

A Living Belief Book

How We See Things

A Christian
Perspective

R. Herbert

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We See
Things**

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By R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION

What makes us who – and how – we are? The human mind is a complex thing, of course, and many factors affect how we act and react, but one thing is clear: how we see things, our point of view, isn't just a result of our background; it also often directly affects the kind of people we are and who we become!

How We See Things

This is not a book about psychology or self-help, but it is based on a long-established psychological principle regarding the importance of our perspective in life: the fact that how we see things not only ultimately guides us through many of our everyday decisions, but it also colors how we feel about everything from our own circumstances to what others say to us and even our deepest beliefs. The psychologist Carl Jung went so far as to say “It all depends on how we look at things” – and there is a good deal of truth in that statement.

In fact, this basic principle is as old as the Bible. “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7a NKJV) is a scripture often quoted in this regard, though the underlying Hebrew text is somewhat unclear in that verse and it has different possible translations.

We find the same idea, nonetheless, in Proverbs 4:23: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” For the ancient biblical writer the “heart” was what we would call the mind – the aspect of the person that considers things, that perceives how things are. By “guarding our heart” we pay attention to how we see things, because our perspective, our point of view, will affect our life in every way.

Learning to See Differently

For the Christian, this simple principle is a very important one. How we view physical things and ourselves, for example, will affect how we see others and interact with them. How we view others will affect how we perceive and interact with God, and finally, how we view God will affect how we see ourselves, others and physical things – it is an interlocking cycle as constant and ongoing as life itself. That is why you will find this book is comprised of four sections:

Part One looks at how we see the “things” of life,
Part Two ... how we see ourselves,
Part Three ... how we see others,
Part Four ... how we see God.

It’s a straightforward approach to examining the way we look at things in those great spheres of life. And rather than being an ongoing discussion that you need to systematically work through to gain something, this book consists of short individual essays that all illustrate some aspect of the theme. Some of the essays first appeared on our websites and have been carefully selected for inclusion here, others were specially written for this book, but all of them tie in to their respective sections by showing some of the ways we look at things and how that affects us and others in countless aspects of our lives.

Many of the following chapters also show that how we look at things can be put to work in our everyday Christian walk. One psychologist famously put it this way: “If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.” Simple as it may sound, this principle can often have life-changing potential for improvement in our lives. It’s not the trite application of some mantra of pop-psychology; it is coming to see an undeniable fact of life that we can easily prove to ourselves. It’s the truth that lies behind a great many statements by celebrated thinkers and doers

alike. It's why Israeli statesman Yitzhak Rabin said that if we want to change something for the better, "we must think differently, look at things in a different way." That is ultimately what this book is about.

The Five-Minute Challenge: Change How You See Things

How We See Things challenges you to take a few minutes to try it and see if this is not a subject that can more than repay the investment of a little thought. The way the book is constructed, you can "dip, skip, or read it through." But you may well find a number of ways in which examining how you look at things, yourself, your neighbor, and God himself may change your perspective, may change the way you think and act, may change the way you are!

PART ONE:
HOW WE SEE THINGS

1. LOOKING AT THE UNSEEN

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen ...” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

When you look up on a starlit night, what do you see? For those of us who live in the glare of modern city lights, it may not be much. But some three thousand years ago, under the clear desert skies of ancient Israel, King David thought that he could clearly see God’s invisible hand in the starry creation:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge (Psalm 19:1-2).

Like King David, most who read this book will probably also see God’s hand in the creation. That the vastness of the heavens and everything in them could come from nothing, without cause and design, seems unimaginable to us. Yet although some people feel they see the clearest evidence of God in the creation and in events in their own lives and in the lives of others, there remain those who see nothing there at all. It certainly isn’t a matter of wishful thinking or lack of education or intelligence on the part of those who feel they see an unseen God, as some cynics would like to believe. The fact that there are equally intelligent and emotionally mature people on both sides of the “Is there a God?” debate demolishes that fiction.

So why is it, then, that some people see God where others see nothing? The apostle Paul gives at least part of the answer in affirming that:

... since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made ... (Romans 1:20).

Paul goes on to show that many people do not see God because they do not want to see him (vss. 21-23). Not wanting to acknowledge God's authority in our lives usually means we will not see it. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah put the situation this way:

If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness; in the land of uprightness he deals corruptly and does not see the majesty of the LORD ... your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it ... (Isaiah 26:10-11a ESV).

Isaiah's point is that whether people are faced with blessings ("favor") or punishments (the hand that is "lifted up") – the "carrot or the stick" – in their lives, those who do not want to see God's presence will not see it. But there is a lesson in this for those of us who do acknowledge God's existence and presence in our lives. We do have to look and continue looking, with spiritual sight, to keep that which is not physically visible clearly in our mind. That is what the apostle Paul meant in saying "So we *fix our eyes* not on what is seen ..." (2 Corinthians 4:18, emphasis added).

But the word Paul uses for "fix our eyes" connotes much more than just "looking." The Greek word *skopeó* that he used essentially signifies that on which we focus intently – as with the point of aim on a target we intend to hit. (It is the root from which we get words such as telescope, microscope and rifle scope.) It is that kind of focused "looking" and "seeing" that helps us to recognize God's presence in our lives and to live according to it. As the author of the Book of Hebrews tells us of Moses: "... he persevered because he saw him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27).

So, a thread connects each one of the biblical writers we have quoted here. They all show it is only as we work toward focusing past the creation to the Creator – only as we fix our spiritual sight on the unseen – that we see what we need to succeed in our walk with God. We will consider some examples of that principle in the following chapters.

2. THE GIFT OF COLOR

“Colors are the flavors the eye enjoys.”

A Christian watching the flaming reds and burning golds of a sunset may give thanks for the beauty of the kaleidoscopic colors, while an atheist or agnostic seeing the same colors may perceive them only as a function of the filtering of shorter light frequencies by the atmosphere. The scientific explanation of how the sunset occurs is correct, of course, but that doesn't mean that we weren't made to appreciate the beauty of those fiery colors.

Take, for example, the richly colored tropical fish we see swimming around in aquariums, or, if you are fortunate, that you may have seen in some tropical ocean. Most people presume those fish just evolved that way because their bright colors gave them some survival advantage over dull grey fish. But there are plenty of dull grey fish in every ocean and they seem to be doing OK. That's not to say that the colors in nature don't have any use, but often they are not really as necessary as you might think.

Flowers could have survived just fine if they were all one or two bright colors to attract insects where necessary, but there are thousands of colors in the floral world. Birds and tropical fish could have survived with a much more limited palette of colors, too, but again we see thousands of colors in these creatures – colors that are far more wide-ranging than would be needed for members of species to recognize each other or for any other practical reason.

Nature has a superabundance of colors – and humans are clearly designed to enjoy them. The human eye can recognize nearly ten million distinct colors, and although we don't need to be able to see so many colors in order to survive, the ability adds immeasurably to our enjoyment of the world in which we live.

But it could have been a black and white world. There is no reason to believe that a black and white world would not work any

more than a black and white TV could not work; but if you have a color TV, would you want to go back to black and white? We all know the answer to that question. The truth is, we love color and color adds tremendously to the enjoyment of watching a film or television program. The creation is no different. Whether we realize it or not, color is a gift we were given and one that helps us see something about the mind of God.

Usually we think of the creation as showing God's intelligence in his design and provision for the many life forms of this world, but we can also see other traits – including his love – in the colors of the creation. Think about it. If your parents were inestimably rich and gave you a TV as a gift, would you think they loved you more if they gave you a black and white TV or a color TV? Color is obviously an important part of the gift.

That is why we see examples of multiple colors being associated with gifts of love in the Bible. Think, for example, of Joseph's coat of many colors and notice why it was given him: "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons ... And he made him a robe of many colors" (Genesis 37:3 ESV). Joseph's father would still have loved him if he had given him a dull grey coat, but he loved him greatly and, as a result, gave him that coat of many colors. And it wasn't just Joseph – we see other beloved individuals with many-colored coats in the Bible (2 Samuel 13:18, Psalm 45:14 NKJV, etc.).

