

The Man in the Mirror

By Allen Dvorak

Some readers might recognize in the title of this article a song performed by Michael Jackson. According to one source, it was perhaps his favorite. Michael Jackson (1958-2009) was a consummate performer. Dubbed the “King of Pop,” in the music industry, his career was unique in several categories. It would be difficult to calculate the impact his music and performances have had on music in general. Guinness World Records has recognized him as the “Most Successful Entertainer of All Time,” no small honor considering the success of other entertainers.

He was a master showman, and his popularity has continued even after his decease. His fame was obviously not confined to the United States. According to Wikipedia, the televised memorial service for Jackson was viewed by more than 2.5 billion (with a “b”!) people globally. Jackson is probably remembered by many for his eccentricities and physical appearance (which changed radically over his lifetime) and the accusations of pedophilia made against him (never convicted on any account), but maybe not so many are aware of the extent of his philanthropy.

It is estimated by one source that he donated over \$500 million to various charities during his lifetime. This figure does not include donations that were anonymous and benefit concerts that he did. He helped underprivileged and sick children in several different ways and was recognized for his benevolence by two Presidents of the United States. The music of Michael Jackson is admittedly an “acquired taste,” meaning that his music doesn’t appeal to everyone. However, if one can get past the screeches, hoos, aaows, oohs and yeahs, and made-up words (what is a “shamone,” anyway?), the lyrics of his hit single “Man in the Mirror” are worth examination. Like so many songs of the pop or rock variety, the meaning of some of the lyrics are obscure, but the primary message of the song is crystal clear.

The first verse observes that there are children who are needy and asks, “Who am I to be blind, pretending not to see their needs?” The chorus reads,

I’m starting with the man in the mirror
I’m asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you wanna make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself and then make a change

In the second verse, the speaker admits to having been “a victim of a selfish kinda love,” perhaps an odd way of confessing selfishness. The verse continues,

It's time that I realize
There are some with no home
Not a nickel to loan
Could it be really me pretending that they're not alone?

The chorus repeats and the rest of the song is repetition and slight adaptation of the same chorus. The principal message of the song is that of personal accountability. If we are not careful, we can isolate ourselves from the needs of others, pretending to be “blind,” as the song lyric goes, to obvious needs. Or perhaps it is easy for us to look at social injustice, the financially needy and discrimination in our communities and conclude that “someone needs to do something about this!” Jackson’s song suggests that the first place we need to look is in the mirror!

No doubt there are systemic changes that need to be made in our society, but change can begin with us as individuals. Jackson’s song speaks from the viewpoint of someone who needs to make a change, but even if we are not responsible for social injustices or even others’ needs, we can help to alleviate the suffering of others by using our blessings. The Scriptures encourage us to do good to others. To the Galatians, Paul wrote:

9 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. 10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:9–10; ESV)

James commented: Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27) The apostle John warned Christians about “love” that is feigned or nothing more than empty words. Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18; ESV)

“Man in the Mirror” encourages us to examine ourselves - so does James...and he warns us about not getting any further than just looking into the mirror.

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22–25; ESV)

Whatever character flaws Michael Jackson had, he was generous to the unfortunate. May we be encouraged to “look in the mirror” and make any needed changes.