thinks is good and smart.

And it's with this fact in mind that James closes today's passage, he says "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to look after widows and orphans in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*" My first job out of college was to be an aide in a residential treatment center for boys who were so disturbed or their families were so broken that they could not live at home. It was a dreary, lonely place, full of heartbreak and upset. Orphans. And these last twenty two years, when I'm not teaching and preaching and trying to be pious, I been touring nursing homes, visiting what we call shut ins.

And I can tell you that these are not popular, happy places. And the point here is not that I'm wonderful. It's my job and it took me a long time to learn to love it. The point is that real faith, genuine religion will orient us away from the the beauty and happiness, and fulfillment and mastery the world teaches we all deserve. And often Christ will point us toward the loneliness and dreariness that worldly people labor to avoid. Only obedience can teach us what meekness is worth. More to say, but I'm out of time! It is by learning and obeying God's word that we learn to truly love God and others.