

Story: Dirty Finches

September 1, 2024

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Saffron finches don't fly about in larger flocks like mynas, but they certainly do gather in small groups to feed and chirp and, one assumes, share the news of the saffron finch world. One little group was having a problem with not one, but two, of their members.

The first one who bothered them was, well, unwashed. Routinely. A finch is going to get dust and bits of grass and, I suppose, the occasional bug wing on their beak and face, and he did that. They'll also get dirty feet and, if they're hopping about on muddy ground, get dirty feathers. He did that, too.

Most saffron finches find ways to wash it off. They'll clean with beak and toes and let the rain wash them off when they can. On a gray day a saffron finch is a pretty bright sight. But not this guy. Somehow a rain shower left him muddier. If he pushed bug wings off his head he'd get dirt in the feathers.

He was a sight, let me tell you.

The other troublesome bird was clean and bright. He not only got himself clean, somehow he avoided most of the dust and dirt that the other birds had to deal with. And... he let you know it.

"Are you going to clean those feet?" he asked. "There's a bug wing on your beak," he said. "Can you believe it? You've got a speck of mud on your feathers," he commented.

He went on and on about the finch with the dirty feathers. "Look at that, he's a disgrace," he'd say, and "I'm so glad I'm not like him."

They say "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," but you know? Words hurt. And nearly every bird in the little flock of saffron finches felt the sting, with our dirty finch feeling it the worst.

What to do?

They got together, the other finches. They talked it over while the dirty finch and the absolutely clean finch were elsewhere. They come up with some possibilities. They made some decisions. They got ready to offer some options.

They called the whole flock together, including our two problem finches, and said, “We’ve got to see some changes here. First,” they said to the dirty finch, “we’re going to give you some help, because clearly you need it. We’ll help you with the preening and the cleaning and make sure you stay both healthy and show off your bright feathers.

The dirty finch, who thought he was going to be kicked out of the flock, chirped a grateful “Mahalo!”

The absolutely clean finch huffed, “I can’t believe you’re going to put up with him and his filth. You’re as bad as he is.”

“What we’re not going to put up with,” said the spokedfinch, “is your bullying any longer. You’ve been hardest on this finch here, but you’ve been at all of us at one time or another. Yes, your feathers are always immaculate, and no, our aren’t always at their best. But your tongue is never at its best, and that needs to change. Now.”

The absolutely clean finch was speechless for a moment (which was a good thing, if you think about it), and then he burst out with a harangue that few have ever heard. I’m afraid he didn’t learn his lesson, and I’m afraid he couldn’t stay with that flock.

When it came down to it, the things that make a finch dirty from the outside are things they could help with. But the things that make a finch dirty from the inside, all the harshness and bullying, those are the things that have to go.

by Eric Anderson