



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word  
(*The Letter of James*, pp. 62-69)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word

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. In James's parable, Søren Kierkegaard explains, we learn that Scripture is fundamentally practical. We cannot hear it or read it properly unless we have a fundamental concern for how it should govern our lives.

### Prayer

Loving God, you teach us that if we are lacking in wisdom, we should turn to you and ask for what we need, because you give to all generously and ungrudgingly. We know that we have so much to learn about your way; open wide your word to us, and give us wisdom to understand the things you want to teach us. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: James 1:22-25

### Reflection

The moral instruction in James comes alive in vivid illustrations, pithy parables, and trenchant sayings. No wonder, then, it was a favorite epistle of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who loved arresting word-play. He took James's parable of the mirror (1:23) as a sly exposé of our strategies to avoid hearing Scripture as addressed to us – like squabbling over the most difficult passages or studying "ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries" to indefinitely postpone really hearing what God is saying to us.

Steve Evans summarizes Kierkegaard's insight: "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."

Kierkegaard offers advice for reading God's Word properly.

- ▶ *"Look at yourself in the mirror, not at the mirror."* Do not approach the Bible *merely* as a scholar, examining "thirty thousand different ways" of reading each passage. This makes Scripture so "complicated," Kierkegaard says, "I very likely never come to see myself reflected" in it. Should we ignore scholarship? No, but we should not confuse the scholarly stance with the disciples' goal to hear what God has to say. To distinguish these approaches, Kierkegaard imagines a lover who has received a letter from his beloved, but it is written in a foreign language. The lover employs the best dictionaries and grammar books to translate it (the scholar's task), but does not confuse that effort with lovingly poring over the letter to absorb its message (the disciple's stance).
- ▶ *Focus on what you can understand.* Kierkegaard says, "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



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Scripture, well, then you must do that first of all, but you do not first have to sit down and ponder the obscure passages." He warns against letting worries about the proper interpretation become an excuse for disobedience.

- ▶ *Be alone when you read God's Word.* Do we engage in endless scholarly debates because we fear the Bible "may suddenly and radically change my whole life on a prodigious scale"? Kierkegaard warns against using such debates as a dodge to avoid a personal encounter with what God is saying.
- ▶ *Remember that God's Word is addressed to you.* Recall how the prophet Nathan confronted David after his affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2-12:15). Nathan's tale about the rich man slaughtering a poor man's only lamb upset David; but Nathan's point didn't sink in until he said to David: "You are the man." Why not? David knew objective facts, but had not confronted how God's judgment applied to him. Kierkegaard advises us, when we read Scripture, to repeat Nathan's words: You are the one.
- ▶ *Wait silently before God.* Kierkegaard commends a virtuous woman who keeps silent in church (as she was required to do in his day). "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," Evans writes. "We cannot hear God if we are always talking ourselves."

"Some of Kierkegaard's advice needs to be nuanced and qualified," because many people today are not as catechized as Kierkegaard's audience who had a good understanding of Scripture but needed "to make what they knew existential," Evans warns. "However, Kierkegaard is surely right to insist that when God does speak, we must be willing to respond, promptly and with all our hearts."

### Study Questions

1. How do the stances of the biblical scholar and the disciple toward reading the Bible coincide? How do their goals differ? Do you agree with Søren Kierkegaard that as educated Christians we may be tempted to confuse these two stances?
2. Discuss how Evans nuances Kierkegaard's advice to make it more applicable today. What part of Kierkegaard's advice is most helpful for you?
3. Consider how more recent information technologies – from inexpensive books to Internet libraries and personal blogs – have influenced your study of the Bible. How do these resources reshape the problem that Kierkegaard identifies?

### Departing Hymn: "Be Doers of the Word of God" (v. 1)

Be doers of the word of God, not simply those who hear.  
Be ones who look into God's word, obey, and persevere.  
Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, too.  
Put wrath aside; instead, be meek and let God work in you.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2003)<sup>†</sup>

Tune: ELLACOMBE

<sup>†</sup> Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *Songs of Grace: New Hymns for God and Neighbor* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2009), 69. Used by permission.

