

Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word

BY C. STEPHEN EVANS

One who hears the Word of God but doesn't act accordingly is like one who "observes his bodily face in a mirror" but turns away and forgets what he looks like. If we understand James's parable rightly, Kierkegaard explains, we will see how being a good hearer of the Word is linked to being a doer of the Word.

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) is probably best known for his philosophical works, such as *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, all of which were attributed by Kierkegaard to pseudonyms. However, Kierkegaard himself believed that his "edifying" or "upbuilding" writings, published mostly under his own name, reflected in a deeper way what he hoped his readers would find in his authorship. These edifying or spiritual writings, which became the dominant stream of his authorship after 1846, are more deeply Christian as well as polemical than his earlier work. Kierkegaard calls these parts of his writings "Christian Discourses," since they are clearly designed to be delivered orally in church, yet he did not think they should be called sermons since Kierkegaard himself was not ordained as a pastor.

None of his books from this period is more significant than *For Self-Examination*, published in 1851, and no section of *For Self-Examination* has attracted more attention than the very first part: "What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?" which is an extended meditation on James 1:22-27. In this article I shall refer to this as "The Mirror of the Word" and use page numbers in parentheses.¹

Kierkegaard was of course a member of the Danish Lutheran Church, but Lutherans have not typically focused much on the letter of James, since Lutherans are known for their insistence that salvation is solely through faith, and James affirms that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-26). After all, Luther himself had called this book an “epistle of straw.”² Kierkegaard, however, clearly thinks that James is one of the most important books in the New Testament and he returns to it frequently in his edifying writings.

Kierkegaard no doubt anticipated the reaction of his Lutheran audience to a meditation on James, and so he opens “The Mirror of the Word” with some reflections on Luther, Lutheranism, and the contemporary Christianity he often calls “Christendom.” He begins with a rather standard (for a Lutheran) and perhaps not-altogether-fair critique of the medieval church as one in which the grace that is the essence of the gospel had been lost or obscured: “Everything had become works” (15). As Kierkegaard sees things, the error lay not in the focus on works themselves, but rather in the belief that works were meritorious. He warns his readers not to allow the error of the medieval church to be an excuse for a new error: that works can be completely ignored and forgotten (15). The problem was not in Luther himself, since Luther’s “life expressed works—let us never forget that—but he said: A person is saved by faith alone” (16). Luther “established faith in its rights” and properly understood that works were not a payment for salvation, but he recognized the importance of works as an expression of gratitude to God (16).

As Kierkegaard sees things, the Christianity of his own day (and he includes himself in this indictment) has perverted Lutheranism by simply taking it as a doctrine that the only thing that matters is faith. On such a view “we are free from all works,” free to seek “women, wine and song” (16). The problem is not that Lutheran doctrine is wrong, but that we humans are “cunning fellows” who misuse the doctrine in order to exempt ourselves from all striving (24). If Luther were to return in Kierkegaard’s own time, he would doubtless be shocked at how his doctrine was being used to rationalize a secular, worldly lifestyle, and perhaps would even say that “The Apostle James must be drawn forward a little, not for works *against* faith—no, no, that was not the apostle’s meaning either—but for faith, in order, if possible to cause the need for *grace* to be felt deeply...” (24).

READING GOD’S WORD PROPERLY

James is well-known for his admonition that Christians must not only be hearers of the Word, but doers of it as well (James 1:22). Of course it seems necessary that to become a doer of the Word one must first become a “hearer or reader of it,” and Kierkegaard affirms that this is so (25). Thus he launches into an extended meditation on how to hear or read God’s word, taking as his main text James 1:23-24, which compares the person who hears the Word of God but does not act accordingly to a person who “observes his bodily face in a mirror” but who immediately forgets what he looks like once

he turns away from the mirror (13).³ If we understand this passage rightly, we will see that being a good hearer of the Word is linked to being a doer of the Word. Hearing and doing cannot be sharply separated.

