

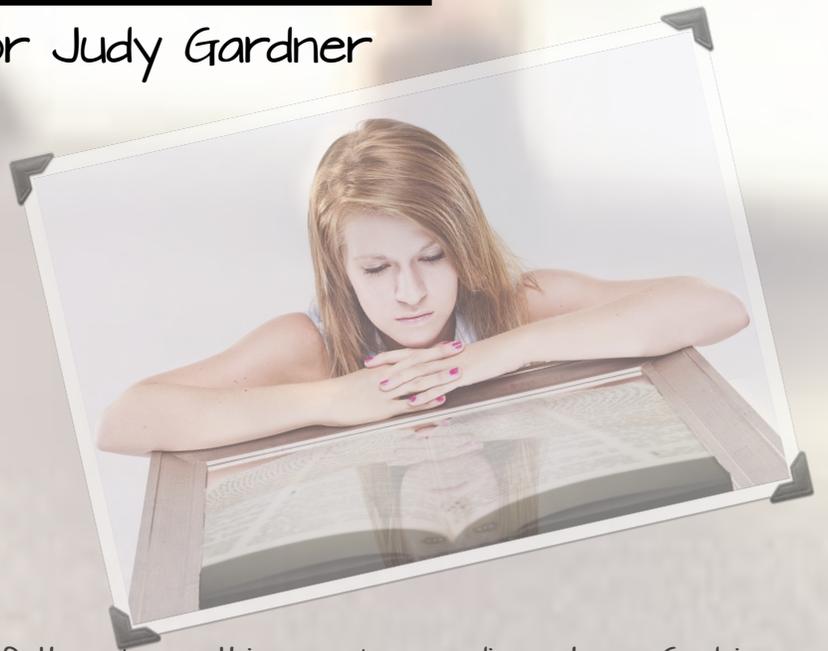
December 5-9, 2022 Edition

Following
The Year Of Jesus Part 49

James On The Scriptures
Reflect... Reflect... Reflect:

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

December 3/4, 2022



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;D) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. James 1:22-25 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so James says we need to look at the Bible like a mirror. We'll talk more about that in a minute... but first, why? Why do we need to use the Bible as a mirror? Because it is the only way to freedom. James calls the Bible the "perfect law that sets you free." I don't know about you but I never would have put the words "law" and "freedom" together in the same sentence. I always thought of God's law as the prison and people outside the church as the free ones. I imagined God's way of life as constraining ourselves in this world and living within the confines of the church as our sort of payment for the freedom and joy that would come later after we die.

So as soon as I was old enough to do it, I threw off the constraints of my family and church and school and ran with the people I thought were "free". I did the things that represented freedom to me. And I won't lie... at first, it was great. But over time it took more and more drugs or alcohol to give me the same feelings I had experienced in the beginning. Anyone familiar with addiction will tell you that over time the substances take more and more and give you back less and less until the day comes when they've taken everything from you and left you with nothing. That happened to me. Like I said, when I was younger I would never have put the words "law" and "freedom" together in the same sentence- but I would now. Now I can understand this verse from Psalms:

I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free. Psalm 119:32 (NIV)

Freedom. There is no substitute. What I've learned over the years is that there is no freedom without structure. God will happily provide that structure but I have to follow it if I am going to remain free. That's why the Bible is so important. That's why using the Bible as a mirror is so important. This week we are going to look at how that works. You've probably heard that the first rule of real estate is location, location, location. Well, when it comes to using the Bible as a mirror to provide me with the freedom, power and blessings that God promises to those who follow the first rule is reflection, reflection, reflection. We'll flesh that out this week as we look at how to hear from/listen to God. Maybe today you could spend some time thinking about what freedom means to you? Where do you think freedom is found? Do the words "freedom" and "law" or "commands" go together?

