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Seeing Ourselves In His Image



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Seeing Ourselves In His Image

Living out our identity in Christ, the basis for our significance and worth

PART I

In talking with women of all different ages, from all over the country, in many different places in life, there seems to be a common thread that links many of our struggles. It has to do with how we view ourselves, our God, and the relationship between God and ourselves. God has provided us with everything we need and this provision includes a personal relationship with Him. In order to grasp the significance of this relationship, we need to understand three things: the basis for it, the hindrances that could get in its way, and how to participate in its growth.

You've heard it before, but it's an important point: You are created in the Image of God. *Genesis 1:27* tell us, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." Male and female each reflect the image of God. Part of God's plan in creating us was to share His love with us. Before we could do anything to earn His love, He loved us. This love is similar to, but much greater than, the love a mother has for her newborn baby. It is genuine and unconditional. God's plan is further explained in *Jeremiah 32:38-40*.

"And they shall be my people, and I will be their God: And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them: And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me." Jeremiah 32:38-40

For those of us who have accepted the gift of grace and have been converted, we can have confidence in the covenant that ensures God will not turn away from us.

In the world in which we live, there are many distractions that attempt to take our focus away from the simple truth of our identity in Christ. The distractions can come in the form of busyness and endless "to-do" lists. In addition, we are surrounded by advertising that tries to sell us that one special product that will make our life happier and more fulfilled. All around us are social messages that say we need to be thinner, better-looking, and more successful. When we listen to these messages, we are left striving to meet an impossible, unrealistic standard. This standard can easily become our master, never relenting in its demands. This master is quite unlike the Master we should be serving, who loves us as we are and yet loves us enough to want us to grow, mature, and draw closer to Him.

Often, the confusion of the mixed messages and distractions leads to a discrepancy between our self-image and reality. Our self-image is our perception of, beliefs about, and attitudes toward our self. It is based on how we compare to our own perception of the "ideal standard." Unfortunately, this standard is often not based in reality. The more we adhere to the world's standards of beauty and success, the less able we are to see ourselves accurately. When we adhere to the standard of the Word, we can say with confidence *Psalms 139:14*.

"I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well."
Psalms 139:14

What would it take to be able to say this verse to yourself and honestly believe it? Ultimately, it requires *recognizing* what hinders us from seeing ourselves as God sees us and then releasing ourselves from the grip it has on our lives. We can then *replace* the deceitful messages with truth from the Word. The Word tells us that in Christ, we are clothed with the garments of salvation, covered with the robe of righteousness (*Isaiah 61:10*), cleansed from sin by the blood of Jesus (*1 John 1:7*), and justified freely by God's grace (*Romans 3:24*). In accordance with *Ephesians 4:21-24*, we want to "put off" the distracting messages and "put on" Truth.

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“If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” Ephesians 4:21-24

When our focus is on the distractions of life and striving for approval, we miss out on the freedom that comes from living in the Truth of the Word.

Relationships shape and sustain us. Relationships that are consistent, supportive, and involve speaking the truth in love (*Ephesians 4:15*) provide the ultimate setting for growth and enrichment in our lives. These types of relationships do not always occur spontaneously, but, rather, develop from purposeful, intentional efforts. Our relationship with Christ goes hand-in-hand with being made in the image of God. Christ offers a secure sense of belonging and ultimate acceptance (*Ephesians 1:6*), unlike anything we can find on earth. In our relationship with Christ, we find our self-worth and identity. We don't have to strive for others' approval but can focus on who we are in Christ and on His favor towards us that does not change. If we look elsewhere for a sense of worth, acceptance, or identity, we will be striving for it based on our works and trying to meet a standard that is not based in reality.

We can rest in the reality of God's love towards us, His love that He gave even before we could do anything to deserve it. Our true value, based on God's love and grace, is steady, faithful, and constant. Our love towards Him is a response to His initiating love.

“We love him, because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19

Deepening our relationship with Christ allows us to accept the truth about our value and worth in Christ. We can go about this similarly to how we would deepen a relationship with a friend. We can take time to focus on God's Word by ourselves. Just as important, we can take time to focus on God's Word with other believers in accountability or mentoring relationships. We can take time to focus on God's Word with a group of believers, such as at church. Remember that He walks with us constantly as we go through our day-to-day activities. As we take care of our God-given responsibilities of children, jobs, family, etc., we can be purposeful in acknowledging His presence. Lifting up spontaneous prayers throughout the day redirects our focus to God and acknowledges our reliance on Him (*1 Thessalonians 5:17*).

As we spend time deepening our relationship with Christ, we will be able to grow in our ability to view ourselves more accurately, to view God more accurately, and to understand the significance of the intimate relationship we have with Him.

PART II

For every one of us, acknowledging the significance of being created in the image of God (*Genesis 1:27*) and having a relationship with Him is essential. It is also critical to realize our significance and worth stems from our position in Christ. Our position in Christ is based on His love and grace which we receive when we are adopted into His family. Just as the Lord showed grace to His chosen people the Israelites, so He also shows grace to us.

