



*James uses the idea of looking into a mirror as a metaphor for our interaction with the Word.*

# Spinach In My Teeth

BY CHARITY BROWN

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— JAMES 1:22-25 —

How many times have you gone to wash your hands, looked up at the mirror, and realized you had something in your teeth that most likely had been hanging out waving at everyone you talked to for hours? I'm always like, "How in the world did nobody have the heart to tell me about that?" It's kind of like those dreams where you are missing at least one major article of clothing, and once you realize it, you're like, "How have I been walking around like this?" The fact that I have those dreams on a semi-regular basis probably says something about my mental health, but I'm not sure what.

James uses the idea of looking into a mirror as a metaphor for our interaction with the Word. A major theme in James is that believers should be active in their faith. Faith without action cannot even be regarded as faith. In James 1:22-23, James tells us to be "doers of the Word, not hearers only." Anyone who is a hearer only is "like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror" and walks away and "at once forgets what he was like." Many of us (me included) are guilty of reading the Word, even studying or listening to it being preached, and then walking away from it without allowing it to change us. We forget what we just heard and don't put it into practice. We hear what the passage is saying and may even feel some conviction, but we walk away and do nothing about it. This is where my metaphor from earlier breaks down a bit. Most of the time, when we have spinach in our teeth or when we are missing a major article of clothing in a dream, we don't know about it. What James is saying here is that we do know about it. He is assuming his audience is "looking intently" at himself. The Greek word here implies careful consideration. This message is not just for those who are not carefully considering what the Word is telling them to do. In fact, this message is for those who do carefully consider the Word, who study it rather than just listening passively. Knowing the Word inside and out is not enough.

God's Word is a powerful mirror, one we can look into and see our true selves rather than the version of ourselves the world sees or the version that we imagine we are. Charles Spurgeon puts it this way: "The Scripture gives a truthful reflection of man's nature, it lets the man see himself, not as others see him, for others make mistakes, nor as he would see himself, or he is very apt to be partial to his own soul, but the Scripture makes him see himself as God sees him... The holy Book does not flatter human nature, neither does the true preacher attempt so base a work, but in plain and downright honesty of truth the witness is given, 'They are all gone out of the way,

they are together become unprofitable; there is none that does good, no, not one.” If we carefully read, study, and consider the Word of God, we will see what it tells us about who we really are and walk away and do something about it.

I don't know exactly what it looks like to be open to this conviction whenever we read, listen, or are with other believers who might point us to Him. But these kinds of changes started to happen more often when I started to be more intentional about allowing Him to work in me instead of just reading and listening to check it off my to-do list. I've never really struggled with having a consistent time in the Word. But I have always struggled with having consistent prayer times and silence before Him. I have never really struggled with attending church and listening to sermons, but I have always struggled with applying what I heard and being open with others in community about my struggles and sins. In other words, I have lived so much of my life as a “hearer” and not a “doer.”



I said that being intentional helped me open up more to the Spirit's instruction. That intentionality wasn't my own idea. Living overseas helped force me to be intentional. Others around me had already learned the importance of being intentional and

vulnerable. They were modeling it for me. They were opening up to community and the Spirit's movement. They were sharing what He was teaching them and convicting them of. I realized He wasn't doing much of that in me. I realized I never talked about what He was convicting me of. I have always talked about my knowledge of the Word. I have gotten by with sounding like I knew the Bible well. I have been reading through it at least once every year for many years. I have a degree in theological studies. I have taught classes at church. I have led Bible studies. I have gone overseas to do His work—but I have not allowed His Spirit to convict me daily, and I have certainly not shared those convictions in community for mutual accountability and encouragement.

It shook me when I was surrounded by people who were doing that with each other and with me. And the Spirit began to work in a new way in me, bearing fruit and challenging me. And He continues to do that work in me, to humble me and remind me that I am no more sanctified than the brother or sister with their long list of don'ts, no more sanctified than the brother or sister who offends me or hurts me.

Obviously, not everyone struggles with pride in the same way, but we all struggle with something. When was the last time we admitted our struggles before the Lord and before others? I'm not talking about the ones we admit to so easily like, "I'm really struggling with anxiety," or, "I'm struggling to love myself." My confession of pride even came with too much fear of what you think of me. No, I'm talking about, "I'm struggling with hateful thoughts toward someone; I've been rejoicing in their sorrows." Or "I've been struggling with the desire for men to find me attractive." Yes, these are real struggles that I have only rarely brought up in community. Why? Am I afraid people will judge me? Yes. Do I really let my fear of being judged override my desire to be cleansed of these sins? Yes. I do. But I shouldn't. That fear puts me firmly in the hearer-but-not-doer camp.