Tuesday:

And the LORD came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, "Speak, your servant is listening." 1 Samuel 3:10 (NLT)

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." Luke 7:40 (NIV)

Reflection: If you are willing to use the Bible as a mirror then the first step is to listen. I start out looking to the Bible to ask God the question, "what are the rules?" How was this

world set up? What do I need to do to excel? We talked about last week that each of us has planted deep within us God's word. That implanted word, even if I never read a page of the Bible, is enough to show me the way to live out God's rules for living according to the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 2. But the difference between that word planted deep within me and the word that is revealed in the pages of the Bible is like the difference between playing a board game with the rules or trying to make them up yourself as you go along. One way leads to a fairly understandable process and the other leads to quite a bit of confusion and frustration. So if you want to understand the rules for this life that God has designed you to live in, then you first have to try to figure out the rules. The rules, as it turns out, are found in the pages of the Bible and listening is the first step to recognizing them. James puts it like this:

But don't just listen to God's word. James 1:22 (NLT)

Now I know James says not to "just listen" to God's word and he will go on to tell us what to do next but the first step is always listening. Listening is really important. Why do you think James started this section of his letter off by saying in chapter 1:20 that all of us should be "quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry"? Did you think he was only talking about the importance of listening in our relationships with each other? If listening is important for understanding other humans in our lives, imagine how much more important it is for our relationship with our Creator. Listening is where relationship begins.

There's a great story in the Old Testament. It's about a woman named Hannah who hasn't been able to have any children. She prays and tells God that if He would just give her a son she would dedicate her boy's life to Him (I'm not sure if the biggest miracle in this story is that Hannah has a son or that her promise that her son's life would be dedicated to God actually worked out- for those of you who are parents I imagine you've felt the frustration of your kids NOT getting with the program and following our carefully laid out plans for their lives. I'm completely off on a tangent now but if you wonder if anyone else can sympathize with your pain I think our Heavenly Father, Who has an awesome plan for each of His children's lives including yours and mine, can understand how much it hurts when His children fail to live according to His plans for our lives. Ok... back to the story of Hannah... that was a pretty long rabbit trail, wasn't it? ;o) So Hannah has a boy. She names him Samuel. If you're watching the ABC series, "Of Kings and Prophets" then you'll be familiar with the Hollywoodized version of Samuel- that's this kid. As soon as Samuel is old enough, Hannah takes him to the Tabernacle and drops him off with Eli- the old, blind priest of God. Eli agrees to train Samuel and so the story continues. That first night Samuel is sleeping in the Tabernacle right next to the Ark of the Covenant (which is wild, right? I mean here this kid is sleeping next to the Ark... you know... the one Indiana Jones was looking for in his first movie? This is WAY before Indiana Jones of course but you get the picture, right? Samuel is sleeping next to the most powerful object on earth!) while Eli sleeps in another room of the tabernacle. At some point Samuel hears his name called and thinks it must be Eli. Here's the story:

Meanwhile, the boy Samuel served the Lord by assisting Eli. Now in those days messages from the Lord were very rare, and visions were quite uncommon. One night Eli, who was almost blind by now, had gone to bed. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel

was sleeping in the Tabernacle near the Ark of God. Suddenly the Lord called out, "Samuel!" "Yes?" Samuel replied. "What is it?" He got up and ran to Eli. "Here I am. Did you call me?" "I didn't call you," Eli replied. "Go back to bed." So he did. Then the Lord called out again, "Samuel!" Again Samuel got up and went to Eli. "Here I am. Did you call me?" "I didn't call you, my son," Eli said. "Go back to bed." Samuel did not yet know the Lord because he had never had a message from the Lord before. So the Lord called a third time, and once more Samuel got up and went to Eli. "Here I am. Did you call me?" Then Eli realized it was the Lord who was calling the boy. So he said to Samuel, "Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again, say, 'Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went back to bed. And the Lord came and called as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel replied, "Speak, your servant is listening." 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (NLT)

And God spoke to Samuel.