Kierkegaard takes seriously James's metaphor of the mirror, and thus begins his meditation by asking how we can obtain "true blessing" by looking at ourselves in the mirror of the Word (25). The fundamental purpose of God's Word is to give us true self-knowledge; it is a real mirror, and when we look at ourselves properly in it we see ourselves as God wants us to see ourselves. The assumption behind this is that the purpose of God's revelation is for us to become transformed, to become the people God wants us to be, but this is impossible until we see ourselves as we really are. The Scriptures are not given to us to satisfy our curiosity or our speculative impulses; God's Word is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should govern our lives. Kierkegaard emphasizes five things that must be kept in view to hear or read God's Word properly, all of them flowing from this understanding of the purpose of Scripture. I will briefly discuss each of these five themes.

First, "*Look at yourself in the mirror, not at the mirror.*" If we are to hear what God wants to teach us about ourselves, we must listen for that message. We must not distance ourselves from the Scriptures, treating them solely as an objective treatise to be studied in a scholarly manner. There are of course many scholarly questions that can be raised about the New Testament: "Which books are authentic? Are they really by the apostles, and are the apostles really trustworthy?" When we turn our attention to the commentaries, we discover "thirty thousand different ways" of reading various passages, since there is a "crowd or crush of scholars and opinions" about everything (25). As Kierkegaard says, all of this makes it seem that God's Word is "rather complicated," and the complications make it confusing. "I very likely never come to see myself reflected — at least not if I go at it this way" (26).

Should the person who wants to read God's Word simply ignore what the scholars have to say? A careless reader might think that this is what Kierkegaard means, but this is not really correct. There is a place for scholarship (to be discussed below), and Kierkegaard is careful to say that he does not want to disparage scholarship (28). However, it is crucially important to distinguish between the attitude of the scholar who treats the Bible objectively as an artifact to be studied and the stance of the person who loves God and wants to hear what God has to say about his or her life.

In order to make the distinction between the two attitudes clear, Kierkegaard employs an extended metaphor in which the reader is asked to "imagine a lover who has received a letter from his beloved" (26). The metaphor seems appropriate if we assume that God's Word is just as precious to its reader as the love letter is to the person who receives it. For those who might object that the Scriptures are written in a foreign language that is not easy to understand, Kierkegaard enriches his metaphor by assuming that the letter

of the beloved is also written in a language that the lover does not understand (26). Before the lover can really read the letter, he must first find a dictionary (and perhaps some grammatical aids) and laboriously translate the letter so that he can understand it. This work may be tiresome but it is necessary. However, the tiresome labor must not be confused with the experience of reading the letter once the work has been done.

Kierkegaard imagines that the lover is interrupted by a visitor who sees the letter and says, "Well, so you are reading a letter from your beloved?" (27). On Kierkegaard's view, this comment will elicit an indignant response on the part of the lover: "Have you gone mad? Do you think this is reading a letter from the beloved! No, friend, I am sitting here toiling and moiling with a dictionary to get it translated....thank God, I am soon finished with the translation and then, yes, then, I shall read my beloved's letter; that is something altogether different" (27). The scholarly work is a necessary evil that must not be confused with the experience of reading the letter.

If we apply the analogy to the case of Scripture, the lesson is clear. Of course the Bible must be properly translated, and historical and scholarly study can be valuable if it helps us grasp the meaning. However, this scholarly work is not an end in itself, but a means to reading Scripture in an existential manner, in which one seeks to hear God speak and in particular to understand what God wants to teach one about oneself.