This leads to my final point, which I have been hinting at from the beginning. Living in community ensures that you are holding the mirror of His Word up to yourself and others on a regular basis. It means that they are also holding the mirror up to you. It's always a little mortifying to be told you have a huge piece of spinach in your teeth, but then you can do something about it instead of just wondering why people seem to be staring at your mouth. Having a brother or sister confront you with your sin or with lies you believe is way more mortifying than having them point out something in your teeth. But how much better are we when we realize they were right? Let's stop just hearing when we read or when we listen to a sermon or Sunday school lesson. Let's do, and let's help one another do too.

For discussion:

1. In what ways are you "hearing" on a regular basis? (e.g., daily time in God's Word,

listening to sermons, etc.) How can you grow in this area?

2. In what ways are you “doing” on a regular basis? (i.e., do you have any method of applying what you read and hear?)

3. Think of a time that you or someone you know was noticeably active in living out their knowledge of the Word. What did that look like?

4. What does spiritual community look like for you right now? Do you have people in your life holding up the mirror of God’s Word to you? What might it look like to pursue this kind of community and provide it for someone else in your life?

5. Read and consider Galatians 6:1-2. What would it look like to put this into action?

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## Problem! Mine or Theirs?

BY CHARITY BROWN

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A few years ago, I was working with someone (a brother in Christ) with whom I did not see eye-to-eye (to say the least). If I'm honest, there were things I found annoying about him to begin with. Then he said a few things off-handedly that offended me, and that did it. I wrote off any possibility of true friendship and biblical unity with him. I would do the bare minimum in my relationship with him to avoid feeling guilty, but I would not pursue community with him. I would not bring my grievances to him because I was sure it would not make a difference and he would not change.

Months went by, and there were many times I would read the Word thinking, "He really needs to hear this." Or I would listen to a message and think, "Surely he should be feeling conviction about this right now." Then, one day after reading in 1 Corinthians, the Spirit convicted me. What if He had a plan to teach me something through this relationship? What if He was using this relationship to grow me? What if I had been needing those messages and passages every bit as much as he did? What had I missed out on while focusing only on his imperfections rather than my own? And how might the Father have used me in his life had I allowed Him to convict me, change me, and use me to show His love instead of focusing on how my co-worker was seemingly not showing me love?

I wish I could say I got up from that quiet time and went to him to ask for forgiveness. But I did not. In fact, circumstances changed, and we never saw each other again after that year. I studied the Word. I knew what it was saying. I even saw myself in its reflection through the conviction of the Holy Spirit. But I didn't do anything about it.

Quite a few years ago, I realized I was holding on to some bitterness. This bitterness was directed toward a few people in our denomination who I saw as "Pharisees." I felt like many people were so focused on doing things perfectly that they had turned their faith into a list of dos and don'ts and were trying to force everyone around them to adhere to that list regardless of how biblical it was. I was tired of wearing skirts and dresses every Sunday and Wednesday. I was tired of memorizing verses in the King James Version. I was tired of following someone else's list of don'ts that weren't explicit in Scripture. And I was tired of pretending to be perfect. I remember reading verse after verse with these "Pharisees" in mind.

This attitude started in my teens, but it progressed as a college student who wanted

to wear pants to class and go to the movies, and it continued to progress as I later worked with brothers and sisters of other denominations who were enjoying some of their Christian liberties more than I was. These thoughts and feelings came to a head one winter as Reese and I were on winter break attending a conference with our organization. He and I were at different places in what we thought we could and should do regarding some of our Christian liberties. I was struggling with whether it was pharisaical to have this list of don'ts that we had. I wanted to be free. I grappled with it, and I read 1 Corinthians again. And as much as I wanted to think, "See? They're just being overly conservative and old-fashioned. Paul literally calls the person who puts these kinds of restrictions on himself 'the weak person.'" As much as I wanted to use that as justification to enjoy my Christian liberty, the Spirit convicted me with the words, "Be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 8:9)." Was my "right" worth the possibility of causing someone else to stumble?

I hope sharing the ugly pride I experience daily helps you somehow. The Spirit made it through to my heart after I had resisted for quite a while. James is talking about being willing to allow the Word to change us. Allowing the Spirit to convict us and point out areas we have ignored. What would it look like to be open to this conviction every time we read, listen, or are with other believers who might point us to Him? What would it look like to follow through when we are convicted, to do instead of merely hear?

