



From Coping to Cure

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LESSON 8:

WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO WALK BY A MIRROR WITHOUT LOOKING AT YOURSELF?

THOUGHT STARTER:

Is the real you underneath your skin?

Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently.

Deuteronomy 4:9, KJV

When people come into my consulting room, I can see that they have taken time to look nice. However, what we talk about is the part of them you can't see, the world of thoughts, feelings, and emotions underneath the skin. This part of us that no one can see is what some call the soul.

Very few of us would think of neglecting our appearance before leaving home. We want to make the image we see reflected in the mirror acceptable to ourselves and others. We know that others make judgments about us based on our appearance.

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Very few people get to see what we see in the mirror in the morning. What people do see is our version of what we want them to see. Some people have more work to do than others.

Multimillion-dollar industries provide products for eye care, ear care, lip care, hair care, body care, and clothing.

As you look in the mirror in the morning, you are vaguely aware of your behavior patterns, thoughts, and reactions. Circumstances and events in your life make you aware of pleasant or unpleasant thoughts and emotions. And as you look in the mirror, you are either pleased or displeased with yourself.

With personal behavior, as with personal appearance, you behave acceptably to particular persons or groups. In their presence, regardless of what they say or do,

regardless of the reactions going on underneath the skin, you strive diligently to maintain a pleasant smile, a friendly word, and a congenial manner.

Few people get to see what you see in the mirror, and no one gets to see what goes on underneath your skin except God. The Bible says:

**Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.
(1 Samuel 16:7, NKJV)**

If the Lord looks on the heart, then it follows that a checkup of your heart is more critical than an examination of your physical appearance.

I don't like checkups. I usually have a feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty that something bad will come up that I don't know about. When a physician checks your body, he is alert to discover anything that needs correcting.

Soul searching can be as uncomfortable as a physical checkup. But if God looks upon the heart, one needs to be sure of His approval. The psalmist said:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:
And see if there be any wicked way in me. (Psalm 139:23-24, KJV)**

When Moses passed the mantle of leadership to Joshua, he said to the people:

Give heed to yourself and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. (Deuteronomy 4:9, NASB)

Most of us don't need any urging to look after our personal appearances and personal advantages. We encounter people every day, and their approval or disapproval is face to face and immediate.

A ROOT OF BITTERNESS UNCHECKED

It is fairly simple to lose sight of the need for the Lord's approval. The effects of deviating from His standards may not be evident to you and others for a long time. As a result, more and more frequently these days I hear about another "model" couple who, after twenty years of marriage, are getting a divorce.

One such marriage might have been saved if they had heeded this biblical advice:

**Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.
(Hebrews 12:15, NKJV)**

I was sure this couple had a marriage that was grounded solidly on mutual devotion to each other. He had poured twelve years of his life into a service organization. He worked long and sacrificially, and his wife was by his side, supporting him. We all admired their commitment and even thought of them as a model couple who put serving the Lord as the top priority in their lives.

Then we heard the chilling news that he had resigned from the organization, was divorcing his wife, and would marry another woman. Everyone was shocked; all of a sudden this model marriage just collapsed. I had a chance to talk to him about the surprise development. He was quick to assure me, however, that there was nothing sudden about it. This break had been coming on for years.

He and his wife encountered conflict from the beginning of their marriage. The first issue was over money; she failed to record checks she had written. The monthly bank statements were consistently different from his checkbook. He brought the matter up repeatedly; she ignored the problem. After a few years he quit trying, but a root of bitterness developed in his heart.

There were other issues. One was a running battle about punctuality. They differed over rules for their two teenagers. Another issue was the level of involvement with their immediate families. These issues had rocked along unresolved for seventeen years.

Strangely enough, they had worked together on one project: creating the impression around friends and associates that they were a happy, cooperative couple. But in reality, skillful deception covered growing bitterness.

Eventually his work on a certain committee placed him next to a rather plain woman. He helped her into her chair and at the break he served her coffee. Nothing unusual about that. At the next meeting he arrived early, as was his custom. He was the first one there, and the second one, also early, was the woman who had sat next to him. He complimented her on being early. She replied that this was her custom, but when she went to meetings with her husband, they were always late. He remarked that he and his wife had the same problem. She complimented him on his attentiveness, remarking that her husband never paid much attention to such things.

He was given responsibility for producing a report, and she was to help him with research and typing. She was prompt and cooperative. He remarked that he wished his wife would work with him like that. He found himself thinking about this woman frequently. Once, they had lunch together to plan their report. His hand brushed hers and lingered there. She began sharing some of her problems with her husband, and he sympathized with her because he, too, had some problems with his wife. After lunch, she took his arm as they walked to her car. He found himself thinking about her in the office, and on an impulse, called her and offered to pick her up for the next committee meeting. After driving her home, they sat in front of her house and chatted a while. He walked her to the door and gave her hand a squeeze as he said good-bye. After the next meeting, they spontaneously kissed, which was an electrifying experience that he

hadn't enjoyed for a long time.

