

LESSON ELEVEN: THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

The letter that St. James sent to the Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire is a study in practical Christianity. In the first chapter, verses 22-24 he writes: “But prove to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of a person he was.” St. James is describing what might be called spiritual Alzheimer’s disease. Alzheimer’s is a terrible disease that affects a person’s short-term memory. Spiritual Alzheimer’s disease causes people to forget they are Christians.

PRAY: Lord Jesus, we confess we have sinned and come far short of the expectations You have for us. Help us to use Your law as a mirror to show us our sin. Then send us Your Holy Spirit to renew us with forgiveness so that we will be empowered to seek Your face always. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION: Michael Jackson’s 1987 *Man in the Mirror* is one of his best. As the video begins, Jackson sings, “Gonna make a change for once in my life,” while newsreel footage flashes images of riots in South Africa and doe-eyed, bloated-bellied African children with flies crawling across their faces. Jackson responds to these images by singing that he sees, “the kids in the street/with not enough to eat... /Who am I, to be blind, pretending not to see their needs?”

The tempo of the song picks up as the viewer sees shorter clips of a crying Lech Walesa and Desmond Tutu. Jackson then sings the chorus of the song, “I’m starting with the man in the mirror/I’m asking him to change his ways...”

BIBLE BASE: Ask a volunteer to read Luke 18:9-14. Ask the other participants to follow along in their own Bibles.

DISCUSS: (The following questions are for discussion. The answers are to help the leader guide the discussion. Participants may fill in the answers in the space provided.)

1. Why did Jesus use a Pharisee as an example in this parable?

Pharisees were the Jewish sect that put the most stress on strict outward observance of the Law. Their definition of the Law also included the rabbinical traditions that include ceremonies, tithing, fasting, alms giving, etc. The Pharisees had insulated the Law with those traditions so that they could appear to keep the letter of the Law while completely ignoring the spirit of the Law.

2. Why did Jesus use a tax-gatherer as an example in this parable?

The tax-gatherers were at the opposite end of Jewish society. They were considered traitors because they collected taxes for Rome. They were widely known as extortionists. They belonged to the most disreputable class of people. To have a tax-gatherer in the family was a public disgrace. Promises to tax-gatherers need not be kept. Their alms were not received, because they were considered to be ill-gotten.

3. Why did they go to the Temple to pray?

They went at one of the regular hours of prayer. Because they are in the Temple, we see them going into the presence of God. Most likely they went into the court of the men. The Pharisee represented those who think like this Pharisee, and the tax-gatherer represented those who think like this tax-gatherer.

4. What was the problem with the Pharisee's prayer?

We see him as he really is, and we hear the actual thoughts that he entertained. He is an example of full-blown self-righteousness. He may be a Pharisee, but he could be anyone who thinks the way he does. The Jews had memorized prayers like the ones we teach our children (Now I lay me....), but they also prayed extemporaneous prayers. He thanked God, but he had nothing for which to be thankful. He was using the wrong measuring stick, his own, not God's.

5. Why did the Pharisee fast twice a week?

God commanded His people to fast only on the day of Atonement. Private fasting had been introduced since the exile. Pharisees fasted on Monday and Thursday as a special mark of holiness.

6. How was the prayer of the tax-gatherer different?

His prayer and his person was the exact opposite of the Pharisee. He did not take a prominent stand as the Pharisee. He stood at a distance, because he felt he was too unworthy to go nearer. He didn't lift up his eyes but looked to the ground. He was utterly ashamed of himself. He compares himself to no one. Rather, he confesses his sin, and he asks for mercy.

7. How did Jesus view these two men?

Jesus saw them as they really were. Using the voice of authority ("I tell you"), He announced a verdict. The tax-gatherer was justified. That is to say, the Almighty Judge of all his sins acquitted him. Jesus declared him righteous. The Pharisee was not justified, because he put himself up in a high and false way that was contrary to God. The Pharisee's righteousness was a fraud.

CHALLENGE: Discuss ways that modern day Christians see Pharisees when they look in the mirror. Then find ways to change the face in the mirror to look more like the tax-gatherer.

CLOSING THOUGHTS: I heard a silversmith talk about refining silver. He said, "I must sit with my eyes steadily fixed on the furnace; for if the time necessary for refining be exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver will be injured. I never take my eyes off the silver in the furnace. If I take it out too early, it won't be purified. If I leave it in too late, it will be injured. When the silver is in the fire, I focus. I don't let anything distract me. I watch that silver carefully waiting for the right moment to take it out." "When is the right moment?" I asked. He said, "I know the silver is pure when I can see my face reflected there."

When I'm in a storm, as soon as the storm comes, I'm saying, "Okay God, bail me out. Find me. Rescue me." Sometimes he doesn't rescue me. He doesn't come. But He is the great silversmith. When I'm in the furnace, He focuses and watches. His job isn't a quick rescue mission. His job is to purify. He holds me until the right moment, and then He comes—never too early, never too late—right on time.

—John Maxwell, quoted in *Men of Integrity*, March-April 2000, www.christianitytoday.com

CLOSING PRAYER: Almighty Father, You created us to reflect Your image, because in Your image we see the face of Jesus. Yet we sin against You daily. This we confess with shame and without excuse. Have mercy on us sinners. Send us away from this study justified. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.