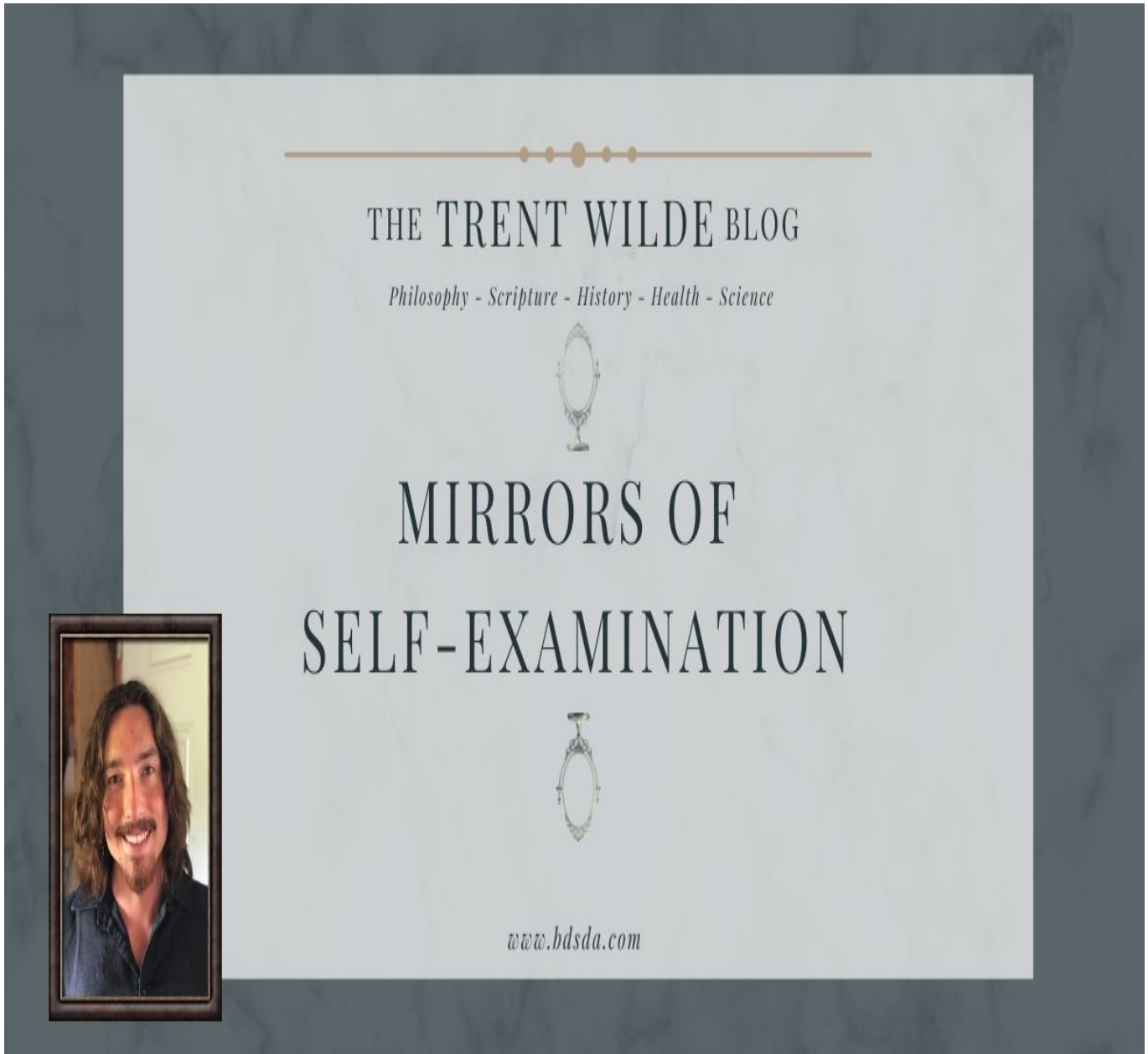


Mirrors of Self-Examination

Description



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The other day, Teresa and I were [listening to Ellen White's book *Education*](#) and came across this statement:

The mind, the heart, that is indolent, aimless, falls an easy prey to evil. {Ed 189.5}

It made me think of the trouble some have in keeping the mind from wandering during self-examination. As you may know, the Branch message teaches us to engage in daily self-examination. But it takes time to discipline the mind to focus in this way if you aren't used to it. Whether when attempting to self-examine, or at any other time, an unfocused mind can easily go in undesirable directions and it can be all too easy to look on the negative side of things ([negativity bias](#)). A slightly different, but related, sort of experience is when people try to overcome the temptation to think in a certain way by merely thinking "I don't want to think that way." But as long as the content of your thoughts is that you don't want to think a certain way, for just that long you will be stuck making evasive maneuvers, like being chased by your thoughts around a table.

