

Mirror, Mirror . . . on the Wall . . .

***Who's the Most Righteous of us All?* by Pastor Marty**

Last night, I had a conversation with a friend of mine in another state. This friend is not only educated academically but also committed spiritually in her relationship with the Lord. After hanging up the phone, I found myself slightly distressed over one aspect of the conversation: the Church's current practice and position on a controversial issue. Now, this monthly newsletter is not about that specific issue itself; that is a topic for a future time. Instead, I want to discuss the nature of the argument. In this specific instance, she began to reevaluate her beliefs and convictions after the issue directly affected someone close to her. I have heard this same statement—in various contexts and forms—from multiple friends in just the last few months. I categorize this as a “sympathetic” argument because it is based upon caring about the feelings and experiences of other people.

The “sympathetic” argument is based on the feelings and experiences of others.

When I woke up this morning, last night's conversation was still on my mind and my heart. While I was praying about it, another friend of mine in another state came to mind. She is also educated academically and very committed spiritually in her relationship with the Lord. Nevertheless, I also find myself at times feeling distressed over aspects of our telephone conversations when the same or similar topics are discussed. However, this other friend's position and approach is totally

opposite than the previous argument. For her, moral and ethical issues are usually black-and-white, and liberal positions are contrary to God's perfect plan, promoted by militant forces in our culture to demonize all who disagree while accomplishing a specific agenda; in other words, sin is sin, plain and simple. I categorize this as a “judicial” argument because it is based upon the letter of the law in concrete terms.

The “judicial” argument is based on the letter of the law in concrete terms.

Returning to the title of this article, most of us have heard the story of Snow White. She was oppressed by a wicked stepmother who owned a magic mirror. This evil Queen used the mirror to confirm her opinion of truth. At this point, I want to take a step back from the myth to see the spiritual truth behind it. In his very direct and revealing way, James says, “Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you here! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like” (1:22-24 MSG). I want to suggest that a significant number of us in the body of Christ, the Church, are doing exactly what James warned us not to do: we are looking in the Word of God as if it were a magic mirror and asking, “mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the most righteous of us all?” I am convinced that if the Bible were to speak back

to us audibly as the mirror did to the Queen, it would answer in like fashion, according to our genre of choice, “There is that word again; I don’t think it means what you think it means.”

“There’s that word again; I don’t think it means what you think it means.”

To clarify what I mean by this, I would like to reference another passage in Scripture by someone who understood the law more than any of us. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, “therefore you have no excuse, every one of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (2:1 NASB). These are very serious words. Between James’s comments and Paul’s comments—and we are not even getting into what Jesus said on the topic—we should be afraid to judge anyone or anything. Paul pointed out that “in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself—for ***you who judge practice the same things.***” The words here must be understood as being true on more than just a surface level. For example, it is relatively easy for us to judge somebody who has murdered innocent people in cold blood. Most of us could feel judgmental even though we had not murdered anybody ourselves. However, if we accept Jesus’ words that the one who is angry toward another is guilty of murder, then we must admit that we do practice the same things; we are also guilty of murder. Paul said that we have all sinned and fallen short, but does that just apply to our pre-Christian past? Who can read the Sermon on the Mount and not recognize sin in their own life? Truly, we can all be justifiably judged.

The Sermon on the Mount shows that we can all justifiably be judged guilty.

If our discussion were to end at this point, those who hold to the “sympathetic” argument would be very pleased. They often use this same line of reasoning to counter almost any objection: nobody has the right to judge another person. They may even quote the story in John’s Gospel when Jesus states that those who are without sin cast the first stone, pointing out that the only one who could do so—Jesus—did not; they usually do not point out that he also told the person to stop sinning. Nevertheless, Scripture does tell us that we are all guilty according to the letter of the law. However, that leads to an equally false argument, which says that all judgments are invalidated because all judgments involve hypocrisy. If only sinless people can judge, and if nobody is sinless, then nobody can judge. However, Paul was certainly not promoting a type of Christianity in which nobody makes judgments, for he himself rebuked the entire church at Corinth for not judging one within their midst (1 Cor. 5), and he himself rebuked Peter for sinning against the Gentile believers. Clearly, making judgments is not inherently evil, and in some cases, ***not*** making a judgment is sin. How, then, do we make sense of this?

Making judgments isn’t inherently evil.