And not only was the course of Samuel's life changed- so was the course of history of nation of Israel. In fact, the course of all of human history was changed because a boy was willing to listen. Are you willing to listen for God's voice? If you are then God will speak to you. Now, be careful because God's voice comes to each of us differently. As I have cultivated the art of listening for God's voice I have learned to recognize a sort of internal dialogue deep within me. I don't hear an audible "voice" (I think that's referred to as schizophrenia in the DSM ;o) but some of my pentecostal acquaintances say they do hear an the audible voice of God. I don't want them to think I'm making fun of them but I always wondered what God's audible voice would sound like... is it like the voice of James Earl Jones, really deep and resonating? But I digress...

If you're willing to listen then God will speak. How He will speak will be very different in all our lives but I believe He always, always, always speaks clearest through the pages of the Bible. And He is always speaking. As in the story of Jesus and the Pharisee named Simon from Luke chapter 7, if we are willing to listen then from time to time He will get our attention and say (as He did to Simon): " (put your name here), I have something to say to you." Will you listen to Him? Will you let Him guide you through this life by showing you the rules, correcting you when you need to be corrected. Encouraging you all along the way? Then the Bible will need to become a part of your life. It is the most amazing book in the history of the human race. It contains within it the very secrets of eternity. Every line, every phrase allows us to draw a breath of inspiration from a caring Father. It is SO MUCH more than mere words written on a page. In fact, the next time you hear someone say that the Bible is nothing more than words, remember, He sent His only Son to prove that His love for us was WAY MORE than just words. But those words that are in the Bible are still VERY important. They are the clearest means by which our Father communicates with us. Will you listen?

Prayer: Father, thank You for sending Your Son to show us that Your love is more than words. But today I want to turn to Your word and say, speak Lord, and I will listen. Teach me through the pages of the scriptures how to live this life that You have given me. In Jesus Name I pray, Amen.

Wednesday Reflection: If I'm going to use the Bible as a mirror than I have to do more than just listen... remember what James said,

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. James 1:22

So after I've "heard" from God then I need to think about what I've heard. Last week is the perfect example... James began this whole section about listening and doing what God says with a pretty tough statement:

All of you should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry. James 1:19

If you're really listening then when James says that I imagine that most of us are going to hear Jesus whispering in our ear, "I've got something to say to you." Why? Because most of us struggle with anger in some form or another. If we're not exploders (pretty much self explanatory) then we're "imploders": People who instead of expressing their anger where everyone can see it, we instead pull it inside and let it simmer until it boils. But whichever you are, and exploder or an imploder, Jesus wants us to work on our anger. So when we hear something like we just read in James 1:19 we have to think about what that means for me in my life. What will it look like to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry in my relationships? With my spouse? My kids? My parents? My co-workers or people I go to school with? The Bible calls that thought process "meditation". God tells Joshua that "meditation" and then following that up with obedience is the key to success:

Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do. Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do. Joshua 1:7-8 (NLT)

And then there's Psalm chapter 1. These three short verses claim to be the key to being happy, strong and successful.

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the Lord's teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:1-3 (NCV)

If you're trying to make a change that you haven't been able to make this passage of scripture can change your life if you let it. It doesn't matter if we're talking about walking away from a substance addiction or if you're trying to walk away from a relationship that isn't honoring to God and is causing a ton of toxic destruction in your life, a habit, an emotion or a behavior that you want to change, Psalm 1 can help you. First King David tells us that if you want to make a change that will lead to greater happiness you need to change a couple of things up- who you listen to, where you go and what you do. I spent a couple of years of my life trying to leave behind the things that were destroying my life by just "not doing them anymore." My idea was that I would continue to live my life as I had been but just stop the things that were killing me.

THAT. DOESN'T. WORK.