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*“But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”
Deuteronomy 7:8*

The Lord loves each one of us and keeps His covenant that was sealed by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Just like He brought the Israelites out of bondage and redeemed them, He continues this work in us today. We can be released out of the bondage of sin and be redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

“And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. . . . And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.” Colossians 1:17,20

The ultimate act of redemption was completed on the cross; it was through Christ’s sacrifice that He made peace for us. Many Christians understand these scriptural truths as they relate to eternal destination, but do not understand how these truths relate to issues of day-to-day living including emotions, relationships, purpose in life, etc. Remember, Jesus *“made peace through the blood of his cross.”* It wasn’t our works, the actions of other people, or our feelings. He is the perfect sacrifice for us and through accepting it in faith, we have peace with God. It is important to understand this peace with God is not based on our emotions or our feeling of peace; rather, it is a state of relationship. Because of this peace that was made for us, we can have a place with Christ in His family.

In order to live an abundant life (*John 10:10*), we need to have our beliefs based on the Truth from the Word. Often, our thinking patterns hinder our ability to accept the Truth and to act on it. Harmful thinking patterns can hinder our ability to see ourselves as made in the image of God. One practical way to accept the truth of our identity and position in Christ is to monitor our thoughts and replace distortions with the truth.

“For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” Proverbs 23:7a

One common distortion can be referred to as “black-and-white thinking” or “all-or-nothing thinking.” It occurs when you view a situation in only two categories instead of on a continuum. This is a very common way to try and make sense of the world. Black-and-white thinking is appropriate in matters related to God’s moral law and what He calls sin. With these issues, they are either “right” or “wrong.” However, outside of moral issues, life rarely provides situations that can be seen in “all-or-nothing” terms.

This distortion often arises when an individual is evaluating his or her own work and viewing it as either “failure” or “perfection.” For any task or assignment, it *may* be possible to completely fail, such as by not attempting to do it, and occasionally it *may* be possible to complete it perfectly. In the vast majority of situations, however, you land somewhere between failure and perfection in the spectrum of “good enough.” This concept has broad implications. For example, many people struggle with their weight and eating habits. Their goal is often a narrowly defined perfection and when they don’t meet that goal, they feel defeated because they have “failed.” They feel discouraged and may even believe they need to punish themselves for not achieving perfection. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking makes it easy to slip into a dangerous cycle of discouragement, attempts at stringent control, defeat, and self-punishment.

The truth is that many things like weight, eating habits, prayer life, moods, etc. really should be viewed in terms of “better and worse” outcomes. Again, for most things in life, there is an acceptable range of “good enough.” Also, many believers live with significant self-condemnation that the Lord Himself does not lay on these people. We need to be reminded of *Romans 8:1*, *“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”*

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A sure way to feel unnecessary discouragement is to view your responsibilities in life in all-or-nothing terms. For example, if you are planning to host a dinner or a family get-together, there is a very slim chance you will fail and a very slim chance it will be perfect. You will most likely fit in the “good enough” range. And that is good enough for God! If your goal is to do all things “*as to the Lord, and not unto men*” remembering that “*ye serve the Lord Christ*” (Colossians 3:23, 24) you won’t have to strive for the unrealistic expectations of perfection and won’t need to be unnecessarily discouraged by not being able to reach perfection. As we allow Christ’s love and grace to give us significance, worth, and approval, we won’t need to seek it from the wrong sources or compare ourselves to others to find it. Rather, we can be filled with gratitude for His presence in and with us.

Think also about raising your children. First, there is no such thing as a perfect parent. Even then, perfect parenting can’t achieve perfect results: remember Adam and Eve sinned when they were alone on the earth with God! Our heavenly Father is the perfect parent and yet all of His children live in the range between perfection and failure. No one is perfect and no one is a complete failure. Because of Christ, every person has purpose and meaning.

Another common distortion in our thinking is called “mind reading.” We do this frequently, but sometimes it interferes with our ability to see ourselves and others accurately. In mind reading, you believe you know what others are thinking about you and assume they are reacting to you negatively. Unfortunately, you may fail to consider other possibilities or interpretations for why a person is reacting the way she is. This process can be very damaging to relationships and to your sense of worth.

“Mind-reading” occurs in a wide variety of settings. For example, you might walk into church one Sunday morning and a friend of yours doesn’t seem to notice that you have arrived. If you think, “She must be upset at me,” you’re mind-reading! Mind-reading thoughts can lead to emotions such as disappointment, anger, insecurity, frustration, sadness, or discouragement. These thoughts and emotions then can lead to actions. For example, if you believe someone is upset with you, you may avoid initiating conversation or sitting near her. If these actions and emotions are not based on truth, they will be misdirected and may lead to more serious consequences.

Instead of “mind-reading,” it is often helpful to realize that while your initial interpretation may be one way to look at it, there are other possible explanations. Perhaps your friend is tired after being up all night with a sick child. Perhaps she has other things on her mind. When you assume you know what other people are thinking, you run the risk of drawing conclusions about yourself or others that are not accurate.

