

Sight & Sound

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God Doesn't Bless Bigheads

Our culture worships celebrities and superheroes. But in the kingdom of God, we are called to pursue humility.

I want to thank my Dad and Mom...," he began, smiling while trying to choke back the tears that were trickling down his face.

Ché Ahn, my "son in the faith," was standing before the congregation that Sunday morning more than 20 years ago, about to be ordained. While he was honoring his parents, I couldn't help feeling a little fatherly pride over the man I had spent years mentoring, and with whom I shared a wonderful friendship.

"I'm grateful to my family members...," he continued. Just the day before, I had officiated at his wedding.

"I also want to honor the men who have poured their lives into mine." He began listing the godly people—none nearly as close to him as I was—while throwing in remnants of stories and describing their unique contributions to his life.

Sitting on the front row, my thoughts began to drift. I wonder what he'll say when he gets to me? Sniffing a little and straightening my posture in my chair, I readied myself for the "big" moment when Ché would single me out as the spiritual father who had brought him to this hallowed place.

Ché concluded naming the various people, and the applause subsided. Then he stepped back from the microphone and said quietly, "There is one more man I want to honor today." His eyes scanned the hundreds present as I gathered my thoughts.

"I thank God for his role in the plan of God for my life." I cleared my throat, preparing to share a few words.

"Lastly, to Schmitt [a wonderful Bible teacher whose teaching had influenced Ché]. Please stand." The crowd broke into applause as I sat there, stunned.

God had pulled a fast one on me!

As I concluded my clapping and made my way alongside the other leaders to lay hands on Ché in prayer, I did my best to conceal my sadness in being forgotten.

How could he overlook me? I thought. After all the years, all the time. No one had given to him as I had.

An hour later I drove home feeling physically spent and emotionally hurt. As the inevitable "Why?" circulated in my mind, I sensed the fingertip of God on my spirit. "I let this happen on purpose, My son," He said, "to reveal what was in your heart."

My good Shepherd was going bottom line, and He was right. I was exposed. God made me aware of my carnal desires for recognition and honor by allowing me to be overlooked.

Subduing my flesh, I eventually repented and let God know I was ashamed and truly sorry for my pride.

Today Ché remains my close friend as he leads the Harvest International Ministries (HIM) network of churches and serves as director for The Call, an international prayer movement. We both laugh now at the oversight, but I'm thankful for what happened. The lesson from God was loud and clear: He wants the people who serve Him to be men and women of humility.

God Doesn't Need Superheroes

The greatest danger lurking ahead of any pioneer is overconfidence. When you trust in your own abilities and seek recognition, you set yourself up for a fall. To be a pioneer of the spiritual sort, you must recognize how human you really are.

If you ever struggle with superhero tendencies, you are in good company. The apostle Paul struggled with pride, and as a result, God gave him a thorn in his flesh (see 2 Cor. 12:7-9).

The power for you to minister as a pioneer comes not from honed skills or extensive Bible knowledge (though both are important). The power comes from your acknowledgement of your inabilities and God's abilities. God's power is made perfect in weakness, and His grace is released in your life when you deflect all honor from you to Him.

Throughout Scripture God makes it clear that He will not share His glory with another (see Is. 42:8; Ps. 115:1). When you withhold the glory that is due God, you will find Him opposing you.

The apostle Peter wrote: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Pet. 5:56, NIV).

God isn't neutral or passive about proud people. He opposes them. The Greek word for "oppose" in this passage, *antitasso*,

is a military term that literally means “to rage in battle against.”

When you seek glory for yourself, when you take the credit for any success, you risk having God battle against you. And the one person you don't want resisting you is almighty God!

On the other hand, God gives grace to the humble. Pride places God against you; humility places God on your side and unleashes the powers of heaven on your behalf.

And notice, Peter doesn't write, “You are clothed with humility.” He writes, “Clothe yourselves with humility.” Humility is something God won't do for you. It's not a fruit of the Spirit that is a result of the Spirit's work.

Humility is an act of your will. That's why Peter writes further, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Pet. 5:6).

God isn't opposed to exalting you. In fact, He wants to—but He must be the One doing the exalting! Exalt yourself, and God will humble you. But humble yourself, and God will exalt you—according to His time line.

When you don't choose to be humble, it is easy to become uptight and believe that if you don't speak up for yourself, no one else will commend you. You may have the noblest reasons for drawing attention to yourself, but all of them are rooted in pride. Don't worry about being promoted. Be faithful in the little things, and God will make you a ruler over much (see Matt. 25:23).

When you promote yourself, you circumvent God's time line and process for promotion. Perhaps He wants to work on a few more character issues before moving you on—issues that will make the difference between being an effective leader and an ineffective leader.

Self-promotion is the pursuit of quantity over quality because it seeks quick results without having to prove itself first. It also places people in the position of trying to do God's work in the flesh, which requires much more effort than doing God's work by the power of the Spirit.