At least it didn't for me. And I've never seen it work for anyone else either. If you want to see lasting change in your life you have to change where you go, who you listen to and what you do. David goes on to say that these "happy" people love the Lord's teachings and "think" (or meditate) on those teachings day and night. The result is not only happiness for these people but strength and success. Happy, strong and successful. Where do I sign up? What else is there? If you want that kind of life then James says it begins with listening (reading the Bible or listening to a sermon or listening to Christian music or reading a book filled with Christian ideas or...) and then we chew on what we hear. In fact, if you look up a synonym for meditation on thesaurus.com you'll find that one of the words that most closely parallels meditation is "rumination". Rumination is what a cow does with its food. They chew it up and swallow it and then after a while they burp (it was the most polite word I could find on thesaurus.com for what happens during this process) it back up and chews on it some more. It's how the cow gets the absolute most nutrition out of grass. Bible meditation is kind of like that. It's spiritual digestion. It's a way of getting everything we can out of the messages we receive from God by listening to Him. Think about it. Chew on it. And then when you think you know what God is asking you to do and what that will look like in your life you move on to the last step of using the Bible as a mirror. We'll get to that on Friday but first I want to spend tomorrow going over how to make sure that what I'm hearing is actually from God (a pretty important thing for make sure of).

But for today chew on this: am I following the advice of King David in Psalm chapter one? Am I careful about who/what I listen to, where I go and what I do?

Prayer: Father, I want to listen to You. I want to hear from You. Show me what I need to change in order to move into the future You have in store for me. Show me what I need to do to become the person You dreamed of when you designed me, long before I was even born. I want to be happy, strong and successful. In Jesus Name, amen.

Thursday:

Don't always believe everything you hear just because someone says it is a message from God: test it first to see if it really is. 1 John 4:1 (TLB)

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. Romans 12:2 (NLT)

Reflection: I don't think I'm going to have much time during the weekend services to talk about how to make sure that I'm actually hearing from God but I think it's a REALLY important question so I'm going to use one day in these devotionals to talk about that question. Because while God does want to speak into your life, His isn't the only voice trying to be heard- and His isn't generally the loudest voice either.

The Bible says that one voice that shouts for our attention is the voice of our culture. Everywhere you look you are being told what to wear, drive, eat, drink & think if you want to be enough. On top of that is this internal voice- Paul calls it our "sinful nature" that just wants what it wants. This voice is very much like a toddler that wants what it wants and it wants it now!!!! As long as you don't try to discipline this terroristic toddler there is peace

and harmony in your life (there is also a lot of consequences that come from giving in to our sinful nature but we talked about that on Monday when we talked about God's commands bringing freedom instead of the consequences of going our own way- you remember, right? But as soon as you decide you're going to listen to God's way of living things will suddenly become VERY interesting as that selfish nature within you rears its ugly head and throws a tantrum when you won't give in to what it wants. Then there's the voice of the evil one. Satan, the devil, the serpent- the Bible has lots of names for him but no matter what you call him he is dangerous and wants your attention. He attacks in all sorts of ways but he will always fight when you decide to listen to God and then do what He wants you to do. And to make matters worse, the devil will often use just enough truth from the Bible to confuse you and try to keep you from seeing the distortion he's made of the truth. So how do I know when God is speaking to me? How do I learn to recognize His voice and filter out the rest of them? Well that's the key word to me- filter. What I'm going to share today is a 6 step filter that I use when I'm trying to figure out if God is speaking to me and what it is He's saying. Sometimes it's not a complicated question. Does God want me to love my wife? I think I know the answer to that one. I probably don't need a complicated filter to run that message through to make sure it's from God. But there are times when we are looking for guidance and the messages we receive aren't so cut and dried. Where should I go to school? Who should I date? Should I move? What job should I take. My boss is doing something I find to be at least a little bit sketchy... what should I do? So here's the filter:

1. What does the Bible say about it?

The first step is where most of us get the most clarification- run your message through the filter of the Bible itself. The first step is to ask myself, what does the Bible say about it? Look at these verses from the Bible:

Heaven and earth will pass away but My words will never pass away. Luke 21:33 (NIV)

The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8 (NLT)

Most of God's will for your life is right there in black and white (or red and white in the case of the words of Jesus) written out in the pages of the Bible. God will NEVER ask you to do something that He has already told you not to do in the Bible. So if your neighbor is REALLY bugging you and you get the idea that killing him would fix this situation then I can confidently tell you that message was not from God. He's already said that murder is not a good thing. That's a pretty easy one, right? But some are not so easy. There's a lot of stuff that we have to decide that the Bible hasn't spoken on. The list above has several of those. So what do I do if the Bible doesn't rule out or confirm the message I'm hearing? Well then you go to the next step.

2. Will this make me more like Jesus?

This is your number one job in life. Tomorrow when you get up God's number one agenda for you is that you become more like His Son.

Instead, we will lovingly follow the truth at all times—speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly—and so become more and more in every way like Christ. Ephesians 4:15 (TLB)

And all of us... can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 (NLT)

When I first started trying to figure out what my new life would look like following Jesus I focused on the rules, on the directions. If there was a direct command then I was on it. But it didn't take very long to realize that I wasn't becoming more like Jesus as I followed them. In fact, I was becoming more like the Pharisees- the professional rule keepers who Jesus said "flawlessly fulfilled the external requirements of the Law" but who also were the only guys who got laid into by Jesus on a regular basis. So while it's good to do what the Bible says, if we aren't at the same time becoming more loving, more accepting of those who are struggling with the rules we are trying to follow, more forgiving, more joyful, more peaceful, more humble, more patient, more kind, more faithful... then we've missed the boat. I think it's one of the devil's most powerful weapons- getting us to obey without that obedience leading us into deeper relationship with the One Who made the rules. So if the Bible doesn't expressly confirm a message (definitely do it or definitely don't do it) then the next part of the filter is to ask if it will make me more, or less like Jesus? Still don't have your answer? It happens... there are situations that the Bible doesn't rule out and that this second filter of developing the image of Jesus within us also won't rule out (because it's something I can do that won't particularly change His reflection in my life one way or the other) so I go on to the next filter.

3. Is it really my business?

I don't want to spend a ton of time on this one but here's the gist of this step- if the message you're getting is for someone else then it's time to be VERY careful. I'm not saying God will never speak to other people through you but I find it's much rarer than we'd like to think. God is perfectly capable of speaking directly to other people Himself. Then why don't they listen? Probably the same reason you have failed to listen to God in the past. And if they aren't willing to listen to the Creator of the Universe, what makes you think they're going to listen to you? In my experience most of the time somebody tries to speak to others on God's behalf it ends badly. I love The Message paraphrase of Romans 14:10-13

So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly - or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in Scripture: "As I live and breathe," God says, "every knee will bow before me; Every tongue will tell the honest truth that I and only I am God." So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God. Forget about deciding what's right for each other. Here's what you need to be concerned about: that you don't get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is. Romans 14:10-13 (MES)

“Tend your knitting”! Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha. I spent a few years trying to tend to others knitting and I can’t think of anyone’s actions I changed but I can think of a ton of people I drove further from God because of my criticizing and condescending. Like I said earlier, I’m not saying God will never use you to speak to someone else on His behalf, but first ask yourself if it’s really your business and then if you still think it might be move on to step

4. Do people I admire agree?

The Bible has a ton to say about getting good advice from mature, balanced men and women of God. So before you make up your mind on whether a message you are getting is from God or not, talk to some people. With the technology nowadays there is no reason not to reach out to people for advice. Here are just a couple of pieces of advice from the writers of the Bible:

God's intent is that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known. Ephesians 3:10 (NIV)

The manifold wisdom of God. What’s that? Well, basically manifold means the whole enchilada. Each of us has some of the wisdom of God (some more than others obviously) but none of us has the market cornered. So talk to a few people. Just because everyone says the same thing and contradicts what you think you’re hearing from God doesn’t necessarily mean you’re hearing incorrectly, but it should give you something to think about... hard... for a while before you make any decisions.