In the same way, color is not just a part of God's creation, it is a gift that he has given to us. He could have made everything black and white, or in far fewer hues, but in love he made us capable of seeing millions of colors and built a superabundance of color into the creation for us to enjoy. Next time you see a sunset, an iridescent tropical fish or a brightly colored bird or flower, think about it. Do you just see colors – or do you see something about God in the gift of color?

3. MISSING SMALL MIRACLES AS WE LOOK FOR LARGE ONES

*“We don’t see the grass around our feet when we look only
for the towering trees.”*

1 Kings 17 tells the story of how the prophet Elijah fled to the region of Sidon on the Palestinian coast during a great drought and famine in Israel. Elijah was led to the home of a poor widow and her son, and when Elijah asked for a little water and a small piece of bread the woman replied:

“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die” (1 Kings 17:12).

Elijah told the woman that the God of Israel had promised that if she did as he asked, “The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land” (1 Kings 17:14). The woman complied and sure enough, after that meal and others there was still food every day for the woman and her son as well as for Elijah, “For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah” (1 Kings 17:16).

This situation must have continued for a while because the Bible reports, “Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. She said to Elijah, ‘What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?’” (1 Kings 17:17-18). Elijah prayed over the young man and God restored the youth’s life. It is only then that the woman said to

Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth” (1 Kings 17:24).

Are we like the Sidonian woman in so often missing the continuing everyday miracles of our lives and losing faith – despite those small miracles – when severe problems come on us? We read the story and wonder, “How could she not have noticed the ongoing miracle of the lasting flour and oil – especially when Elijah told her it would be so?” But would the woman read the story of our lives and wonder, in the same way, why we did not notice the things that were worked out for us and others around us?

Perhaps this is part of what the Prophet Isaiah referred to when he spoke the words quoted by Jesus: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving” (Isaiah 6:9 quoted in Matthew 13:14). Certainly the “hearing” refers to hearing the word of God and not understanding it, but the “seeing and never perceiving” must surely refer to things we witness but simply do not grasp their significance.

Let us remember the story of the woman of Sidon when we next face a difficult situation. Rather than fearing the lack of some large miracle when we need help, perhaps the way of faith is that we remind ourselves of all the small miracles that brought us to the point where we are now. But it’s a question we can all ask ourselves at any time. Are we seeing the ongoing “flour and oil” in our lives? What are the small miracles that we are missing?

4. GETTING PROBLEMS IN PERSPECTIVE

“What you see depends not only on what you look at, but also where you look from.”

Few people ever think about the fact that they had to learn to see. Even after infants have opened their eyes, they still have to learn to see things in perspective in order to understand and properly interact with the world around them. This is because the human brain receives millions of nerve impulse messages through the eyes and must learn to organize those messages in a meaningful way in order for us to “see” a picture that makes sense to us.

That’s where perspective comes in. Visual perspective is what allows us to organize the individual points of light our eyes register into a picture that matches reality – and that process has to be learned. Spiritual sight is no different. In order for us to truly comprehend our purpose in living and to understand how we should live our lives, we must learn to “see” spiritually. First, our spiritual “eyes” must be opened – something that only God can do for us (Psalm 119:18, Ephesians 1:18) – but even then we have much to learn in order to begin to see things in true spiritual perspective.

We have all seen children’s drawings and smiled at the way the figures and objects in the landscape are placed on the paper in an unrealistic manner – without fitting together properly. A person may look as big as a house and things that are supposed to be far away may appear no further than objects in the foreground. It is only as children develop that they learn how to make their drawings match reality by the use of perspective.

We discover, as we get older, that physical perspective depends entirely on our position relative to the objects being viewed. If we lie on the ground and place our eyes next to a small rock it will look as big as – or larger than – a distant mountain. To see things as

they really are, we have to step away from the rock and closer to the mountain so that we get better perspective and the rock looks as it is – a tiny stone – and the mountain rears up as a great peak.

It's easy to see the analogy here. For example, when we get too close to the problems in our lives and focus on them, they seem huge and fill our vision more than our mental picture of God. It is only as we step back from the problems and closer to God that we see both the problem and God in perspective – because perspective depends on where we are looking from. Stepping back from problems helps us in other ways. A mountain looks very different from a mile away and from a foot away. Up close it may look like an impassable barrier. From further away we see the passes on either side that provide ways around that formidable peak.

This is more than just “looking on the bright side.” The old saying that “We can complain because rose bushes have thorns, or rejoice because thorn bushes have roses” may have a valid point, but it's not a principle that will get us through the times we find ourselves lying on the thorns. When all we can see is the problem “in our face,” we need to point our face in another direction. That's why the Scriptures continually talk about “looking to God.” It's not just a trite aphorism. When the psalmist wrote “Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always” (Psalm 105:4), he was talking about our perspective in life.

Ultimately, the problems we experience will always seem bigger the closer we are to them. When we keep perspective in mind, we realize that the only way we can make our problems smaller is to move closer to God. It's an obvious principle, but one that we must always strive to remember. Put another way, what we see in life will always depend on what we choose to be close to. If we want to go through life seeing smaller problems, we need to move closer to God. We may still have problems, but we will better see them in perspective.

5. BEHIND LIFE'S BLACK PATCHES

*“If we look closely, we can see God speaking to us
.... beneath life’s problems.”*

The young man sat alone in his cell staring at the letter. Imprisoned in a country not friendly to Christianity, Matthew (not his real name) was kept in relative isolation and the only contact he had with the outside world was in the form of occasional heavily censored letters he was allowed to receive from his family. The letters had any words of encouragement – especially scripture quotations – completely covered over by the heavy black markers of the government prison censors.

In the long months Matthew had been imprisoned, he had come to deeply resent those patches of blackness that cut him off from the love of his family. Until today. Now, Matthew looked at the patches of black obscuring much of the latest letter he had received and smiled. Matthew was a happier man.

The truth of the situation had dawned on Matthew like a personal revelation. He had come to see that the black marks and patches on his letters did not obscure his family’s love for him – they highlighted it. He saw that every obscuring black mark was not a denial of the love felt for him, but proof of it. Sometimes he could guess that there was a scripture behind the black ink from quote marks not obscured at the beginning or end of the marking.

If the censors blacked out words individually he could guess from a short word blacked out after the quote marks that it was probably the reference to a quoted verse in Psalms, which his family knew was his favorite book of the Bible. Very occasionally, if he held the letter up to what light he had, he could make out faint traces of what was written and have some idea of what was being said to him.

As time progressed, Matthew came to resent the black marks less and less. Sometimes he would take out a letter and just look at the

marks, because he knew that behind them was the love of his family. Understanding what lay behind the black marks – even though he could not see through them – sustained Matthew until he was eventually released.

Sometimes, when we go through the trials of life, it's hard to see God's love for us. We may even come to resent the black marks and clouds of life: the illnesses, job losses, persecutions, or whatever seems to obscure God's love and concern for us. But if we learn to see them as we should, we can come to see behind the black patches in our lives.

On occasion we may be able to make out the loving correction in things that go wrong (Hebrews 12:6), but this is not always the case. Often, like Job, we may not see that we are being given an opportunity to learn or grow. We don't always see God for the storm – until we realize we are being taught something and we hear him speaking through the dark clouds (Job 38:1) or through the dark patches that seem to come between him and us.

Once we have committed ourselves to God, we can know that his love is always behind the black patches in our own lives, even if we may not see it clearly (1 Corinthians 13:12). We can remember that every dark patch of life, although it might seem to obscure God's love, in reality is being allowed to happen because it can be used to teach, guide and form us or to help others in some way. We come to realize that the black patches of life do not deny God's love for us; they actually affirm that it is there.

6. SEEING WITH OPENED EYES

*“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things
in your law” (Psalm 119:18).*

This verse from the Psalms is perhaps the first one that comes to mind when we think of seeing things from a spiritual perspective, but what part of the Bible would you guess speaks the most about seeing things with spiritual sight? It may surprise you to find that the answer is the Gospel of Matthew.

