

Face Answers to Face

Proverbs 27:19

Attribution

*“As in water face answers to face, so the heart of man to man.” -
Proverbs 27:19.*

As is the habit with Solomon and his writing, this passage is in the midst of a couple chapters that cover different phases of our conduct in regular living. This one of the several places in the Book where he uses a fairly obvious and well know example that would readily be recognized by his readers to demonstrate a more deeply spiritual and godly point that we need to take to heart in our daily lives.

Hear he uses the illustration of a pool of water (small or large) that an individual looks into and calls us to think of what we “see” there and what that implies. Just as **water** reflects a person’s actual appearance, so the **heart** reflects a person’s true nature (v. 19). Looking at a reflection in water is an experience common to all people, but who is able to see into the heart? Proverbs indicates that while a person may conceal or reveal his heart through speech and actions, it lies open and transparent only before God (see 21:2).

The comparisons of 27:19–22 draw attention to the state of the person’s heart:

- The state of the heart is as clear to God (and perhaps to others who know one well) as the reflection of the face in water.
- Dissatisfaction and greed that always want more (v. 20),
- The fostering of either humility or pride in response to receiving **praise** (v. 21), and
- Folly that is so deeply rooted in a **fool** that it is unaffected even if he is ground to a pulp (v. 22).
- This focus on the heart as known and weighed by God is also evoked by the images of v. 20a (**Sheol** and **Abaddon**) and v. 21a (**crucible** and **furnace**), particularly since, in the one place where each of these phrases is found elsewhere in Proverbs (15:11a and 17:3a, respectively),
- It is followed by a second line that refers to the heart as either open before (15:11b) or tested by (17:3b) the Lord.

Many versions use the word “answers” in the first phrase but, hopefully without sounding like an egotist, it would be better rendered “reflects man”. As water reflects the face, so the heart of man reflects and reveals his inner person. As water reflects the face, the heart of man reflects and reveals his inner person. The Hebrew could be more literally rendered, “*Like the water, the face to the face, so the heart of the man to the man.*” Some take it to mean that one sees one’s inner self reflected in the face of a companion; and others, that one comes to self-understanding by introspection. Rather, the point is that as there is an

exact correspondence between the original and its reflection in still water, even so the heart of the man (his mind, inner self, character) corresponds to the man himself (i.e., the whole person). In other words, people have a basic consistency to them. Those who have integrity will maintain it in their inner and outer lives, and those who are perverse will be thoroughly perverted. The point is that one should learn how to read people and thus learn whom to trust.

And so, we can see that Solomon seems to be speaking of the idea of Self-knowledge. As we've said, the original is very cryptic: lit., '*As the water the face to the face, so the man's heart to the man.*' This may mean: 'if you would see yourself, look within—not in the mirror.' Alternatively, the second line could mean: 'so is one man's heart to another' - i.e. just as a mirror confronts you with your public shape, so your fellow man confronts you with the shape in which thoughts and habits like your own have grouped themselves into a character.

So we can see that one's thoughts reflect one's true character. It is emblematic parallelism, the first line forming the similitude. The verse literally says, "*As water face to face / so a man's heart to a man.*" The simplest way to take the verse is to say that *as clear water gives a reflection of the face, so the heart reflects the true nature of the man (NIV)*. The point seems to be that it is through looking at our heart attitudes that we come to true self-awareness.

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Just to review our understanding of the verse; "*As water reflects face to face, so the heart (reflects) man to man.*" This more correct rendering makes the heart of others to be the instrument of reflection. And by the heart is to be understood, in a general way, the character, mental and moral. You may see yourself while looking upon others, especially those over whom you have influence. But it is equally true that you may know other men by getting a thorough knowledge of yourself. The oneness of human nature is here taught.

As is always the case, there are Biblical illustrations that are useful - How often may parents see their own faults or virtues reflected in their children,

- as Jacob his deceitfulness,
- David his voluptuousness,
- Hannah her prayerful piety.
- Or a master in his servants (29:12), for if he "hearken to lies they all are wicked,"
- if he be like Cornelius, "a devout man," one or more of them will probably reflect his devoutness (Acts 10:7, 33, 48).

- Often has it been found that “*like people like priest,*” and the converse of this also is often true (Hos. 4:9).
- Do not David’s Psalms strike the same key-notes in our hearts now as vibrated in his heart when he sang them of yore?

And were not the Apostles, however diverse in natural character as in their several experiences, one in heart and linked together (as in the Apostles Philip and James), in that they loved the same blessed Master and devoted themselves alike to His service?

We ought to think by way of application as well. - The text is not a mere sentiment, but teaches many lessons. I ought to learn from it the immense responsibility of influence, in that I must make others more or less like myself. I am taught, by way of acquiring self-knowledge, to study human nature, since what I shall find in others exists more or less, latent if not developed, in my own heart. Should I not be more able to do to others as I would they should do to me—if convinced that their expectations of what is due only correspond with my own? Would not my sympathies be more readily drawn out towards my fellow-men, did I recognize a kindred soul in each one? To see myself as I am, would it not compel humility? To see others as I am, would it not beget brotherly love?

Moreover, how can I complain of *strangeness* - in my experiences if I realize that, from Adam to David, from David to Paul, from Paul to the present day, human nature and human experiences have been basically the same? “*He who understands his own heart will have the key to all others.*” There is a correspondence between man and man which is common to all. But as the “*image of the earthy*” is borne by every corrupt heart, so is the “*image of the heavenly*” by every heart renewed by grace. And thus true Christians are linked together in one mystical brotherhood, “*the communion of saints.*”