Kierkegaard's second theme is that *as a reader of God's Word, you should focus primarily on what you can understand about what*

God wants done. One might worry that the complications that appear to be present in Scripture make it hard to read from this practical point of view. Must I not have a clear understanding of what God wants me to do before I do it? In order to deal with the problem, Kierkegaard expands the metaphor of the love letter one more time by imagining that the

beloved's letter contains something that the beloved wishes the lover to do (27). The true lover will be "eager to fulfill his beloved's wish" as he understands it, and will lose no time in doing so. However, suppose the translation the lover has done is faulty, and he therefore misunderstands what the beloved wants him to do? Surely, the beloved will still appreciate the desire to please her that the lover has shown, and the lover himself will be glad he

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acted, even if he acted on a misunderstanding, rather than doing nothing because of some possible doubt about what he was supposed to do (28).

It is not difficult to translate Kierkegaard's extended analogy to the case of the reader of Scripture. If I am listening to God's Word, I ought to focus on what I do understand and strive to live accordingly; only then do I have the leisure to worry about the parts I do not understand. In particular, I must not allow the fact that there are interpretive difficulties to be an excuse for doing nothing:

When you are reading God's Word, it is not the obscure passages that bind you but what you understand, and with that you are to comply at once. If you understand only one single passage in all of Holy Scripture, well, then you must do that first of all, but you do not first have to sit down and ponder the obscure passages. God's Word is given in order that you shall act upon it, not that you shall practice interpreting obscure passages. (29)

Worries about interpretation can easily become an excuse for disobedience, and Kierkegaard compares our scholarly, learned ways of reading Scripture to a little boy who is going to get a whipping and puts several layers of napkins under his pants to cushion the blows (35). Interpretive labor can easily become a way of distancing ourselves from God's Word and rationalizing our own inaction.

The third theme is *you should be alone when you are reading God's Word*. Kierkegaard tells us that in a certain sense it is dangerous to be alone with Scripture: "It is an imperious book — if one gives it a finger, it takes the whole hand; if one gives it the whole hand, it takes the whole man and may suddenly and radically change my whole life on a prodigious scale" (31). Just for that reason we are fearful of being alone with the Scripture. We prefer to listen to the chatter of our neighbors, who may well help us rationalize our disobedience and give us excuses. Or if we go into a room by ourselves to read the Scriptures, we carry with us "ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries," and thus we can indefinitely postpone really hearing what God has to say to us (32).

You should remember that God's Word is addressed to you. As an example of what it means to read the Bible from an existential, "subjective" point of view, Kierkegaard gives a powerful reading of the Old Testament story of David's affair with Bathsheba, which led to the death of Uriah, and the confrontation between Nathan the prophet and David (2 Samuel 11:2-12:15). Nathan comes to David and tells a powerful story of a rich man with many sheep who takes and slaughters the one lamb owned by a poor man, even though the poor man loved the lamb "like a daughter." David is angry when he hears the tale, and judges that the rich man deserves to die. Nathan immediately brings home the point of his story by saying to David, "You are the man."

Kierkegaard points out that David already knew the facts of the matter, and he no doubt already knew that it was morally wrong for him to have an affair with another man's wife and then arrange to have the husband killed to cover up the affair when the woman becomes pregnant. What then did David lack? Until confronted by Nathan, this knowledge that David had was simply objective knowledge. When Nathan tells him, "You are the man," then the story is transformed. What David needed was not knowledge; it was someone to say "you" to him and make it necessary for him to apply what he knew to his own life. Kierkegaard affirms that each of us, when we read the Scriptures, should constantly repeat these words of Nathan: You are the one. The words I am reading are addressed to me.

The last theme Kierkegaard emphasizes is that *to hear God's Word, you must be prepared to wait silently before God*. As a model for this silence, he describes the virtuous woman, who in Kierkegaard's day was required to keep silent in church. As Kierkegaard describes the situation, this silence is not merely for women. Rather, the woman who has learned silence properly has acquired the ability to teach men something they need to learn as well (46-51). We cannot hear God if we are always talking ourselves. If we are not to be like the person who goes away from the mirror and forgets what he looks like, then we must be people who are continually listening for God to speak.

A CORRECTION FOR A CORRECTION?