# Seeing Ourselves in the Mirror of the Word

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To contrast the stances of the biblical scholar and the disciple in reading the Bible.
2. To critically examine Kierkegaard's advice for educated Christians who are tempted to confuse those stances.
3. To reflect on how recent information technologies influence our reading of Scripture.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Letter of James (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Be Doers of the Word of God" locate the familiar tune ELLACOMBE in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

"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," Steve Evans writes. Søren Kierkegaard told the following story to make the distinction between the two attitudes clear.

Imagine a lover who has received a letter from his beloved. I assume that God's Word is just as precious to you as this letter is to the lover. I assume that you read and think you ought to read God's Word in the same way the lover reads this letter. Yet you perhaps say, "Yes, but Scripture is written in a foreign language." Let us assume, then, that this letter from the beloved is written in a language that the lover does not understand. But let us also assume that there is no one around who can translate it for him. Perhaps he would not even want any such help lest a stranger be initiated into his secrets. What does he do? He takes a dictionary, begins to spell his way through the letter, looks up every word in order to obtain a translation. Now let us imagine that, as he sits there busy with his task, an acquaintance comes in. He knows that the letter has come, because he sees it lying there, and says, "So, you are reading a letter from your beloved." What do you think the other will say? He answers, "Have you gone mad? Do you think this is reading a letter from my beloved! No, my friend, I am sitting here toiling and moiling with a dictionary to get it translated. At times I am ready to explode with impatience; the blood rushes to my head, and I would just as soon hurl the dictionary on the floor—and you call that reading! You must be joking! No, thank God, as soon as I am finished with the translation I shall read my beloved's letter; that is something altogether different." (*For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990], 26-27)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

### **Scripture Reading**

Ask a group member to read James 1:22-25 from a modern translation.

### **Reflection**

In contrast to his more famous philosophical writings which were attributed to various pseudonyms, Søren Kierkegaard's Christian discourses are direct in communication, accessible to general readers, and pastoral in purpose. They are theology that is witty and fun to read. In this study Steve Evans reflects on Kierkegaard's discourse "What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word?" which applies James's parable of the mirror (1:23) to reading the Bible properly in a scholarly age. With the qualifications that Evans suggests, Kierkegaard can help us see our own foibles as educated Christians through the mirror of God's Word.

### **Study Questions**

1. Many biblical scholars are disciples. If your group includes some, invite those persons to share their answers to this question. Scholars and disciples seek true answers to questions about a biblical text, but their questions often are quite different. A scholar might think a question is important (and worth trying to answer) because other scholars are asking it, her students or people in the wider society need to know the answer, it fills a gap or corrects an error in the scholarly literature, or the answer might get published and help establish the scholar's reputation. You can see why understanding how one's answer differs from other scholars' answers, or how it relates to various questions and projects, can be a very important, but potentially unending task. Scholars often have to stop and say "that's enough," but it might seem like their research goes on forever. Disciples on the other hand, according to Steve Evans, read 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." In researching scholarly questions about the Bible, we sometimes receive answers to personal discipleship questions, but not always. We might tell ourselves "I'm studying the Bible," but not with the right questions.
2. Evans nuances Kierkegaard's advice to "be *alone* when you read God's word." Kierkegaard wrote for an educated and catechized audience. They knew how the Church read the Bible, but they were not connecting that knowledge with their lives. The situation is different today. "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," Evans notes. "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 a section of the article that is not highlighted in the study guide, Evans critiques Kierkegaard's thinking that God's communication 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," Evans writes. "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."

3. Most believers today have access to more secondary writings about the Bible—scholarly and devotional and otherwise—than anyone at any time in history. Much of this secondary material is unsifted, with really valuable contributions buried among many trivial things. The range of materials is so great that none of us feel confident to sift through it all, even if we had the time. How do we help one another as scholars in this situation? More importantly, how do we help one another as disciples? To whom do we turn for guidance in what to read and how to read it? How do we help one another process what we've read? And how do we keep the focus on listening for God's speaking to us through God's Word?

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.