The wisdom of the righteous can save you. Proverbs 11:9 (GN)

With many counselors, there is safety. Proverbs 11:4 (NLT)

If you’re still unsure move on to the next step of the filter.

5. Is the message encouraging or condemning?

God will convict us using our consciences, but He will NEVER condemn you.

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (NLT)

In fact, the next time someone hears the voice of God whisper that they are worthless, useless and beyond saving it would be the first time in the history of Christianity. God has a plan for your life and the lives of those He has entrusted into your care. He will often use His word to guide us, correct us, shape us, sharpen us, but He will never condemn you or anyone else. Guilt is a tool of His, but you were never meant to live with guilt. His plan was that guilt would act sort of like an early warning system- much like the low fuel level light in your car. It flashes to get your attention but as soon as the guilt hits His plan is that we would feel it, recognize what we’re doing wrong and stop it, ask for forgiveness and then leave that guilt behind.

The people I love, I call to account- prod and correct and guide so that they'll live at their best. Up on your feet, then! About face! Run after God! Revelation 3:19 (MES)

So turn the light of God's love onto whatever message you're receiving. Is it condemning and mean? I'm gonna go out on a limb and say it's not from God. So if you're still not sure then move on to the sixth filter.

6. Do I have peace about this decision?

I'm not saying you're not concerned or even stress free about it. There are plenty of things God asks us to do that require us to have courage and strength to do them. I'm not saying that if I'm uncomfortable it automatically means God isn't behind a message- I'm saying that if God is behind it there should be peace in even in the midst of uncertainty or the discomfort of doing something I don't necessarily look forward to doing. Jesus put it this way:

I am leaving you with a gift- peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. John 14:26 (NLT)

Why shouldn't they be troubled or afraid? Because Jesus would make sure nothing bad ever happened to them? Not even close. Go back and read John chapters 13 & 14. What is Jesus telling them? That tough times and suffering are coming for them. Does that make the disciples run away? No- but they were able to find Jesus' peace and courage even in the midst of the storm. When I was asked to come to Alaska to work with the church up here it was a dream come true. I was struggling in a lot of ways at the church I was at and felt like I was not a good fit as their youth minister. I was SO happy to be coming back to Alaska... but I was NOT looking forward to telling the teens I had worked with for years and that I loved deeply that I was abandoning them. Judy and I put that decision through this filter and even though the thought of telling the teens I was leaving made me physically ill I felt peace about the decision. But there are times when even after putting a decision/situation/message through all of these filters that we still are unsure- what do we do then?

7. Trust God and flip a coin.

I'm only sort of kidding. First off remember that even if you make the wrong decision, God can work with that. He looks at our hearts and if you made the wrong decision for the right reasons God can and will make something amazing out of our futures in spite of flawed decisions. So maybe it's not such a horrible idea to flip a coin, or roll some dice, or draw some lots.

We may throw the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall. Proverbs 16:33 (NLT)

I'm not saying make every decision with the roll of some dice or the flipping of a coin, but if God is Who He claims to be in the pages of the Bible then there could be worse ways to make a decision if none of the other filters have led to clarity. After all- it's how the 11 apostles who were left after Jesus' ascension chose a twelfth apostle to fill the empty spot left by Judas-

So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they all prayed, "O Lord, you know every heart. Show us which of these men you have chosen as an apostle to replace Judas in this ministry, for he has deserted us and gone where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and Matthias was selected to become an apostle with the other eleven. Acts 1:23-26 (NLT)

Prayer: Father, I want to hear Your voice clearly. I want to learn to recognize when You are speaking to me and when a voice or message I'm hearing is not from You. Teach me to hear, to recognize and to love Your voice. In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