The Book of Matthew has several clear themes, but one we often do not see unless we are “looking” for it is that of “seeing”! We find this theme expressed in many of the statements about Jesus and in many of his recorded sayings. Christ’s ministry is introduced, in fact, with a prophecy from the Old Testament on exactly this theme: “the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16). Matthew continues to describe the teaching and ministry of Jesus by often using the words “see” or “seeing” in a metaphorical or spiritual sense of seeing beyond the physical. Consider the following words of Jesus found in Matthew 13:

...Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it (Matthew 13:13-17).

Although Mark and Luke (Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10) both mention Jesus quoting Isaiah's words regarding spiritual lack of seeing and hearing, Matthew records the fuller context of what Jesus said – stressing the concept of seeing seven times in these few verses, and making it repeatedly clear that spiritual sight is only possible when God gives it to us. The apostle Paul confirmed this fact when he wrote:

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe (Ephesians 1:18-19).

In fact, the word translated “know” in this passage literally means to “see.” Without our eyes being spiritually “opened,” we simply do not “see” spiritual truth.

But although we may understand that our eyes must be opened before we can grasp the truths God wants us to see, many Christians think this is a one-time process – a “coming to understanding.” In reality, however, it is a lifelong process. The psalmist could already “see” many spiritual truths when he wrote “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from your law,” and the prophets Jesus said longed to see the things we may see also had great spiritual vision, of course.

“Coming to understanding” is only the beginning – *we must continually ask to be shown more in order to see more.* “Open my eyes” is a prayer we can pray every day of our lives.

PART TWO:
HOW WE SEE OURSELVES

7. SEEING OURSELVES IN PERSPECTIVE

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:3-4).

It’s easy to read these words of King David and to see them as pleasant poetic thoughts, but if we put them in the context of modern scientific knowledge regarding the cosmos they take on added meaning. Today, we have a far better sense of the size of the universe than David could have had, of course, and we are used to thinking in terms of light years and stars untold millions of miles away. But our mathematically-based knowledge may obscure the fact that we cannot really comprehend just how small we are in such a huge universe.

It’s helpful to try to realize that though we are less than a speck on the earth and the earth is little more than a pebble compared to our sun, the sun itself is only a speck when compared to the size of our galaxy – and our galaxy is only a tiny dot within its system which is itself no more than a speck within the universe! Put another way, the entirety of our vast galaxy would only be the size of a single blood cell compared to the size of the whole earth if our galaxy were compared to the universe itself.

Yet despite our staggering insignificance in the physical scale of things, the word of God reveals that our potential is greater than we can imagine – to the same extent that we cannot fathom how small we are on the physical scale! David continues his psalm with an affirmation of the incredible worth of humanity: “You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet” (Psalm 8:5-6). Jesus himself

quoted David in saying “... You are ‘gods’; you are all sons of the Most High” (Psalm 82:6, John 10:34), and the apostle John developed this thought even further: “...now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

So, as humans, we are simultaneously pathetically insignificant and of incredible, almost indescribable, potential. To see ourselves properly we must keep both those truths in mind. As Christians we must learn to live between these extremes – we must never forget our smallness in comparison to the creation and its Creator. We must live joyfully – and worthily – in the knowledge of the great potential the Creator has given us. As the Christian writer and Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom wrote, we need to “Learn to see great things great and small things small.”

In some cases we should learn to stress the appropriate view of ourselves – as great or small – according to our particular life circumstances. The apostle James wrote “Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower” (James 1:9-10). James means that we should all aim for the middle – we should all aim to neither elevate ourselves nor allow ourselves to forget the greatness of the position to which we have been called. We who are nothing have been called to inherit everything. The truth of that perspective forms the basis of what we are going to see in the following chapters.

8. A MIRROR WE CAN TRUST

“Reality is a mirror the soul does not naturally seek.”

When explorers Lewis and Clark conducted their historic mission through the American West, they took with them many small mirrors which they traded and gave as gifts to the native Americans they met. One native warrior later described these mirrors as “things like solid water,” and the Indians considered them quite wonderful as they gave much better reflections than looking into water could do.

Today people everywhere take mirrors for granted, but not every mirror gives an accurate reflection. Even apart from the type of distorting mirror that is used in carnivals, there is actually quite a range of reflection accuracy in normal commercial mirrors – as you can often see by comparing several together.

Nevertheless, despite the imperfections they may have, we all need mirrors occasionally to check on ourselves as we go through life. Sometimes we also need a spiritual mirror, and there the level of reflection accuracy becomes much more important. When it comes to taking a look at our own character and spiritual condition, it’s amazing how often many of us settle for mirrors which can’t really be trusted to give an accurate reflection.

We all fall prey to this to some extent. When we attempt to judge how we ourselves are doing spiritually, we run the risk of getting an inaccurate reflection as Jeremiah 17:9 reminds us: “The heart is deceitful above all things...” It’s that human “heart” or mind that twists things so constantly that we simply can’t trust its judgment. Even if we turn to friends and fellow believers to get input on issues regarding our character and behavior, the “reflection” we get from them may be distorted by friendship, too.

The truth is there is only one spiritual mirror we can trust and that is the one God provides us in his word. It’s a particularly

effective “mirror” because it works in two ways. First, the word of God doesn’t hold anything back. We can always trust it to “tell it like it is” because its reflection goes much deeper than our surface selves: “For the word of God is ... sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates ... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). That’s a non-distorting reflection we can trust one hundred percent.

It might be discouraging at times to see a true reflection of our inner nature, but there is another, more positive way the word of God acts as a mirror for us which does change the reflection to our advantage. The more we look into the mirror of the word, the more we clearly see the nature of Christ himself – an image to which we are striving to conform. As Paul tells us, we are: “... beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” and “are being transformed into the same image ...” (2 Corinthians 3:18 NKJV).

So God provides a mirror that we can trust when it comes to seeing things we need to change and fix – and also provides us with a mirror that gives us a clear image to aim for as we change. It’s really not that complicated: the Bible provides a reflection of what we need to avoid and at the same time what we need to become. The only caution is that we mustn’t forget to regularly check the mirror we are given and to act on its reflection, as the apostle James wrote:

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do (James 1:23-25).

That’s a mirror we can trust – all we have to do is use it regularly.

9. THREE THINGS THAT DEFINE US

“Everyone is defined by something.”

Some people are defined in their own eyes and in the eyes of others by their accomplishments, others by their relationships, others again by their education or experiences. There are clearly many things that serve as defining aspects of our lives.

Yet, sadly, a great many people in this world would answer the question “What three things most define individuals?” in a remarkably similar way: “appearance, possessions, success.” Although many are not so shallow, of course, hundreds of millions of people would agree that these are perhaps the three physical things that “define” an individual in the eyes of others more than anything else.

But the Christian realizes that these three things are ultimately meaningless, and that in the long run – at the end of our physical lives – our looks, money, influence, and all such things will disappear and that they certainly do not define who we are in the eyes of God. So what qualities do affect how God sees us?

The answer is a surprisingly simple one and is found repeatedly throughout the Bible. The three things that define us in God’s eyes are our attitudes, our actions, and our words. We see this many times in scriptures such as this example in the Book of Proverbs in which God, in the personification of Wisdom, states: “... I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech” (Proverbs 8:13b) – in other words: wrong attitudes, actions, and words.

What is especially interesting about this particular verse is that it does not say that Wisdom hates “evil thoughts,” in addition to evil behavior and evil speech, but elaborates on the area of attitude by singling out the example of pride and arrogance. The verse makes it clear that the God who looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7) particularly dislikes a proud attitude – something which is underscored by many other verses in Proverbs and elsewhere

(Proverbs 16:5, etc.). In fact, if we study the many biblical verses that deal with our thoughts and mental state, we find one of the most commonly mentioned problematic attitudes is that of rebellious pride that puts itself before God.

This is worth thinking about. It is considerably easier to be aware of the problem when we have fallen down in deed or in word than it is when we have slipped in the area of attitude. Secondly, there are many possible failings of attitude – selfishness, self-pity, lack of concern, etc. – but perhaps none is so hard to see in ourselves as pride. And this is an important thing to remember.

Pride has been called the worst of all sins by Christian thinkers from Augustine to C. S. Lewis and beyond. The fact that pride is so bad and yet is the hardest attitude to detect in ourselves may well be the reason it is singled out so often in Proverbs and elsewhere in the Bible.

