

FAITH DYSMORPHIC DISORDER

The great reformer, Martin Luther, famously referred to letter of James as, “a very straw-like epistle.” Luther held this letter largely in such disdain because he felt that it contradicted the teachings of Paul, who in Galatians wrote, “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” While Luther’s view deviated from the view of his predecessors, particularly the early church fathers, it came to dominate much biblical scholarship until the 20th century. Most of today’s scholars and readers of James and Paul would likely conclude that James and Paul do not contradict each other, but are actually addressing different points all together and in many ways are complementary.

In some ways it is not surprising that the letter of James has undergone such a range of interpretation. For starters, it’s not really a letter but more akin to wisdom literature with its collection of sayings and teachings. It purports to be from James but we’re really not sure who James is. His audience is not any particular church but Jesus’ followers as dispersed around the Mediterranean basin. The first chapter of James wanders from topic to topic with seemingly little structure, and yet the themes expressed in this opening part of the letter are picked up and developed later. One author has helpfully suggested that we think of this chapter as the “overture to James opera, the place where ideas are introduced that will be more fully developed later.”

“... be doers of the word, and not merely hearers...” says James sounds as though these are two unrelated matters, but for James one flows out of the other. Works – “doing” arise as a natural outgrowth of genuine faith. They are not separate from faith but a part of the complete package. Our “doing” extends our “being” and reflects our commitment to live not just as individuals but as a community of faith. A community in service to others. And here, James is specific: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God ... is this, to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and keep oneself unstained by the world.” Seek out and minister to the most vulnerable. Do not let the world so warp your view of others that you cannot carry this out.

So, it’s not just any “works” any “doing” that fits the bill. The church often gets confused about what constitutes the living out of faith. Presbyterian pastor Wallace Bubar recalling his childhood church experience writes:

It was called the six-point record system. In the Southern Baptist church of my childhood, the offering envelopes in the pews had the usual line for your name and the amount of your contribution. But they also had six little boxes underneath where you could put a check mark, and next to the boxes were six actions: worship attended, Bible brought, Bible read daily, Sunday school lesson studied, prayed daily, gave an offering.

Somebody at Southern Baptist headquarters in Nashville had decided these were the six things that were worth recording. Not the Ten Commandments, not the nine fruits of the Spirit, not the eight Beatitudes and not the seven cardinal virtues. No, there were six essentials of the Christian life, and bringing your Bible to church was one of them.

To show up at church without a Bible in hand was unthinkable. Some visitors once came to the service and sat down in front of us. I whispered to my father, "Did you see that? They don't have Bibles!" He said, "Must be Presbyterians."

We can laugh at this illustration but I bet we could come up with our own six-point system tacitly in operation within the United Church of Christ.

I think there is where James' concern over self-deception comes into play. Fortunately, Charles Finney once lectured on this text, and as you might expect, doesn't mince words. Finney begins with by summarizing how he sees James' argument:

There are two extremes in religion, equally false and equally fatal. And there are two classes of hypocrites that occupy these two extremes. The first class make religion consist altogether in the belief of certain abstract doctrines, or what they call faith, and lay little or no stress on good works. The other class make religion to consist altogether in good works, (I mean dead works,) and lay little or no stress on faith in Jesus Christ, but hope for salvation by their own deeds... Those who make religion consist altogether in good works, overlook the fact that works themselves are not acceptable to God, unless they proceed from faith. For without faith it is impossible to please him. And those who make religion consist altogether in faith, overlook the fact, that true faith always works by love, and invariably produces the works of love.

And then, in case anyone in the audience is thinking might not apply to them goes one to say:

Perhaps there are some present to-night of both these classes of hypocrites. Now, mark: I am not going to preach to-night to those of you who, by great strictness of morals and outside show of religion, deceive others. I address now those of you who do not practise[sic.] what you know to be true--who are hearers and not doers. Perhaps I had better say, to secure attention, that it is highly probable there are a number here now, of this character. I do not know your names, but I wish you to understand that if you are that character, you are the persons I am speaking to, just as if I called out your names. I mean you. You hear the word and believe it in theory, while you deny it in practice. I say to you that **YOU DECEIVE YOURSELVES.**

As James speaks of self-deception he uses the illustration of a mirror:

For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

Mirrors are tricky things. Paul says, that now we see in a mirror dimly. When we look into a mirror we think we are seeing things as they are, after all, a mirror simply reflects what is in front of it. However, for humans, there is more to it than that. Mirrors can abet us in our self-deception. When you look into the mirror what do you see? I still see a reasonable hairline rather than a comb-over. Apparently, many folks see themselves better than they are. Research from the University of Chicago revealed that people tend to think they look better than they really are. For this study, researchers selected pics of participants and processed them into better and worse looking versions. Then participants were asked to find the original photos of themselves and most of them failed, choosing pics where they were more attractive.

Of course, for many others, the opposite is true. For people with Body Dysmorphic Disorder, whenever they look in the mirror, they see something terribly wrong. It could be any sort of perceived flaw, such as a large nose or hips. This skewed body image causes them to obsess over their imperfections and often accompanies depression, obsessive compulsive disorder and other psychological problems.

So, what do you see in the mirror? Standing in front of a mirror might mean that we see ourselves as thin or overweight, blemished, disheveled, wrinkled, or scarred, confident, or assured, at peace.

But that is not what James is getting at. Instead, we are to think about ourselves in light of what James has just stated in an earlier paragraph:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Do you see you who are? You are someone who has been blessed by God's gifts, someone who has been brought to new life through God's word—a person who is a first fruit, set aside as someone who belongs to God. Franciscan spiritual author, Richard Rohr, reminds us:

The true and essential work of all religion is to help us recognize the divine image in *everyone and every thing*. It is to mirror things correctly, deeply, and fully until all things know who they are. A mirror by its nature reflects impartially, equally, effortlessly, spontaneously, and endlessly. It does not produce the image, nor does it filter the image according to its perceptions or preferences. *Authentic mirroring can only call forth what is already there.*

What is there is a beloved child of God. Do you – can you see yourself as that in the mirror's reflection? For there is no deception in that – this is how God sees you. And what a difference it makes. If we have yet to accept that this is God's image of us, if our own sense of self distorts this image, if what the world tells us warps face staring back at us, then we truly are deceiving ourselves. We walk away from the mirror forgetting who we truly are.

What happens when you forget who you are? New Testament professor Craig Koester puts it succinctly:

Life typically takes another course. If you forget how much you have been given, why would you give anything to others? If you forget how much you have received, then life is reduced to a quest to get what you can while you can. You may find the situation of the orphan and the widow to be regrettable (1:27), but conclude that this is the way the world is, and you need to get what you can while you can. Or what if you forget that God's word has given you new life, bringing you into renewed relationship with the God who made you and wants you as his own? If you forget what God's word gives you, then what you do with your words seems to matter little (1:26)... To know that one is loved is the most freeing thing imaginable, even as this same love holds us in a relationship of love. This is where we see ourselves, James says. Look into the law of love. This is who God creates you to be.

This morning we are invited to remember who and whose we are. To look in the mirror and behold God's wondrous creation, a beloved child of God, warts, thinning hair, and all. Having received this honest reflection of ourselves we are then called to see the same in others, particularly the most vulnerable. To be hearers, doers, and true reflections of God's word in our world.

AMEN