The point of this newsletter is to focus on the basic principle presented by Paul and James: reflection. Paul explains that when we judge another person, we are judging our own hearts. However, we know that this means more than just identification of sin because as Christians, we are required to condemn sin. The

context in Paul's letter to the Romans is not dealing with condemning acts of sin but with an attitude that condemns the person. He is explaining a core principle often referenced in psychology and counseling: the things in other people that most often upset us are things that we ourselves are guilty of doing. It is this, not the definition and identification of sin, that Paul warned the believers about doing. This is also what Jesus meant when he said that if we judge others, we will be judged according to the same standard of measure. The extent of mercy and grace (or condemnation and disdain) that we give toward others reflects both what we have received and what we will receive. Paul is declaring that these internal judgments always bring judgment on the one who judges, for the one who judges is guilty of the judgment. Judgment and forgiveness—the forgiveness that reaches the core of our being—are mutually exclusive.

Internal judgment and true forgiveness are mutually exclusive.

James expresses this same principle in his analogy of the mirror. He speaks about people who look in the mirror and then immediately forget what they look like. What does this mean? In our context, it refers to those who see what Scripture says about them but who do not live accordingly. It speaks about those who pray for and thank God for His grace, mercy, and forgiveness for their own struggles but have no grace, mercy, and forgiveness for others. This is especially significant when others have sinned against us: the sins we are quickest to denounce or find hardest to forgive are often the ones buried inside ourselves. Do we find

ourselves livid over another person's broken promise? Paul (and Jesus) could rightfully ask us if we keep our word in every circumstance even when it hurts. However, this also goes beyond current sins to identify past sins that still plague us. Similar to the servant who was forgiven much yet did not forgive little, we may find it hard to be gracious and merciful because we still feel guilty and unforgiven on some level. Therefore, the tendency for internal judgment also reveals areas in our own hearts where we need prayer. However, this is actually good news. Whether it shows us sin we must confess or forgiveness we must receive, the mirror principle is beneficial for us because it helps us identify those things within us that need to be brought to the cross.

The mirror principle reveals sin to be confessed or forgiveness to be received.

Our discussion so far has seemed to focus on the "judicial" argument without really identifying problems with the "sympathetic" argument. However, this is where the mirror principle also comes into play. The person who looks in the mirror of God's Word must make the decision whether to be a doer or only a hearer. Being a doer goes a good deal deeper than just a person's actions: it must also define and settle their convictions. What this means is that obedience to Scripture goes beyond the individual commands of "do this" and "don't do that" in the book; obedience means Scripture also judges our own opinions, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, preferences, choices, and everything else that it means to be a human being. It means that God really does know what is best without reservation or qualification. The

person who follows the “sympathetic” argument cares about the feelings and experiences of another. That is not wrong, for we are called and commanded to care for one another. However, the mirror of Scripture requires that God’s Word is more than just recommendation and opinion—it is absolute and final truth on the matter. As any person fighting an addiction will admit, what feels easiest or brings fulfillment is not necessarily best. True love requires the person to reach beyond sympathy and kindness toward what is real and eternal; the person in the struggle is not always the best source for identifying what is needed. The mirror principle also forces us to recognize the standard we hold for ourselves. If our argument is based upon our sympathy for how another person feels, then we are likely basing our standard of holiness and grace on how we feel about things. A tendency to dismiss sins in others often indicates that we dismiss sin in ourselves—or again, that we are compensating for a lack of graciousness and self-acceptance toward ourselves.

The mirror principle reveals when our feelings are dictating our theology.

Just as an attitude that tends toward internal judgment brings judgment, an attitude toward indulgence brings permissiveness. In *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis explains that love must be more stern than mere kindness. If love does not seek for the person’s best interests even when the person is dead-set against it, then it is not love. Jesus explained very clearly that all who desire to follow Him must be willing to go to the cross; it is only by going through the cross that the empty tomb is

reached. As Christians, we are called to lead people to the cross. Although we absolutely must have compassion for whatever situation surrounds them, removing the cost of the cross means we have set our eyes on the interests of people instead of the interests of God. Likewise, our theology must not be defined by the character of those around us. When the rich young ruler stated that he had kept all the commandments since childhood, Jesus told him to give everything to follow Him; he instead went away. We will find many people around us, even in the world, who are very good—and they are sometimes a great deal better than ourselves or those within the Church; however, that can never be what decides our theology. Again, we can only have one model—Christ.

Our opinions of other people must not replace Christ as our final authority.

In this discussion, we looked at two opposing arguments in relation to positions we hold as Christians. Although this discussion was sparked by one specific issue facing the Church today, the point is not the issues we face or the sides we take; the point is that we must desire truth more than we desire approval or even being right. The mirror of Scripture holds us accountable to the true state of our relationship with God as well as our doctrinal theology. The media has a supernatural adeptness at being able to make any issue and position look sympathetically tragic and pitifully misunderstood on the one hand, cruelly heartless and shamefully ignorant on the other, or any range in between. As Christians, we can only have one ultimate, unchanging reference for the positions we hold: the cross of Christ.