In the next chapter we will see some of the aspects of the pride which infects human nature, but for now we might ask: “Why is pride so bad?” From a biblical perspective, pride is often an “invisible” form of hate itself, the very opposite of love. In fact, we find in the apostle Paul’s great “Love” chapter, 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is ... kind ... it does not boast, it is not proud” (1 Corinthians 13:4). These three things are examples of the very opposites of the qualities hated by Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs – wrong actions, words, and attitudes: Love is kind – right actions; love does not boast – right words; love is not proud – right attitude.

It is clear that if we are following the way of Wisdom, the way of life preached by Paul and found throughout the Scriptures, the three things that define us are our actions, our words, and our attitudes. It is usually relatively simple to study to see if we are living according to God’s way of life in our actions and words – it is our attitudes that are hardest for us to see in perspective. The next three chapters look at how we can do that successfully.

10. AT THE HEART OF PRIDE

“The LORD detests all the proud of heart ...” (Proverbs 16:5).

As the old saying goes: “at the heart of pride, just as at the heart of sin, is ‘I.’” There is nothing wrong with a healthy self-identity, of course, or with the use of personal pronouns, but the point the saying makes is that we can get into a world of trouble by seeing ourselves as the center of the universe. In that sense, it is as we begin to elevate the personal “I” above others, and ultimately place ourselves ahead of God in our view of things, that self-identity morphs into pride and pride into sin.

Consider, for example, the words of the prophet Isaiah spoken against the king of Babylon. Since medieval times, at least, these verses have often been thought to be spoken metaphorically against the power behind that king’s throne in the form of Satan himself. But the identity of the one addressed is not as important as the clear picture of pride the words give us, because the picture applies wherever pride is found:

How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, “I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights ... I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:12-14).

When we separate out the statements of the one whose attitude of pride is condemned in these verses, we get a striking picture of self-identity gone terribly wrong – of the personal pronoun out of control:

“I will ascend to the heavens”

“I will raise my throne above the stars of God”

“I will sit enthroned on the mount of the assembly”

“I will ascend above the tops of the clouds”

“I will make myself like the Most High.”

Wrongful pride always involves the expression of one or more of the four aspects of self-elevation – focus on person, possessions, position, or power. In Isaiah’s words, we see excessive focus on all four very clearly. The constant use of the pronoun “I” is the first thing we notice, and although, as we said above, there is nothing wrong with use of the “first person” in speech, when we so obviously put our person first – before all others – there is clearly a problem.

The second thing we notice is the element of possession: "my throne" and the element of position. In every statement we see a dissatisfaction with present position and a desire to be elevated. But the desire for position is not the same as that for power. Numerous studies have shown, for example, that office workers will often give up responsibilities and privileges they have – accept an actual loss of power – to gain a new title that gives them more status.

But power is also an aspect of pride which cannot be ignored. There is a clear lust for power in all of the statements of the prideful one, culminating in the desire to be not only elevated, but also to be like God himself, to have God-like power.

Throughout Isaiah 14:12-14 we see the focus on person, possessions, position and power that reveals the heart of sinful pride. Notice, too, that other than desire to be powerful like God, there is not a single mention of anyone else in any of these statements – every statement begins with an expression of self-identity and ends in a goal of self-elevation.

By contrast, think of the many statements of Christ in his earthly life that reveal the very opposite attitude. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) and “... I have come that they may

have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10) are only two examples of this pride-less state of mind.

When we look at other individuals in the Bible who were close to God, we find the same attitude. Look at King David, for example. David’s humility is often clear in his own writings and in other biblical books that speak of him. His position as king did not affect his view of himself relative to God, and David often doesn’t even refer to himself as “I” or “me” but as “your servant” (Psalm 119:23, etc.) – the very opposite approach to that described by Isaiah.

For the Christian, this attitude is a vital one. If, like Paul, we are to say: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...” (Galatians 2:20), then the person whose identity we seek is not our own self, the position we seek is not an elevated one, our possessions are viewed as being for the benefit of others as well as ourselves, and the power we seek is only to help others.

Whenever we realize that the ongoing focus of our thoughts or speech is on our own self, our possessions, our position relative to others, or some power we may seek, we should remember the words of Isaiah, and that it is precisely these things that lie at the heart of a false perspective of ourselves and wrongful pride. The word of God calls us to reject these natural human inclinations and to see ourselves in a very different way.

11. A BETTER VIEW OF OURSELVES

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself” (Philippians 2:3 NKJV).

It may surprise you to learn that Paul’s words quoted above from his letter to the Philippians are among the most frequently misunderstood in all of the apostle’s writings. On the surface they look straightforward enough – that we should consider others more worthy or better than ourselves – and that’s how most of us understand them.

But it helps to avoid a false view of what our own self-concept should be by better understanding what Paul probably meant. The word translated “better” in Philippians 2:3 in the KJV and NKJV is the Greek word *hyperechontas*. It’s translated “more significant” in the ESV and “more important” in the HCSB, but are these renderings accurate? *Hyperechontas* is an interesting word. You probably recognize the prefix “hyper” as meaning “beyond” or “above” (as in hyperactivity), and the word literally signifies to be above or beyond. It is used four other times in the New Testament, three of which are in the writings of Paul as we see below (emphases added to show where *hyperechontas* is used):

Let everyone be subject to the *governing* authorities...
(Romans 13:1).

...I consider everything a loss because of the *surpassing* worth of knowing Christ Jesus... (Philippians 3:8).

And the peace of God, which *transcends* all understanding...
(Philippians 4:7).

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the *supreme* authority... (1 Peter 2:13).

In each of these scriptures the emphasized word is translated from a form of *hyperechontas* and you can see that "better" simply does not fit in most cases. A more fitting translation would be something like "above," "beyond," or "superior" in the sense of position rather than quality. In fact, this is exactly how biblical scholar N.T. Wright translates Philippians 2:3 in his version of the New Testament: "regard everyone else as your superior." If you replace each emphasized word in the scriptures above with "superior," you will see how well the translation fits in each case.

Translating *hyperechontas* as "superior" gives a far better understanding of Paul's statement in Philippians 3:8 than "better," which implies we must see ourselves as worse or not as good. It makes clear that Paul is talking about having a humble attitude in the way we see our role relative to others. In other words he is not speaking in terms of our perceived self-worth.

In Philippians 2:3, Paul is talking about our considering others as our superiors so that we see ourselves as their servants. Remember that in the very next verse Paul writes: "not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2:4). It is parallel in many ways to what the apostle wrote in 1 Corinthians: "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (1 Corinthians 10:24).

So, Paul makes it clear that the attitude we are to have is not one of self-denigration, but one of placing others ahead of ourselves – lifting them up in an attitude of service and ultimately being willing to place their needs ahead of our own. It means to see ourselves as the servants of others.

12. BEING AS CHILDREN

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

Becoming like a child is a concept not often found outside of Christianity. The idea that we, as adults, should become as children seems silly and even demeaning to most outside the faith, but Christ’s words leave no room for negotiation. The concept of the Christian as a child is also not unique to the words of Jesus – it is found throughout the New Testament. We are told that we should be: children of God (John 1:12), children of light (Ephesians 5:8), children of the day (1 Thessalonians 5:5), and children of obedience (1 Peter 1:14).

So what does it mean to become “like little children” in our everyday lives? It clearly does not mean that we should become childish in our behavior (1 Corinthians 13:11), but rather that we should have a child-like attitude in certain areas. The ways in which we must become like a child are seen in the context of Jesus’ own words that only such a person will enter the Kingdom of God:

He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2-4).

Matthew makes it clear that when Jesus called, the child obediently and trustingly came to him. It was that obedient, trusting humility that Christ then commented on in saying that we must become like such a child and take the child’s “lowly position.” Simply having the child stand among the disciples did not reveal to them what kind of person the child was. Humility, obedience and trust were the traits

of behavior that the child demonstrated and to which Jesus pointed as examples of taking a “lowly position.” So viewing ourselves as children has nothing to do with weakness or immaturity and everything to do with seeing ourselves as a child should before his or her parent – as someone who humbly obeys and trusts the parent’s authority.