The better way is to focus your thoughts on something specific. If you are tempted to think in a way that isn't good, you can focus on the truths that counter those thoughts. This, in effect, undermines the way of thinking you are trying to overcome. When you genuinely see why that way of thinking is erroneous, it loses its power. Likewise, when engaged in self-examination, you will get a lot more out of it if you are focused on something specific rather than aimlessly wondering about what improvements you might need to make.

So how can we keep focused? How can we keep our minds from wandering during self-examination? On one hand, willpower certainly plays a role. As we discipline ourselves, it can become easier and easier to focus. But there is another thing that can really help: mirrors. And obviously, I'm not talking about mirrors of metal and glass. I'm speaking metaphorically about mirrors of self-examination. Just as we can use mirrors to help us examine our external appearance, we can use another sort of mirror to help us examine our character. One such mirror is spoken of in James 1:22-25

1:22 But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves. 1:23 For if someone merely listens to the message and does not live it out, he is like someone who gazes at his own face in a mirror. 1:24 For he gazes at himself and then goes out and immediately forgets what sort of person he was. 1:25 But the one who peers into the perfect law of liberty and fixes his attention there, and does not become a forgetful listener but one who lives it out—he will be blessed in what he does. – James 1:22-25 (New English Translation)

Notice that a mirror is here used as an analogy for. . . did you notice what for? In verse 23 it is "the message" (or, "the word" in other translations). Then in verse 25 it is "the perfect law of liberty." Evidently, James is using the two phrases – "the law of liberty" and "the message" – to refer to the same thing. And this makes sense given that the book of James is largely a manifestation of Jewish wisdom literature in which the word "law" (*torah*) is used with its literal meaning: teaching, or instruction. So the "law" is really the "teaching" – which I'm sure you can see makes sense as a synonym for "message." So how does the message/teaching/instruction of God serve as a mirror? Well, by studying it, we are brought face to face with whether we are living in obedience to it or not. If God's instruction says "You must not lie" but we do lie, looking at that instruction reveals our flaw. If the message says, "love your enemy" but we don't love our enemy, focusing on that

message shows us where we err. And as I hope is already clear from the above explanation of “law” – message/law here is not just legal codes; it is the entirety of what God has revealed in messages given to save us.

So, when it comes to self-examination, take a passage in the writings of a prophet and read it; focus on it and be honest with it and with yourself. Let it show you your defects and thus lead you to see your need of a Savior. Whether it be the writings of Jeremiah, Hosea, the Teacher of Righteousness, Paul, John the Revelator, Ellen White, or some other, every inspired writing is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, in order that you may be competent and equipped for every good work.

We also have another mirror. It says in the [Odes of Solomon](#),

Behold, the Lord is our mirror.

Open your eyes and see them in him. – Ode 13:1 ([OTP](#))

Yes, by studying [the historical Jesus](#) we have a perfect mirror before us. By beholding his character, the flaws in our own characters become manifest. Even in areas where we might not be “flawed,” in him we see a standard of character to which we can aspire and to which, through choosing truth, we might attain. Consider, for example, how Jesus spoke of John the Baptist, or how he said that his disciples could do greater works than he (John 14:12), or how he admonished them to become better than him, if possible ([Apocryphon of James](#)). Jesus’ character contained no jealousy, no striving for supremacy. Do ours? Or does he, as our mirror, reveal something in us that needs to be removed? If yes, let us remove it and conform ourselves to the model.

Lastly, the heart is deceitful above all things (Jer. 17:9). If, in self-examination, we use for our mirror our own heart, our thoughts, our opinions, our conscience – we may indeed deceive ourselves. Instead, let us use the truths given in inspired message after inspired message, and let us use the character of Jesus. Let these mirrors be our daily companions. If we do so, we will come to see ourselves and our need far more clearly.