If you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. James 1:25 (NLT)

And all of us... can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 (NLT)

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Colossians 1:27 (NIV)

Reflection: Ok... so where were we? Oh yeah- reflect, reflect & then reflect. We've spent the first 4 days of this week looking at how to do the first two (look for my reflection in the pages of the Bible- in other words listen. Then reflect or meditate on what I believe I've heard from god), now it's time to implement the 3rd "reflect". And implement is a good word for this step. The third step is for me- once I've determined that I'm hearing from God- to do my best to reflect that image or message to the world through my life. This is where the rubber meets the road so to speak. This, in my experience, is the step where the power lies. When we do what we know to do, then God gets behind us in a BIG way. Jesus called it the "path of blessing":

You know these things-now do them! That is the path of blessing. John 13:17 (TLB)

This is the kind of life God blesses. This is the kind of life that He pours His energy into. This is the kind of life that His power flows into. It's not that He's some petulant child who takes his toys and goes home if his friends don't play by his rules. It's just that there is a specific pathway on which flow God's blessings, God's power, God's presence and His knowledge/wisdom. I can remember wondering why more of God's power and blessings weren't flowing into my life. I can remember thinking that I saw others who were living miraculous lives and I wasn't sure what was so different about them. Why was God blessing them and not me? I'm not here to tell you this is the reason all the time, but as I think back on those days I now recognize that I wasn't acting on what God was asking me to do. I wasn't doing anything that would require me to be uncomfortable or that would mean I had to give up something I didn't want to give up. Basically my prayers went something like this:

Lord, I need your power and your blessings in my finances and career and if you could fix this stubborn wife of mine I'd really appreciate it... but I do not want you messing with these other areas of my life (I won't bore you with what those areas may or may not have been... in fact I'm not even sure I can really remember what they were anymore... just that they existed ;o) I don't really want to change any of those areas so if you could just fix what I'd like you to fix and leave me alone in all these other areas, well, that would be greeeaaaatttt (insert Lumberg impersonation here ;o)

Now, I didn't actually pray that prayer that clearly- I never would have said those words out loud. But it was how I was living my life. And then I wondered why my spiritual life was so anemic. If we are going to experience God's miraculous power flowing into and through our lives we are going to have to commit to Him. I don't claim to understand it but as it turns out, He desperately wants me (and you too, by the way) to be His partner in changing the world:

The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. 2 Chronicles 16:9 (NLT)

I used to wonder why God wanted me so badly. What help could I be? Wasn't I far too messed up to be His partner? I'll never forget when one of the preachers I asked about this told me, "Ed, the reason God wants you to be His partner in changing the world is because... He's desperate! Turns out there aren't very many of us out there who are willing to fully commit our hearts to Him." Ummmmmm... thanks... I guess.

But it's true. There just aren't many out there willing to "fully" commit their hearts to Him. What would that look like? Well, it'll look different in each of us. What might that look like in your life? I'm not exactly sure. Want to find out? It is nothing less than the most exciting adventure you will ever embark upon. It will require you to become much, much more than you are right now. God will use you right where you are today, but He won't leave you where you are right now, today. He will transform your life and change you in ways you never dreamed possible. In so doing He will change those whose lives He has entrusted to you and really, that's how He changes the world.

So how about it? Ready to change the world? Then the first step is to fully commit your heart to Him. Listen for His voice. Reflect on what you hear. Then reflect that message to the world around you.

Reflect. Reflect. Reflect.

Prayer: Father, today, right now I fully commit my heart to You. I have no idea what it will mean or where You will take me or exactly who I'll be when You're done with me, but I can't wait to find out. I know I don't already know all that I will know but with the knowledge I already have I will start doing what I know, understanding that that is the pathway upon which Your blessings, Your power, Your knowledge and Your presence flow. Take me places I've never been. In Jesus Name, amen.

