The Mirror Cannot Wash

"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Romans 3:20

The church in which I grew up had a statement called "Our Teachings."

Some of those teachings concerned things we were not permitted to do. We were not to go swimming with members of the opposite sex. We were not to wear gold. There were other restrictions, and together they provided a recognizable standard by which people could measure their conduct.

And people could keep that list.

That is an important distinction.

They could not perfectly keep the law of God. But they could refrain from the activities the church prohibited. And keeping the list could gradually become confused with keeping the law. Some came to consider themselves sinless.

I do not say that to question their sincerity. These were people among whom I grew up. But sincerity does not prevent us from misunderstanding what God requires—or what our obedience can accomplish.

A list can tell me whether I have worn gold. It cannot establish that I have loved God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself.

I can remove a ring without removing pride. I can avoid a forbidden activity while harboring resentment toward someone who participates in it. I can satisfy an outward requirement and congratulate myself for being better than the person who has not.

The list may be finished while the heart remains unexamined.

The rich young ruler came to Jesus with considerable confidence in his obedience. When Jesus named the commandments, the young man said:

"All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Matthew 19:20

He knew the commandments. He believed he had observed them. Yet when Jesus called him to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow Him, he went away sorrowful.

Something held his heart that his account of his obedience had not revealed.

Mark tells us that Jesus loved him. That matters. Jesus was not exposing the man's need merely to humiliate him. His searching words brought into view the very thing the young man needed to see.

God's law does that.

It reaches beyond the conduct we can easily count. It exposes the desires, loyalties, and motives we would rather leave undisturbed. It silences our claim that we have done enough.

But it cannot cleanse what it exposes.

A mirror can show you that your face is dirty. It cannot wash the dirt away.

There is nothing wrong with the mirror. It is telling you the truth. But looking longer will not make you clean. Neither will promising the mirror that tomorrow you will present a better face.

You need what the mirror cannot provide.

Through the law comes the knowledge of sin. Through Christ comes the salvation we cannot accomplish for ourselves. His death and resurrection are sufficient grounds for our hope. Our success with a list is not.

That speaks to two very different people.

One has kept the list and feels satisfied.

The other has failed and feels ashamed.

Both need the same Savior. Neither has a righteousness of his own sufficient to stand before God. Both must come with empty hands to receive what grace provides.

Obedience matters. But it belongs in the life that grace has given us. It is not the price we pay to obtain that life.

I am grateful for a mirror that tells me the truth, even when the truth unsettles me.

But I must never confuse seeing my need with having that need met.

The mirror cannot wash.

Christ can.

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