This was Christ’s own attitude. We see this from his first recorded words in the New Testament – the time his earthly parents found him, still a child, in the Temple saying “Didn’t you know I had to be in my *Father’s* house?” (Luke 2:49, emphasis added) – to his last recorded words “*Father*, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46, emphasis added). The life of Jesus shows repeatedly that he saw himself as a child before God, and he clearly taught his followers to view themselves in the same way.

We must not only see ourselves as the servants of others, as we saw in the previous chapter. We also need to continually view ourselves as the children of God if we are to display the attitude necessary to fully enter the family of the One we call Father. If we can truly come to see ourselves as children before God and as servants before others, we will have gone a long way toward banishing the pride that infects human nature. We will have found the perspective we need.

PART THREE:
HOW WE SEE OTHERS

13. THE IMAGE WE SEE

“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them ...” (Genesis 1:27).

As Christians we understand that all humans are created in the image of God, but do we see each other that way on a daily basis? In a world conditioned by perfectionistic ideas of physical beauty, we might perhaps see the idea of perfection in the humanly-imagined gods portrayed in classical Greek statues, but it is not as easy to see the image of God in actual flawed and broken human beings.

Yet we know that every human is made in the image of God – not just the more physically perfect ones (Genesis 1:26-27, 9:6). In fact, a Messianic statement found in the Book of Isaiah suggests God himself was purposely shaped in imperfect form as a human: “... He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2), and that description certainly fits the Jesus of the Gospels who was not easily recognized and who slipped through crowds unnoticed (Luke 4:30). Religious art and movie casting notwithstanding, the second century writer Celsus may even preserve a tradition that Jesus was “unattractive” from a physical perspective.

In any event, Christ’s own compassion for the physically flawed and broken of this world, as well as the spiritually broken (Mark 1:40-45, etc.), perfectly illustrates the attitude of seeing every person as an image of God despite outer appearances.

But in addition to the compassion and true acceptance we must have for those the world considers physically unattractive or undesirable for whatever reason, there is perhaps a second and less obvious way in which we can apply the principle that we are all made in the appearance of God.

The Book of Genesis tells us the story of how the patriarch Jacob cheated his brother out of his inheritance and how, after a length of time, the two brothers met again. The biblical account states: “Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men” (Genesis 33:1). Think about this situation. Jacob knew what he deserved from his brother and here was Esau, with a large fighting force, coming directly toward him. Jacob probably didn’t expect Esau to be friendly at this point, let alone brotherly.

We might well ask ourselves how we would have met Esau in that situation – with justification for our own actions, with mistrust of Esau, with fear? Humanly, it is easy to demonize not only our enemies, but also those we mistrust and are afraid of. We see their worst points and use those faults to justify our own actions and thoughts. But notice what Jacob told Esau as soon as he realized he could speak safely with his brother: “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God...” (Genesis 33:10).

This amazing expression of how he felt shows us clearly that Jacob was able to look past his own fear and mistrust and to see his brother as he should – as someone made in the image of God – just as Esau, as it turned out, was willing to see him. In that instance, such an attitude, such a viewpoint, avoided revenge and possible mayhem involving hundreds of people. In our own lives this attitude can help us just as much in our own one-on-one relationships. If we, too, can learn to see even those we mistrust or fear as potentially bearing the image of God, no matter how their behavior may work against that identification, we are growing in the way that Christ himself walked.

14. THE REST OF THE FAMILY

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10).

How do we see ourselves in our relationships with our fellow believers? We know the scriptures that speak of the family of God (1 John 3:1, etc.), and we may frequently think of ourselves as “brothers and sisters” in Christ to others in the church (Acts 11:29, etc.) – and even use these terms without thinking about them much – but that’s often as far as the analogy goes.

However, the family concept is a deeply biblical one. When we read the New Testament we find that this concept of family relationships among believers was central to the way the early Christians thought about themselves. In fact, the apostle Paul expands the analogy to the point of showing that believers can embrace a point of view in which we see ourselves from the perspective of numerous family relationships! In everyday life we may be used to being both parents to our children and children of our own parents at the same time, but this is not sharing those relationships with the same people. Yet Paul shows that this is actually something we can and perhaps should do in our Christian family.

In his first letter to the Thessalonian church Paul makes a fascinating expansion of the family analogy. The apostle first addresses the Thessalonians as siblings: “You know, brothers and sisters...” (1 Thessalonians 2:1). Paul actually uses this address more than any other New Testament writer (over 80 times in his letters compared to 18 times in all the combined epistles of James, Peter and John). Clearly, the brother-sister relationship with other believers was one that was very present in Paul’s mind.

But Paul then expands the concept. A few verses later he writes that while he was with them: "... even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you..." (1 Thessalonians 2:6-7). Notice that Paul does not say he thought of the Thessalonians as parents here – but that he himself, along with his co-workers, acted from the perspective of humble and respectful children. This wasn't an act. One can only consistently do what Paul describes if one can genuinely view oneself from that perspective.

Then, Paul moves on to say that during this same time he was with the Thessalonians: "Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8). Paul changes the perspective entirely here to that of looking at his fellow believers as a loving mother looks at her children – and within a few verses he adds that he was with them: "... as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God..." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Finally, a few verses later, Paul reverts to the viewpoints of the sibling and the child: "But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you" (1 Thessalonians 2:17).

In these remarkable verses Paul shows that he was able to frequently change his viewpoint regarding his own relationship with other believers. Rather than seeing himself from the perspective of the father or the older brother as many ministers might naturally do, he moved back and forth – looking at others in the Church entirely depending upon the circumstances. In Paul's constant effort to be "all things to all people" to best help them (1 Corinthians 9:22), we see that he was willing to see himself as a sibling on equal terms when that was appropriate, as a child among seniors when that was helpful, and as a loving and encouraging parent when that could do the most good.

This is a far deeper and richer approach to our spiritual family relationships than simply calling each other “brother” and “sister” and never moving beyond that. Paul recognized that, spiritually speaking, sometimes we may need to be our brother’s exhorting parent, at other times our sister’s respectful child. He knew and lived by the fact that the Spirit which makes us all one family gives us true family responsibilities and opportunities if we can learn to look for them and utilize them. Paul knew that such an approach can strengthen our individual connections with each other, and that having such a perspective can strengthen the Church as a whole. It’s yet another way that how we see people can affect the kind of people we become.

15. THE BEAUTY OF INCOMPATIBILITY

“He created them male and female and blessed them....”
(Genesis 5:2).

Recent statistics suggest that as many as 40% to 50% of marriages in some developed countries end in divorce. The divorce statistics for second and third marriages are even higher (practice evidently does not improve performance), and these sad statistics underline the even more unfortunate truth that many of these divorces were undoubtedly preventable.

While some marriage splits are, of course, the result of adultery, drugs, alcohol, spousal abuse and other problems, the great majority of divorces claim “irreconcilable differences” as the reason for dissolution of the marriage bond.

This is where the aspect of preventability enters into the picture. “Irreconcilable differences” is really just an expensive way of saying “incompatibility,” and at the heart of many divorces – and problem marriages which somehow stay together – it is incompatibility that is so often cited as the underlying problem.

Now in almost all cases where incompatibility is cited as an issue, it was not present at the beginning of the relationship. We doubt many individuals who always considered themselves incompatible got married – it is something the marriage partners feel “happened” as time progressed.

But the truth is, incompatibility between a man and a woman usually never “happens” – it is present, under the surface, all the time. It is simply that marriages begin to falter when couples begin to focus on their incompatibility. A century ago, in his book *What’s Wrong with the World*, G.K. Chesterton put it this way:

I have known many happy marriages, but never a compatible one. The whole aim of marriage is to fight through and survive

the instant when incompatibility becomes unquestionable. For a man and a woman, as such, are incompatible.

These may be among the wisest words ever written on marriage problems. They are based on the undeniable fact that most marriages occur because “opposites attract.” But when marriage begins, we are focusing on the “attract.” As marriages progress, if we are not careful, the focus switches to looking at and dwelling on the “opposites.” Our point of view shifts and we begin to see our relationship differently – and as we do, the problems develop.