Saturday: (bonus Saturday reflection- Judy and I got our info crossed up and didn't split the days up correctly so the solution was- add another day! Jesus is awesome!)

When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. Three things will last forever-faith, hope, and love-and the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13:11-13 (NLT)

Reflection: There are some things you can only really see if you look in a mirror. For example, you can believe that your friends would tell you if there's something in your teeth, but you can't really be sure until you consult a mirror. Mirrors don't worry about hurting your feelings. They just reflect back what they see. The Bible talks a lot about mirrors - mostly how we can be mirrors reflecting back the glory of God. But James also refers to God's word as a mirror.

The odd thing about mirrors is that although they are highly accurate in their portrayal, they look at the world backwards. We are so used to seeing our mirror image that we rarely notice it. But if you look at any slogans on your t-shirt, you'll notice that the words are backwards. Jesus' law, the Word that brings us life and sets us free, can often seem backwards but is it? Or is it that we are so used to seeing things the way we have always seen them that we don't recognize upside right when we see it? In a way, Jesus' kingdom is a lot like Jerry Seinfeld's bizarro world. It's like our world, but everything is somehow upside-down. If you're a fan of Seinfeld then you might remember the "Bizarro Jerry". Elaine meets a guy at a different coffee shop from the one the gang usually haunts and they are eerily familiar, but somehow also completely opposite from one another.

They are all incredibly nice to each other. They are thoughtful and earnest. They will get together just to read in the same room. They appreciate acts of kindness and generosity. Elaine feels herself being drawn to this strange way of life. She is getting tired of the way Jerry, George, Kramer and even herself look at life. Here's one of my favorite exchanges from the show:

Jerry- "What's so great about this guy and his friends?"

Elaine- "He's reliable. He's considerate. He's like your exact opposite."

Jerry- "So he's Bizarro Jerry."

Elaine- "Bizarro Jerry?"

Jerry- "Yeah, like Bizarro Superman, Superman's exact opposite, who lives in the backwards Bizarro world. Up is down, down is up, he says hello when he leaves, goodbye when he arrives."

Elaine- "Shouldn't he say badbye? Isn't that the opposite of goodbye?"

Jerry- "No, it's still goodbye."

Elaine- "Does he live underwater?"

Jerry- "No."

Elaine- "Is he black?"

Jerry- "Look, just forget the whole thing."

Jesus' teachings took human knowledge about how the world should be and completely turned it on its head! Want to move up the ladder in God's kingdom? Serve. Want true life? Die to having it your way. Want to have a powerful influence? Listen. Want victory in how you relate to those who have wronged you? Forgive. When we look at our lives in this mirror we see options for who we could be that don't exist outside of the mirror. We see a self that can be polished until we reflect the One in whose image we were made. We see a clear, true image of how Jesus wants us to live, even if many of His teachings run completely opposite of our human instincts.

This mirror can provide us with plenty of “Ah ha” moments. We feel powerful and clear when we can see. We like insights and understanding. The snag comes when we try to act on those insights, to put into practice what we see. Life outside the mirror has a push-back for those who try to move against the grain. We can easily forget what we saw so clearly in the mirror when we’re trying to improve in the world outside of it. Service is often not our favorite. Dying to our own expectations rubs us the wrong way. Listening takes effort, more with some people than others. And forgiveness just feels wrong. The world outside the mirror of God’s Word isn’t going to applaud us for living as Jesus did. He served. He listened. He forgave. And He let them kill Him for it.

It’s simply too easy to walk away smug with insights and forget to act on what we’ve seen. But James reminds us that the grueling follow-up work, not the moment of insight, is where God’s blessings are unleashed. It is in living lives that go against the flow of our own appetites, instincts and culture that transformation takes place. Jesus wants us to bring His bizarro world into our reality. What He wants more than anything is for us to see that the kingdom described in His words, teachings and interactions is actually the real world, and this place where we live that seems so compelling is in reality nothing more than an illusion- the bizarro world.