

## **“It’s Time We Look in the Mirror”**

James 1:19-24

Dr. Anne M. Cameron

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First in a series on *Relationships*

There are mirrors all around us. They show us every detail, every flaw we often do not wish to see. We are the most mirrored population ever in the history of the world! Think of it! Every car, every purse, nearly every room in every house. . . . I walked around my house and counted 15 mirrors hanging on the walls.

The idea of looking in a mirror to improve one’s appearance is very, very old. Of course the mirror is also a great metaphor, and there are lots of other kinds of mirrors besides the shiny ones.

Here’s a mirror comprised of statistics:

*About 50,000 people die each year in this country as a direct result of violence<sup>1</sup>. Three out of four child murders take place in the United States. The U.S. has more child homicide, suicide and gun-related deaths than any other of the world’s twenty-six richest nations.<sup>2</sup>*

*Over half of all television programming shows violence. The average TV viewer sees roughly 18,000 violent interactions per year.*

*By age 18, a U.S. youth will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence.<sup>3</sup>*

*Workplace violence has shown a staggering increase in recent years, even though the apparent causes of this are usually minor annoyances or offenses.*

*Each year, nearly two million men in this country batter their wives.*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cdc.gov/ncipc/profiles/nvdrs/](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/profiles/nvdrs/). July 2008, Centers for Disease Control

<sup>2</sup> Government Report, CDC, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> American Psychiatric Association

A sobering set of mirrors, indeed.

Now hear the tale of The Two Wolves Within, a mirror which comes to us by way of a Native American folk story:

An old Grandfather said to his grandson, who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice...

"Let me tell you a story. I too, at times, have felt great hate for those who have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It's like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die."

"I have struggled with these feelings many times. It is as if there are two wolves inside me; one is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way.

But...the other wolf... ah! The littlest thing will send him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all of the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing."

"Sometimes it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit."

The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?"

The Grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."<sup>4</sup>

The mirror of God's word speaks a practical word from the book of James:

**My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.**

**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man**

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<sup>4</sup> A Native American tale told many times around the Sacred Fire

**who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.**

The series on *Relationships* we begin today is aimed at understanding what the Bible has to say about how we should relate to others.

Today we consider how and with whom we harbor anger. It is time we look in the mirror. It is time to use **the word of God as a mirror** to take a serious look at how we deal with people: our most intimate relationships, more distant family, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, co-workers, strangers, *and even our enemies*. The word of God provides a mirror, but it also provides insight to improve the flaws we see when we study ourselves in that mirror.

Most of us are hopelessly confused when it comes to anger. Most of the time, we are taught to repress our anger, to stifle or bury it. At the same time, we feed our anger by watching or playing violent sports. We teach our children to be intensely competitive in school, on the field, in almost any endeavor they do. We spend hours (virtually years) of our lives watching or playing media that drip with violence. We often direct our anger toward people whom we are not even angry with! Almost never do we speak directly with people we are really angry with. Few have healthy models or guidelines on how to deal with anger.

We struggle with the competing wolves inside us. We often give in to feeding the one the culture tells us to feed, which is the violent, angry one. The culture models violence and rewards certain types of anger. The culture condones many forms of overt violence. The culture values pride, power, and entitlement, which are often tied up with anger.

The mirror of statistics on violence is easy to disregard, because it refers to such horrific crimes. However, we cannot dismiss our own pride, our desire for power, our sense of entitlement, all of which feed our anger. Let's look in the mirror and be very honest about some ways we are angry.

1. We kill someone's hope by consistently putting them down.
2. We sabotage a co-worker because we are insecure.
3. We refuse to listen to different points of view.
4. We bear grudges.
5. We secretly nurse our own sense of rightness.
6. We shove someone's feelings aside and ignore them.
7. We gossip and hurt someone's reputation.
8. We focus on the negative when we don't agree with something.
9. We consistently refuse to look at our own part in an argument.
10. We get worked up about small matters.
11. We are negative and discouraging.

12. We expect others to make amends to us first before we will budge.
13. We retaliate in kind when others hurt us, and we feel justified in doing so.
14. We are quick to blame, quick to sue, quick to externalize.
15. We want revenge.
16. We insult others. We are sarcastic and ridiculing.
17. We are arrogant and rude.
18. We put others down by subtle and not so subtle behaviors.
19. We complain about someone instead of talking directly with them.

**How do we combat anger and cultivate gentleness? Let's see what the Bible says:**

1. If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment (Matt 5:22). We need to take anger seriously!
2. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. (James 3:14)
3. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)
4. Clothe yourself with compassion, meekness, patience. (Col. 3:12)
5. Bless those who persecute you.
6. Never avenge yourselves. . .live peaceably. (Rom 12:14-19)
7. Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander (Eph 4:29ff).
8. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger. . . (Ephesians 4:31)
9. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander. . . (Colossians 3:8)
10. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Gal 5:26).
11. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. (Ephesians 4:26)
12. If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. (Matt 18:15)

The Bible is pretty clear. As Christians, we handle conflict differently. First of all, we are painfully honest with ourselves. We look into the mirror God holds up to us and we see our anger, our ambition, our pride. Then we sincerely ask God to change us and we work to be different. We don't just listen to the word; we do what it says.

We desire to rid ourselves of all anger, hate, and envy. We make a decision to let go of power, pride, and entitlement. We cannot be striving, domineering, competitive people in one part of our life and be gentle and kind the rest of the time. We cannot be two things at once. We cannot turn anger and violence on and off at will. The wolf we feed is the one that will win.

Christians handle disagreements differently. We admit we are not always right, and we mean it. We listen. We stop ourselves when we are getting worked up. We shut up. We develop a thick skin. We work on developing a 'long fuse'.

How? We think of the best of others. We swallow our pride and apologize to that neighbor we are angry with. Remember, he's going through some hard times, too. We remind ourselves how much we love our children, our spouse, our mother-in-law. And if we don't love them enough, we work on loving them better. It is amazing how anger melts away when you focus on the good things in another person.

Christians address real problems directly. We go to the person who has insulted us and we talk to them calmly. More importantly, we listen. We swallow our pride. We take care of small hurts early on so we do not grow enraged over time. If possible, we deal with our anger the very same day. If it's not possible, we take a break from it and let it go until we can.

Christians pray for people who disappoint, irritate, or attack them. Pray for and bless those whom you most dislike or even hate. This is very difficult. This kind of prayer changes us! It is impossible to grow in anger toward someone you are sincerely praying for!

Christians seek to absorb violence and anger rather than multiply it.

Christians take a long hard look at who we exclude, who we put down--- and we stop doing this. We reach out to these very people. We make a point to hang out with powerless people, like children, the handicapped, the sick or the elderly. This has an amazing way of growing our heart and making us peaceful people.

Christians let go of conventional ideas of power. We realize that serving someone is not lording it over them, not engaging in power plays, but in caring for them. Christians look to models of humility and servant leadership and copy their ways of living and dealing with anger.

I realize these are sound bites in a way, but they are sound bites I firmly believe in, sound bites that are based in scripture, and things that really work. I know they work because I have seen people changed by doing these things. I know they work because I have been changed. I know they work because God is not going to lead us in the wrong direction. God wants us to have life, joyous life in all its abundance.

I am starting with the one in my mirror. That's all any one of us can do.