Simple as it may sound, the quality of every marriage and every day within every marriage depends on how we look at our partner. We must remember it is not that beneath the attraction there are differences we must somehow try to suppress, but that the differences between us are so often the root and cause of the attraction itself – and we mean not just the sexual aspect, but the full range of psychological, spiritual and physical attraction.

A happy marriage is, then, always one of managed incompatibility. We can certainly do what we can to make it easier for our mates to deal with our differences where they are problematic: “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). Each mate must concentrate on how he or she sees the other – we must continue to look at the attractive things about him or her. A happy marriage isn’t based on finding a perfect person, it’s based on mutual ability to see an imperfect person perfectly, and there is perhaps no more helpful scripture relating to this fact than the words of the apostle Paul:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things (Philippians 4:8).

We render this wonderful advice useless by consigning it to generalities, but it is a potent marriage problem solver. If we apply these words in the sphere of our relationship with our mate – in constantly looking for, affirming, and complimenting the good things we appreciate about each other on every level – the matter of incompatibility usually becomes an increasing non-issue.

Incompatibility is not the destroyer of marriage; it is healthy tension that forms the basis of meaningful marriage relationships. The more we begin to see each other in a positive way and keep our focus there, the more we see attraction and the less we see opposites. In fact, we become more and more able to celebrate our incompatibility – and good things happen when we do. In the words “He created them male and female and blessed them....” (Genesis 5:2), we see God blessed marriage relationships not as unisex, “unithought,” uniform pairs of mankind, but blessed us as male and female – blessed us in the beauty of our differences.

16. DEALING WITH THE FAULTS OF OTHERS

“We are not called to interfere, but to intercede.”

Earlier, in Part Two, we talked about seeing our own problems and failures in perspective, and here we look at a natural extension of this situation. Just as the Spirit of God causes us to see spiritual problems in our own lives, so the Spirit also often gives us discernment as we grow, and we begin to see the same or even other spiritual problems in the lives of others, also.

A natural human reaction to this fact is to want to tell others how they could change or become better. This may be based on a totally sincere wish for the welfare of the other person, but we must always rein in this feeling and be especially aware of two things.

First, seeing a problem in others can pose problems for us. It is not easy to discern the faults of others and not to judge them to some degree. Every Christian knows that we must not judge the motives of others (Matthew 7:1-3), but every Christian is still vulnerable to doing exactly that.

Judging others improperly often begins with how we look at them, and we have to learn to view others as we view ourselves. We know that we can produce excuses and rationalizations for almost everything we do, and we have to see that others are no different. As Jesus himself said, some would even kill Christians thinking they were doing God a service (John 16:2). What may appear to us as a blatant wrongdoing may not be understood that way by the perpetrator – so we should avoid judging motives whenever possible, even in extreme cases. If we can remember this, it makes it a little easier to follow Christ’s injunction to pray for our enemies who may often be more misled than we realize.

Another aspect of seeing the problems of others, even when we are successful in not judging their motives, is the need to resist the

temptation to try to change the other person spiritually. This is often a matter of humility. It is a matter of accepting the old television commercial warning “Don’t try this at home, it requires a trained professional.” It’s much easier to see problems in other adults than to correct them as God would do, and in most cases we need to leave that work to the One who is the only true “Trained Professional” when it comes to matters of the Spirit.

We are not talking about matters of blatant sin within the church where we are clearly instructed to go to a brother or sister who is in error (Matthew 18:15-17), but about situations within our families and personal circles where we sorrow for those who unknowingly “oppose themselves” (2 Timothy 2:25 KJV) by less than perfect behavior. It’s a principle we must especially apply in our marriages and with adult children or friends with whom we interact closely. Rather than preaching at people, even subtly, we need to pray that they may come to see the need to change. Being a right example is always good, but if we are not asked for our input by a mate or friend, and we are not that person’s pastor, experience shows we should always pray rather than preach. The spiritual discernment we are given is not given to judge others, but to protect us or to help them.

Oswald Chambers summarized this situation perfectly a century ago when he wrote “God never gives us discernment in order that we may criticize, but that we may intercede.” It’s an understanding that is in harmony with everything we find within the New Testament.

17. WHAT DO YOU SEE?

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

Have you ever noticed, when reading the Gospels, how often we are told that Jesus noticed something, saw something? We are frequently told that he observed those around him: “Seeing the woman...,” “seeing the man ...,” “seeing the people...,” “seeing their faith ...,” – even noticing small details of people’s expressions: “seeing that he had become sad...” (Luke 18:24). Jesus was clearly observant, and although his eyes took in no more than those of others, it’s obvious that rather than just looking at people Jesus saw them in a way that others did not – it is as if he thought about everyone he saw. The Gospel writers show that at the core of Jesus’ ministry was his ability to focus on others.

Do we have that kind of focus, or do we go through each day so busy and absorbed in our own lives that we are conscious of others, but not clearly seeing them in focus? The truth is, we can’t love without looking – seeing – comprehending. Perhaps part of the answer is that if we see ourselves as the servants of others, we will see them differently – as Christ did.

The apostle Paul put it this way: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who ... made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...” (Philippians 2:5-7). Think of an attentive waiter in a fine restaurant, or a rich person’s personal servant. A servant certainly watches those he is responsible for – staying aware and looking out for any need that may occur. And a person’s servant doesn’t just stop at noticing the need – the servant obviously acts swiftly to take care of it.

That’s what the Gospels show was the natural corollary of Jesus seeing people the way he did – he didn’t stop at seeing them, he

immediately responded to what he saw: “seeing the woman he said ...,” “seeing their faith he [healed]...,” “seeing... a large crowd he [asked] ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?’” Jesus saw and then acted with compassion according to what he saw. So seeing people in a focused way was only the first half of what he accomplished with his observant attitude. Always, the seeing led to acting in some manner in order to help those who needed help. The focused eye enabled the outstretched hand – because ultimately, love depends on looking.

We too can accomplish so much more when we train our minds to really see the people around us, to focus on them and to ask ourselves what do they need and is there a way we can serve them. It’s not just about giving physical things; it’s just as much about seeing people’s emotional and spiritual needs. But it takes a kind of awakening of the eyes to see like that. We won’t do it unless we think about doing it – it takes a conscious decision to open our eyes to really see others beyond how they fit into our own lives.

Perhaps that’s part of what the prophet Isaiah meant when he wrote: “Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed...” (Isaiah 32:3). He wasn’t talking about the blind, but about those with vision coming to really see. That may primarily mean coming to see spiritual truth, of course, but it can also mean coming to see others as we should see them – as Jesus saw them – through the eyes of an attentive servant. When we look at others like that, we see them in a whole new way.

18. GRAINS OF SAND

“To see a world in a grain of sand...” (William Blake).

Occasionally, the fact that the population of Earth is now well over 7 billion sinks into my mind. It usually takes some kind of Infographic to help me even begin to comprehend a billion, let alone 7 billion, but at those times I get close, it's easy to begin to see how small and insignificant we really are. It's even hard to find an analogy to put the understanding in perspective, but seeing ourselves as grains of sand on an ocean beach or in a great desert brings the point home pretty well.

It's an analogy that God himself used in promising that the descendants of Abraham would be almost innumerable: “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore” (Genesis 22:17). Those living in the biblical age had no idea how vast the universe really is, of course, but they could see the number of stars visible to their own eyes and could certainly visualize the vastness of numbers involved in comparing humans to grains of sand. It's a simple analogy, but the more we grasp it, perhaps the harder it is not to feel totally insignificant. Being one of untold numbers of teeming humans is one thing, but sand particles all look alike, don't they? The grains of sand analogy really can make one feel like a faceless speck if we think about it too much.

But if you take grains of sand and magnify them under a microscope about 250 times, you will see that every grain of sand is in fact different. The grains may be made of shell, stone, coral, or other substances and they are not only often vastly different, but they are also all unique. We know that the countless stars are different, and every elementary-schooler learns that each snowflake is unique. But seeing that every grain of sand is different somehow

helped me see the endless variety in creation more than anything else might have done.