Kierkegaard begins, as we saw, with a discussion of Luther's "correction" of the medieval church, and an argument that Luther's correction may not be what the contemporary church needs to hear, because the circumstances have changed. Kierkegaard then offers a kind of correction of Luther that he hopes will mitigate some of the vices of his time. What should we make of Kierkegaard's own correction?

We fear being alone with Scripture. If we go into a room by ourselves to read the Bible, we carry with us "ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries," and thus indefinitely postpone hearing what God has to say to us.

I find Kierkegaard's words about how Scripture should be read to be powerful and needed. He is right that scholarly study of the Bible does not always lead to really reading God's Word; in fact, it can be a substitute or evasion of reading God's Word. I need to be reminded that Scripture is addressed to me, and that its purpose is to allow God to speak to me and transform me. I need to remember Nathan's words that "you are the man" as I read the Bible.

However, just as Luther's situation differed from that in Kierkegaard's day, so also the situation in Kierkegaard's day differs from our own, and some of Kierkegaard's advice needs to be nuanced and qualified as well. Kierkegaard was writing to an educated audience, all of whom had been catechized, and who were familiar with the Christian creeds and the "rule of faith." His audience understood how the Scriptures were to be read; what they needed was to make what they knew existential.

Our situation is different in many ways. There are many in our society who, whether educated generally or not, lack even basic knowledge of the Bible. There are also those who see themselves as committed to the Bible but who read the Scriptures with little understanding of the Church or the rule of faith. For them God's Word is simply whatever they individually decide God is saying. In such a situation, some people may hear God commanding them to do acts of terrorism against others whom they understand to be God's enemies. For such people, God's Word should not be read alone but in community. They need to allow their individual interpretations to be challenged and corrected by what God's people as a whole have heard God saying. Where a misreading stems from simple misunderstanding of a passage, the commentators can also be helpful. In Kierkegaard's analogy of the love-letter, he thinks of the lover who misunderstands the request of the beloved as someone who does more than the beloved requires, but he clearly thinks of this "more" as an excess of loving and self-sacrificing behavior. I do not think Kierkegaard would assume that the beloved would find it excusable if the lover's misunderstanding caused him to do something cruel and inhuman. In such a case, the lover does need someone who can help him or her read the letter properly. Similarly, the person who hears God commanding us to do what is reprehensible needs a better understanding of the text.

It is also somewhat one-sided to think that God's Word consists solely of commands. In the Scripture God also tells us about himself and thus makes it possible for us to relate properly to him. In the Old Testament we learn that he is the Creator of the world and the one who called Israel to be a chosen people. In the New Testament we learn that he has sent his Son to die for us and to establish a people that will be Christ's body. We need to hear God tell us not only what we should do, but also who God is, and who we are in relation to God and God's people. God does not just reveal what we should do, but our true identity, which must shape what we do.

Again, these were things that Kierkegaard, writing to an educated and catechized audience, could assume his readers already understood. His correction then very properly was to emphasize the need to read the Bible in "fear and trembling," to apply our understanding of God and the Church to our lives. I think he is quite right to stress the fact that scholarly learning can be a substitute for devout hearing of God's Word. But it is not always

so, and perhaps we must also note the way in which the work of the scholar, as well as an understanding of the Church's traditional teachings, can make us more attuned to hear God's Word. However, Kierkegaard is surely right to insist that when God does speak, we must be willing to respond, promptly and with all our hearts. For God is the Lord, and if we do not acknowledge that lordship, we fail to hear God's Word as God's Word, however much scholarly knowledge of the Scriptures we may have.

NOTES

1 The page numbers are taken from what is currently the best scholarly translation into English, *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

2 See *Works of Martin Luther*, edited by Paul Zeller Strodach, volume VI (Philadelphia, PA: Holman, 1932), 444.

3 Throughout this article, quotations from and allusions to Scripture are taken, not from a standard English translation, but from the Hong translation of Kierkegaard's scriptural quotations, which of course draw on a Danish translation.



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