What these two people had in common was a root of bitterness. As a result, they had forgotten the sweet times in their marriages, and any grace toward their partners departed from their hearts. Along with the bitterness, uncontrollable lust flared up. From that point, reason went out the window and before they recovered, they had broken up two marriages, ruined two careers, and ended up married to each other. They soon found that they had new conflicts to deal with in each other.

Since then, they have come to their senses, have sought God's forgiveness, and are trying to repair the damage that has been done. They are finding out that they have no good options, but that they must make the best of a hopeless mess: two successful careers and two marriages died.

A CHECKUP FOR THE SOUL

What happened? This man and this woman had neglected to check up on their souls.

A checkup of the soul need not take longer than a checkup of one's personal appearance. Regular checkups will serve you well if you correct what needs attention, but often we will go for weeks or months or even years, without checking up on our hearts. Why?

Men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19, NKJV)

The following is a brief checkup. It will only take a few minutes:

Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled. (Hebrews 12:14-15, NKJV)

The soul is reflected in a special kind of mirror called the Bible. It says:

If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:23-25, NKJV)

Is it a challenge to resolve any conflicts between you and someone else? Perhaps even the person on the other side of the bathroom wall in the morning? Does the conflict disturb you? Are you "gracious" about it? Look carefully. If you glanced in a

mirror and saw a pimple you would surely look more carefully. A pimple! You don't ignore a pimple! This is an emergency! You would move quickly to get rid of it.

We get the word *gracious* from the word *grace*, which generally means "loving acceptance." Look carefully lest you fall short of the grace of God. Are you aware of an ungracious spirit toward a family member, a co-worker, or anyone? You still act graciously, sound gracious, but deep down inside you are not gracious. Beware. This is more serious than a pimple.

Is there a root of bitterness lurking in your heart toward the person with whom you are in open or hidden conflict? Are you making an effort to be reconciled?

I see many married couples who were at one time delighting in each other's presence, filled with admiration and appreciation for each other. Because one or both neglected their souls, they are now estranged. They have forgotten the sweet fellowship of the past, and goodwill toward each another has left their hearts.

Take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. (Deuteronomy 4:9, NKJV)

Take another quick look at the mirror that reflects your soul:

Put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another. (Colossians 3:8-9, NKJV)

Also,

Put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another . . . even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. (Colossians 3:12-13, NKJV)

The Bible is a mirror that will let you know what to put off or put on. You may or may not want to know. You may or may not want to act on your reflection. You may even *act* as if you have put off what needs putting off and put on what needs putting on when that really is not the situation under your skin.

Once I stayed in a lovely apartment with a bathroom that had mirrors on all the walls. At first I was pleased, but very quickly I was stunned. I saw views of my body that I had never seen before, and I didn't like what I saw.

A couple came up to me after a speaking engagement to share with me the good news of what had happened to their marriage relationship since they both began spiritual checkups. A year earlier they had heard me speak on this subject, and at that time the wife rid herself of a load of sin that was ruining her life.

She told me how her husband had met another woman in a motel occasionally. The relationship ended. She learned about the situation when her husband and the other woman came to her and admitted they had been together.

She was livid with rage toward the other woman and refused to forgive when the woman pleaded for forgiveness. The wife nursed her rage for six years. Even though she and the other woman were now several thousand miles apart, the thought of the other woman would instantly fill her with rage.

"It was like a rope around my neck," she said. Her rage ruined her appetite, gave her pounding headaches, and often kept her awake. She knew all along that nursing her grudge against the other woman was only punishing herself. But she felt nursing an angry spirit was not evil, but pleasurable. But as the Bible says:

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts . . . lie [not] against the truth. . . . [it] is earthly, sensual [self-indulgent], demonic. (James 3:14-15, NKJV)

At the conference a year earlier, the wife suddenly realized she was punishing herself because her husband and this other person had sinned. Their sin exposed her own sin. She deposited her six-year burden with the Lord; now she was free and their marriage was better than ever.

Can you imagine being at odds over something year after year in a relationship? It is amazing what a low standard of Christian life many of us will tolerate.

As you leave the bathroom in the morning, your appearance can be very different from when you went in. Likewise, we can behave differently from our feelings. We can feel isolated from others, alone in a crowd, detached from reality, uncomfortable, and ill at ease when people praise us. These conditions result because how we talk and act does not accurately reflect what is going on underneath our skin.

Man looks at the outward appearance. The Lord looks on the heart. What really matters is what the Lord sees. He sees the real person underneath the skin. That is why it is important that we deal with the negative (sin) in our lives. When we bring the sin in our life to God, He takes it away and we can actually feel under our skin just as we behave on the outside. This resting and peaceful condition of God's forgiveness gives us tremendous relief from stress and fear.

Lesson: As a mirror is to your face, the Bible is to your soul.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were

started?

- Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
- What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?

1. If God looks at the inside condition of our lives, why do we spend so little time looking after our soul?
2. What is your understanding of the term "root of bitterness"?
3. Is there anyone with whom you are not at peace?
4. What personal grooming routines do you follow every day?
5. What soul searching routines do you follow every day?
6. What behavior routines do you follow each day and why?
7. The Bible reflects the condition of your heart. Do you use it daily?

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