The endless variety in grains of sand makes the point that God's promise to Abraham was not of countless, faceless masses of descendants, but of billions and billions who are all individuals in the eyes of God. And that's just on the outside! Although the grain of sand was the smallest particle known in the biblical world, we know through modern physics that each grain of sand contains an atomic and sub-atomic universe with its own characteristics. The line "To see a world in a grain of sand" from the poem by William Blake comes to mind. In fact, we can understand through the microscope and through physics theory that every grain of sand is different both on the outside and on the inside.

It's an analogy that helps us realize that we may be like grains of sand, but to the God who made the universe in all its macro and micro cosmic levels, we are indeed all unique. So being analogous to a grain of sand is not as dull as you might have thought, and seeing that fact dispels the idea of our destiny as being part of some faceless eternal multitude in standard issue, same size, white robes. The idea of spending eternity getting to know not only God, but also all those unique "grains of sand" who become part of the family of God is an amazing concept - something of infinite as well as eternal variety.

PART FOUR:
HOW WE SEE GOD

19. WHAT WE SEE IN GOD

“True religion is based on what we see in God and what others see in us as a result of that ...”

There comes a point in every Christian’s growth when we realize that how we see God affects how we see everything else – and that God wants us to see him clearly and with understanding. This has profound implications for our comprehension of much of what is said in God’s word. Look at a prime example: the Ten Commandments don’t just list ten do’s and don’ts; they begin with the words “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). These words urge us to see God as he is – not literally, of course, but in our understanding – and for what he has done as the context for the commandments themselves.

The same principle is followed in the great summary of the Law of God found in Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), where we are told to “hear” the nature of God before we consider his commandment of love. Understanding him is to be the basis of both our obedience and love.

Throughout the Old Testament, in fact, God’s word continually urges us to see him and reproaches humanity for closing its eyes to God or for not seeing him correctly. We saw an example of this back in Chapter 1 of this book, in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

If favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness; in the land of uprightness he deals corruptly and does not see the majesty of the LORD. O LORD, your hand is lifted up, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people ... (Isaiah 26:10-11 ESV).

Isaiah shows that many people do not see God behind the “favor” or blessings in their lives, and that they also do not see God behind punishments (the “hand lifted up” to strike) either. A proper understanding of God sees him as both the God of blessing and punishment, though both are done in the love which is God’s very nature.

That is at the heart of what God wants us to see about him, and why Isaiah says “Let them see your zeal for your people,” because if we see him clearly, we will see his work in our lives as based on his dedicated concern and love. But those are only two of the ways in which we need to see God clearly. There are also many more. We might well remember the words of A. W. Tozer:

“A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well ... there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect ... thoughts about God.”

To summarize Tozer’s idea from a positive perspective: “... a good grasp of doctrine or a success in applying Christian ethics can be traced finally to accurate ... thoughts about God.” Everything depends on how we see God, and the more we come to see him as he is, the more we can become like him.

Most Christians come to see the main aspects of God’s nature – such as his power, majesty, love, and mercy – but there are some things we may not see as clearly as a result of misconceptions and commonly held, but actually unbiblical, ideas. In the following chapters we will look at some of those ideas about God and see how a right understanding can help us to see God more clearly – the most important perspective of all!

20. UNDERSTANDING THE FEAR OF GOD

“... Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin” (Exodus 20:20 ESV).

The Bible makes it very clear that humans are intended to fear God – in fact, there are over three hundred instances of the concept in the Old and New Testaments (Ecclesiastes 12:13, Matthew 10:28, etc.); but a proper understanding of the concept of godly fear can sometimes be difficult to grasp. The difficulty comes from the fact that many people only see half of what is involved in fearing God.

For them, such fear appears to be a purely negative thing. Like a sign saying “Beware of the Dog” or “Danger, Minefield,” the exhortation “Fear God” suggests only negative emotional responses of fear for them.

But there is a scripture that gives us the other half of the equation and helps us to see the fear of God much more accurately. That scripture is Exodus 20:20 – the verse quoted above. I think of Exodus 20:20 as the spiritual eyesight verse – it’s the “20/20” eye check report I need, and you do, too, if we are to see this aspect of our relationship with God clearly.

Notice that in speaking these words, Moses told the ancient Israelites three important things:

1. “God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you”: These words make it clear that God wants to be sure that we do have proper fear of him.
2. “that you may not sin” or “to keep you from sinning” (NIV): The clear purpose of that fear is to protect us from hurting ourselves or others through wrongdoing.

3. “Do not fear”: Even though God wants us to fear to do evil so that we do not receive punishment from him, he actually commands us not to fear him for any other reason.

When we see the balance of this verse – that we should fear God and yet not fear him – we see that God treats his human children as we should treat ours: he encourages proper respect for the protection of the children themselves, but does not instill fear in any negative sense. The need for abject fear of a stern and judgmental God is a figment of the human imagination, as we read in Isaiah: “... their fear of me is a commandment taught by men” (Isaiah 29:13 ESV).

In the New Testament we see that Christ also reiterated fear of God in proper context: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). These words are followed immediately by the affirmation of godly love: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matthew 10:29-30).

That kind of balanced “fear and not fear” is analogous to the healthy respect of a child who hesitates to disobey its parent, yet who feels secure in the parent’s love, and who knows it need not fear the parent in any other way than punishment for wrong doing. When we see the true parental love of God in our lives, it should not be difficult to see the fear of God correctly – to realize that we can fear God positively without fearing him negatively at all.

21. THE GOD OF LAW AND LOVE

“From His right hand came a fiery law for them. Yes, He loves the people” (Deuteronomy 33:2b-3a NKJV).

It is surprising how many people visualize the God of the Old Testament as an essentially stern God dispensing laws and their strict penalties. This God is seen by many as a God of law and commandments. By contrast, some think the God of the New Testament and his son, Jesus, are typified by love and not law. It is believed that somehow God changed in his approach to humans.

But what the Bible clearly shows, when we look at it closely, is that the God of the Old Testament is no different from the God of the New. Theologically, of course, it seems clear that in many instances the pre-incarnate Jesus was actually the one called God in the Hebrew Scriptures (John 1:1-5, 9-10, 1 Corinthians 10:3-4), but the point is that the character of God does not change (Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 6:17, 13:8). God has always been a God of law and love.

We can see this dual aspect of the character of God in many examples throughout the Old Testament. Take the words of Moses, for example, in the Book of Deuteronomy (which means “second law”) as it recounts the re-giving of the law of God to ancient Israel. Deuteronomy focuses on the law of God as much as any book of the Hebrew Scriptures, yet we find frequent expressions of God’s love as well as his commands and laws:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments (Deuteronomy 7:9).

Repeatedly, God’s love is stressed just as much as his law, as we see also in the quotation from Deuteronomy 33 above.

And that is not just an Old Testament perspective. When we look closely at the life and teachings of Jesus, love and law are never separated. Not surprisingly, after the Book of Psalms, the Book of Deuteronomy was the book most frequently quoted by Jesus. When asked which was the greatest law, Christ replied that the law is that we love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:35-39). When he showed love by not condemning the woman taken in adultery, Jesus nevertheless still told her “Go, and sin no more” (John 8:11).

God’s law did not somehow disappear after the death of Christ because he paid the penalty for our breaking the law – any more than a speeding law disappears if someone pays our speeding fine. And even though we are not saved by our keeping of the law (Galatians 2:16), Paul stresses that the law is a guide to us (Galatians 3:23) and that “... the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good” (Romans 7:12). Paul continues to show us why the law is good:

... for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

So the principle of God’s use of law as well as love is still alive and functioning throughout the New Testament, as the writer of the Book of Hebrews reminds us: “... the Lord disciplines the one he loves” (Hebrews 12:6). We would not think a human parent did not love his or her children because the parent gave them rules or disciplined them, and we must realize that God works with us in exactly the same way.

As we grow in understanding of God, we come to see that law and love are actually not opposites, but complementary aspects of his character. His laws are given out of love to protect our

relationship with him and with others. God's love does not somehow negate the purpose of his laws, and the purpose of his laws does not somehow cancel out his love. The God who gave the commandments and laws of the Old Testament was a God of love. The same God who is said to be love in the New Testament is also a God of law. As we come to see God more clearly, we realize he is indeed a God of law *and* love.