Another way to deal with this mind-reading situation is to think, “even if that is true, it’s okay because my worth is in Jesus.” Someone being upset with you does not negatively impact your worth as an individual or your position in Christ even though it may make you feel uneasy emotionally. Too frequently, we interpret our self-worth based on our emotions in the situation in which mind reading is occurring. Unfortunately, our interpretations of others’ thoughts lead us to make inferences about our own self that are inaccurate. Our own sense of worth must rest on something more solid and consistent than the opinions and feelings of other people. It must rest on the Truth of the Word.

PART III

As we attempt to clear away these distortions of thinking patterns and replace them with truth, how else can we form our identity? If someone simply asked you to describe yourself, how would you go about answering? The answer to this question, whether accurate or inaccurate, impacts us daily. How you answer the question of who you are gives a strong clue to where you place your worth. Unfortunately, many people define their identities primarily by what they *do*. Therefore, their work equals their worth. Remember, that our ability to *do* changes drastically over time, while who we *are in Christ* is steady and constant.

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At the beginning of each of his letters, Paul gave us a glimpse of how he defined his identity. Here are a few examples of his opening statements:

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus,” 2 Timothy 1:1

“Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God’s elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness;” Titus 1:1

“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God,” Romans 1:1

Paul expressed assurance that he was called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. The word apostle means a delegate, an ambassador of the Gospel, a messenger, or one sent forth with orders. Later in his introduction to the *Romans*, Paul proclaimed, “among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ” (*Romans 1:6*). In *Ephesians 1:6*, Paul wrote, “To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.” Paul knew that he was called and accepted by Jesus Christ and that he was writing to others who were also called and accepted.

Paul received a very dramatic calling, but that should not lead us to believe that we need a blinding experience in order to place our identity and purpose in Christ. Rather, every believer is an ambassador for Christ.

“Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” 2 Corinthians 5:20-21

We can be an ambassador for Christ; not on our own merit, but because God made Jesus (who was completely sinless) to be sin for us so that we could receive the covering of God’s righteousness.

Paul expounds on this God-given calling in *2 Timothy 1:9*.

“Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” 2 Timothy 1:9

God has saved us and has extended an invitation for us to be accepted into His family. It is clearly stated that because of God’s purpose and God’s grace that came through Christ Jesus, we can receive this calling and salvation. It is not our works; nothing we do or achieve can generate this gift. In addition, God’s grace was established before the world began, long before we were alive or able to do any sort of works. In fact, His grace has always been there for mankind to receive. Because of this amazing grace, we are empowered to do good works out of a heart of gratitude that leads us to desire to serve the Lord.

Paul expresses a sincere desire for people to come to understand the truth about their calling, the joy that is available to those who live out their calling, and the abundance of His work in those who are converted.

“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints,” Ephesians 1:18

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So, if you are saved and called by God, what does that mean about you? How does that impact your day-to-day walk?

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,” Ephesians 4:1

Our walk, which is our life, is to be consistent with our calling. Your calling includes being an ambassador for Christ, carrying His message everywhere you go. It impacts your role as parent, friend, family member, church member, etc. It impacts your life at home, in church, in the community. It may come in the form of teaching, praying, serving, etc.

In order to have your entire life consistent with your calling, seek to acknowledge God’s presence in every aspect of your life. Acknowledge Him when you wake up, as you prepare for the day, and as you go about your daily routine. Pray specifically for the grace to be able to acknowledge His presence and honor Him in everything. For example, try starting out your day with at least a few minutes between you and God alone. Strategically place reminders that will help direct your attention heavenward throughout your day. These reminders can be Scripture verses in your purse, on your refrigerator, inside a kitchen cupboard, or on your car dashboard. If you have children at home, memorize Scripture together and teach them to turn to God in prayer both when there is something to celebrate and when they need help. Instead of thinking that you should be able to be a perfect parent (which is black and white thinking!), you can rest in His presence as you daily seek His grace to be Christ-like as you go about your daily duties.

As you acknowledge God in your life, you will find that He has given you certain gifts and abilities that equip you for living out your calling. Consider this idea from the book *The Search for Significance*: “We are marvelously unique, created to reflect the character of Christ through our individual personalities and behavior. In a different and special way, each believer has the capability to shine forth the light of God. No two will reflect light in exactly the same way¹.” When we are struggling with our ability to accept this truth, we need to remember that one of the key ways God equips us is through the availability of His grace and the strength of the body of believers in which we are involved.

You can reflect the light of God through your unique personality, behavior, gifts, abilities, and desires. These characteristics are given by God and are to be used for His glory. It is also through these characteristics that you form your identity. Rather than forming an identity based on others’ opinions or on an ever-changing social standard, you are one of God’s “very good” creations, created in Him and for Him. Your identity in Christ, based on God’s love and grace, is steady, faithful, and constant.

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¹Robert S. McGee *The Search for Significance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), 126.