

Take a Look in the Mirror

The Rev. Dr. Robert
L. Griffin

Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 9:1-6

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Well, this morning I have some good news and bad news to share with you. The good news is that today is part one of a two-part sermon, which means that you'll have fewer points to follow and it won't be as long! The bad news is that you have to be here next week to get the rest of the story! But there's MORE BAD NEWS...and that is that everyone is likely to walk out of here today feeling convicted, depressed or maybe even just downright angry. So, this is your warning—you can head for the doors if you want—I won't be offended, honest! Next week is the happy side of the coin—just in case you're wondering whether to come back for part two or not!!

Today's text picks up where Pete left off last week. Those of you who were here may remember that Moses is essentially offering his final sermon by giving instructions to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, the land that God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to their descendants. Last week, Pete preached about the need for the people to remember God. Moses was warning the people that when they got into the land and became prosperous, they would be tempted to forget all the tough times in Egypt and everything God had done for them in the wilderness. They would be

tempted to attribute their success to their own strength and ability. Moses warned them not to forget God.

The words we read this morning, are another warning to the people. The text says that they are going into the land inhabited by the Anakim, and the Anakim are giants—not unlike our new youth director, Barry Hill. Many believe that Goliath was one of the Anakim. Back in the book of Numbers, it says that Moses had sent spies into the land and they came back with stories of the giants who live there. That's why, in verse 2, it talks about the fact that the people "know" who the Anakim are. They know they are dangerous, and they are scared of them. Moses reminds the people that God is going to go with them and create the means of victory for them—to displace the evil people that live there. God is going to give the land to Israel—because God has promised it, and God will keep the promise.

But, the key learning in this passage is that Moses reminds and warns the people not to think that God is doing this because the people of Israel are such wonderful, beautiful, sincere, kind, spiritual beings. Not at all! In fact, Moses basically says, "Don't think for a minute that all this good stuff happens to you because you're so special." Moses says they are a stubborn people and they made

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God ANGRY over and over and over. Frankly, God was so upset that He was ready just to destroy Israel and be done with the aggravation of dealing with these rebellious people. Don't think you're so great just because God is being so good!

Now, here's something that's important to remember—so hang with me for a minute here. These words in Deuteronomy were written down long after the events took place. The writers have the perspective of history on their side, and they can look back and see what has happened with Israel in the Promised Land. They can see what took place...how Israel was able to defeat larger, more powerful enemies. And the writer can see how easy it is to think that one's success is due to one's own merit or ability. And, so, these words were written down as a reminder to the people to keep a realistic perspective on their accomplishments. You and I know that history is written by the victors, and the victors have an innate tendency to skew the facts to match their agenda. So then, the writer of this passage is putting these words down to help Israel have an accurate sense of reality.

But you know, that's a lot easier said than done, isn't it? Having an accurate sense of reality is something we ALL find difficult. Don't we chuckle when we hear Garrison Keillor's description of Lake Wobegon: "Where all the women are strong, the men are good looking and all the children are above average." How easy it is

to deceive ourselves into thinking that we're smarter, better or even kinder or more loving than others. When we look in the mirror, do we really see ourselves for who we are? Or do we just see what we want to see?

In this humorous clip from Toy Story, Woody is trying to explain to Buzz Lightyear that Buzz is not really a true space ranger. Now, I'm guessing that most of us don't run around pretending to be space rangers or galaxy-saving super heroes. But our ability for self-deception is no less powerful. When we look in the mirror, can we see ourselves for who we really are? I would say the answer is a resounding "No." Our sinful nature makes it impossible for us to have a true self-awareness.

In I Corinthians 13, Paul writes that we "see in a mirror dimly." How many times have we heard that I Corinthians 13 read at weddings and the focus is on the "love is patient, love is kind..."? But oh how much better relationships might be if we realized that we are looking into a fuzzy mirror and that we can't see ourselves for who we really are. Twenty years later, Lynne and I are still fussing over who's right and who's wrong. And the honest reality is that neither one of us is right—at least not totally. Admitting our self-deception helps create healthy relationships.

A couple of weeks ago, I saw a bumper sticker that said, "Ignorance and Arrogance Is Bad Foreign Policy." Now I recognize that bumper sticker had an intended

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political agenda, but that does not negate the reality of that statement. When we look at Israel and Lebanon today, so much of the hatred and violence can be traced to an arrogant sense of superiority and an ignorance of each other's life circumstances. I don't want today's message to be misconstrued as a political speech. But we can't talk about the Middle East without recognizing humanity's incessant propensity for self-deception. Ignorance and arrogance were bad foreign policy in 1000 BC just as they are three millennia later! And Moses was warning the Israelites not to exhibit a sense of arrogance but to look at themselves honestly.

Not only do ignorance and arrogance make for bad foreign policy, they make for bad human relationships on ALL levels. And the place where it aggravates me the most is when it happens among God's own people. Moses was warning the Israelites about the dangers of religious superiority. And it's a warning many of us would do well to heed—myself included.

One of the joys of being in a church like VPC is that there is so much theological diversity throughout all of these chairs. And we have an exciting diversity among the staff as well. No two of us think exactly alike—praise God for that! And NOT ONE of us has the right view of God. NOT ONE of us lives the way God wants. NOT ONE of us, I don't care if you're a pastor, elder, deacon or can't find the New Testament

NOT ONE of us has the right to look down on another with an attitude of religious superiority. Friends, it saddens my heart to say that I have seen way too many instances of the "I'm right...you're wrong" approach to faith. I've been guilty of it myself—way too many times! Yes, we can have firmly held beliefs. But hold those beliefs in tenderness toward each other. Spiritual arrogance has no place among God's people...in ancient Israel...in the modern Middle East...or in Vienna.

And as we close in prayer, I'm going to give us some time to reflect on the ways that we have looked down on others—especially in the ways that we have seen ourselves as more spiritual, more theologically correct, more Christian. OR – for us to think about the way others have looked down on us and the ill-will we may harbor toward those who have treated us that way. I told you this wasn't a comfortable message—it's tough on all of us. Israel probably didn't want to pay attention to it millennia ago. And it's tough for us to hear today. But an honest look in the mirror is good for all of us. I'm going to close each portion of the prayer with the phrase, "In your gracious mercy," and I invite you to respond with "Forgive us our sins."

Let us pray...

God we recognize our propensity for self-deception, and yet it is hard for us to see ourselves honestly and

accurately. Hear us now as we
confess to you:

the ways and times we have
looked down on others ...

the times we have been hesitant to
admit that we might be wrong...

the ill-will we harbor toward the
way others have treated us ...

the animosity we have had toward
those not like us ...

Teach us to look in the mirror with
both eyes open, and help us to
know that YOU see us for who we
are and you love us, nonetheless.
Give us the grace to do likewise to
all people...in all times and
places...for we are all created in
your image. In Jesus' name we
pray. Amen.

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