22. DOES GOD EXPECT US TO BE PERFECT?

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”
(Matthew 5:48).

One of the greatest misconceptions about God, even among many Christians, is that God expects us to be perfect and that he is frequently unhappy with us when we are not. Jesus’ words “Be perfect...” from the Sermon on the Mount are so well-known that it is sometimes hard to see past what they are commonly thought to say to their real meaning.

To get a right perspective on what God does expect of us, we must first look at Jesus’ words in context. In Matthew, Jesus clearly tells us to “Be perfect ... as God is,” but if we read the same account in the Gospel of Luke his words are recorded there as “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). Why the difference? Both Gospels show in context that Jesus was talking about love (see Matthew 5:43-47 and Luke 6:27-35). Matthew’s Gospel stresses that our love should be perfect and Luke’s Gospel stresses that our love should be merciful – doubtless Jesus talked about both aspects of love and each is separately recorded.

But when we look closely at the expression “Be perfect,” we see the situation even more clearly. The Greek word translated “perfect” in Matthew is a form of *teleios* which does mean “perfect,” but in the sense of being mature or complete. Notice 1 Corinthians 14:20, for example, where we find: “Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults” and the word “adults” is the word *teleios*. In Hebrews 5:14 we find the same word translated mature: “... solid food is for the mature...”

In other words, in Matthew 5:48, Christ urged his followers to be mature and complete in their love – like God who is himself Love.

Note too, that only a few verses before saying “Be perfect” Jesus had said: “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45), once again showing that we should be like God in our love.

So, Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount does not mean that God expects us to be perfect in the sense of never making mistakes. In fact, the New Testament shows repeatedly that God knows we cannot be perfect in every way (1 John 1:8-10). That is why God accepts Christ’s perfect life in our stead, just as he accepts Christ’s death on our behalf (Romans 5:9-10). But that does not mean that we need not strive in our own lives toward the goal of perfection (John 14:23-24) – as long as we realize that our efforts will never gain our salvation, which remains a gift from God. Our motivation for striving for perfection must always be to fully express the love God wants us to have.

This fact brings us full circle. When we realize that God knows we cannot be perfect in this life, but that he does encourage us to grow up in him – to become more like him as we live each day – we see God in better perspective. We see that the God of love has lovingly made a way for us to be perfect in his sight through Christ’s life in our stead. But the God of love also offers to give us his love to enable us to continually grow to be more like him.

God does desire to see perfection in us, but he looks beyond us for that perfection. God does not expect continued perfection in our own daily lives – just continued progress. The statement that we must “Be perfect” is not a command to do the impossible; it is an encouragement to become mature in expressing God’s love and fulfilling God’s law of love (Romans 13:10, Galatians 5:14).

23. CHANGING GOD'S MIND

"I the Lord do not change..." (Malachi 3:6).

Does God's perfect knowledge of all outcomes of a situation mean that he knows what is best and that it is useless to ask God to change his mind? A scripture that often affects how we see God in this regard is Malachi 3:6: "I the Lord do not change..."

When correctly understood, Malachi 3:6 is one of the most encouraging verses in the Bible. God's love, forgiveness, patience, mercy, and other qualities are just not going to change. We can find great relief in that fact. God will work with us tomorrow just as he did yesterday and does today.

But incorrectly understood, Malachi 3:6 can limit us. We can discourage ourselves by thinking that God will never change his mind once he has determined something – so our prayers otherwise are probably futile and useless. This is especially true in areas where it looks as though God has allowed something to happen to us or to others that does not change for the better despite our prayers. In situations like that, is it possible to change God's mind? And if God is all-knowing and has perfect wisdom, why should we consider even trying to ask God to change a decision he has made?

Seeing the way God really is in this regard involves looking past our human feelings and seeing how he has revealed himself in his word. When we do this we find that many situations recorded in the Bible show God is willing to change his mind. We will look at only one example in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. The first example is well known: in the Genesis account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we see that although God did destroy those cities and had clearly already decided to do so (Genesis 18:20-21, 19:13), he nevertheless relented in at least sparing Lot and his family as a result of Abraham's persistent intercession (Genesis 18:23-32).

The second example is less frequently cited, but the wonderful New Testament account of the Syrophenician woman who pleaded with Christ to heal her daughter (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30) shows exactly the same thing. Jesus made it clear to the woman that he was not sent to the Gentiles and that he would not answer her pleas. Yet when the woman persisted, he relented and essentially made an exception to the rule he himself had explained regarding his not helping the Gentiles at that time.

These examples, and others, point to something we should always remember. The fact that God is all-knowing and all-wise doesn't mean a decision he makes is the only wise decision possible in a given circumstance. The truth is, by virtue of the fact that God is both all-knowing and all-powerful, he can look at a situation and adjust things to make another outcome work just as well if that would still be according to his will.

I remember reading, many years ago, a short science fiction story ("The Game of Blood and Dust" by Roger Zelazny) in which two unimaginably powerful but unseen alien beings played out a game of chess-like strategy on Earth by adjusting history through injecting the slightest little changes – the death of a great potential leader here, the support of a scientific genius somewhere else – until the whole of history was affected to the desired outcome. The story illustrated in an imaginative way how even the smallest changes could alter the way things work out.

God obviously has the power to do exactly that kind of changing of events, and asking God to change his mind by considering other outcomes is not disrespectful as long as we are willing to accept his answer – it just means we are coming to see how truly loving and all-powerful God is. That is perhaps why we read that: "... Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1).

24. IF WE THINK OF GOD, DOES HAPPINESS COME TO MIND?

“No God No Happiness, Know God Know Happiness.”

What is our perception of God? Can the God who constantly beholds the sin, sorrow and problems of humanity possibly be happy? Can the God who compassionately shares not only our problems, but also those of untold millions, be joyful?

Many of us unconsciously share to some extent the common perception of God that portrays him as a brooding figure focusing on whether we are obeying his laws or not. It's hardly a joyful picture and is reflected in countless images of Jesus as the suffering servant weighed down with the cares and sins of humanity. But at least three scriptures come to mind which show God in a very different light.

First, in 1 Timothy 1:11 and 6:15, Paul speaks of “the blessed God;” and the word “blessed” is not the usual word for “blessed” found in the New Testament, but from *makarios* which also conveys the concept of happiness – “the happy God” – which really says it plainly, although the meaning is not clear in many translations.

The next scripture that comes to mind is in Luke: “...I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7 ESV). Joy in heaven doesn't mean with the angels but not with God. Saying joy in heaven is like saying dinner at the White House – the president will be participating. When we say joy in heaven, we have to remember it is God's house, it's his party, and we need to see this as a reflection of the personality of God. Joy in heaven is synonymous with the joy and happiness of God.

The final scripture that comes to mind is Matthew 25:14-30 – the parable of the talents. This is an interesting parable at many levels,

but its ending gives a profound insight into the nature of God. In the story, the master goes away, leaving talents in the care of his servants. At his eventual return the servant given five talents shows how he has doubled them through his work. The master then says to that servant: “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”

The master in the parable is clearly Jesus himself and the servants are his servants. Notice the master does not say “You have done well, so come and take on some of my heavy responsibility of checking on people and bearing the cares of the world!” but rather, “Come and share your master’s happiness!” All translations have it that way. There is nothing that lets us get away from this simple meaning.

We could probably add dozens of scriptures from the Psalms and elsewhere showing that those who walk in God’s ways are happy and that must, of course, apply to God also. Despite his compassion and care for those who hurt now, God sees the big picture. He knows what he has planned and that ultimately all the hurt and sadness of physical existence will be wiped away (Isaiah 25:8, Revelation 21:4) and that it will have been worth the pain (Romans 8:18). So God is a joyful God who looks beyond the present pain – just as he tells us to do.

So when we keep this in mind, in our own lives and in our portrayal of God to others we should actively work to combat the common perception of God that leaves out the obvious happiness and joy that is part of his nature. The lesson for us is that if God can be joyful because he is able to look to the end result – with God’s help, so can we.

God is a “God of Happiness” because he knows what the outcome of his plan will be. If we can see life – and God himself – that way, we can share in that happiness, too.

AFTERWORD

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