The Faceless Generation

As God revives and restores His church, He is building the ranks of His troops with men and women of character. In humility they will march forward, unconcerned about drawing attention to themselves or building their own kingdoms.

Prophetic leader Paul Cain refers to this mass of people as a "nameless, faceless generation." They are consumed solely with the glory of God and care not what accolades or awards are bestowed upon them.

Michael Brown often exhorts students and faculty at the FIRE School of Ministry by saying: "Don't forget why God brought us here. He is taking somebodies and turning them into nobodies for the glory of God!" The greatest aspiration you could ever have is to be a nobody for God.

"God works best with nothing," Mother Teresa once said. And that is God's nature—working best with nothing. Genesis 1:1 begins with these famous words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God created the world out of nothing and then called it good (see Gen. 1:10).

When Jesus came to earth, He followed the same pattern. Read closely Paul's description of the incarnation of Jesus: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even

death on a cross!

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:311).

How does Paul describe Jesus’ actions when He came to earth to save people from their sins?

He made Himself nothing.

He took the form of a servant.

He humbled Himself.

He became obedient to death on a cross.

And how did God the Father respond to Jesus’ ultimate acts of humility?

He exalted Jesus, giving Him the name that is above all names. He promised that all people will eventually bow their knees to Jesus and confess that Jesus is Lord.

Most interesting of all is how Paul prefaces this weighty passage of Scripture: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5).

Of course, you aren’t God, and God will not someday have creation bow at your feet and declare that you are Lord. However, as you make yourself nothing, taking the form of a servant, humbling yourself and becoming obedient to death, God will exalt you. He will use you because you have become clay in the hands of the Master Potter.

Looking back over his 80 years of life, Billy Graham wrote in his magnificent autobiography, Just As I Am: “Most of all, if anything has been accomplished through my life, it has been solely God’s doing, not mine, and He—not I—must get the credit.” Billy Graham was a 20th century pioneer for the

gospel who models what the heart of a 21st century pioneer should be like.

When the focus of your life is on yourself, you become fearful of man. You want to please people, and you seek their approval. But when the focus of your life is on God, you can venture wherever He calls you to go.

This is an area that God had to resolve in my life before releasing me into the next season of my ministry. For years I made little concessions and compromises to stay in the good graces of certain leaders and to avoid forfeiting privilege, promotion, provision or personal speaking opportunities.

By yielding to a fear of man I became enslaved to the pursuit of being recognized in ministry. My futile attempts to achieve approval and acceptance of certain people drove me even further away from the path God called me to follow.

This carnal, destructive pattern that had developed imperceptibly over many years had to be exposed and dismantled. What I needed was a deathblow to my sinful nature. So God brought me back to the place of being nothing, where I could choose to take on the form of a servant, humble myself and, most painfully, become obedient to death, nailing that self to the cross.

Finally, I could start over. But this time I was performing for an audience of one, God Himself. The result was a new dimension of freedom from bondage to man that I had never known before.

I enjoyed the new security that comes from pleasing the one who already loves and accepts me. I was free to set out again as a pioneer. I could say with Paul: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10).

Seemingly overnight, I jumped from overseeing a network of churches to planting a small church in the basement of my modest home. Straying from the “proven” methods of church planting I was accustomed with, I chose to establish a church birthed in the fires of revival.

But I must admit that my new beginning was quite humbling, even humiliating. While attending a men’s conference in Florida I was approached by a leader of a large church with attendance in excess of 5,000. He began our conversation by asking, “So how large is your church in Atlanta?”

Ouch! Hearts are tested in moments like those! And what matters most to God is faithfulness before fruitfulness.

Get Your Heart Checked

Everyone should see a doctor at least once a year for a checkup. I think that same advice is good for Christians. At least once a year we should visit the Great Physician for a thorough examination of our spiritual condition.

Below are some penetrating questions that I hope you will ask yourself to help determine the state of your heart and your motivation for serving God.

1. Do I promote myself? Is it all about me and my ministry, or do I leave promotion to God while I go about the work He brings to me? (See Prov. 27:2; 25:6-7; Ps. 75:6.)

2. Do I compete with others? Or am I secure in God wherever He places me, content to glorify only Him while He providentially works out His plan for my life? (See Jer. 45:5; Gal. 5:26; 1 Tim. 6:6.)

3. Do I act out of a pure heart? Am I intent on pleasing God, or do my actions proceed from selfish ambition that only pleases me? (See James 3:16; Prov. 21:2; Phil. 2:3.)

Periodically it is wise to ask yourself: Why am I doing what

I'm doing? Who am I doing this for?

A dear friend of mine has a glowing résumé. At times in her life she has worked with political luminaries such as senators John Glenn and Barry Goldwater. At other times she has labored alongside Christian leaders such as Kenneth Copeland and Marilyn Hickey.

But currently she is following the call of God on her life by caring for her 84-year-old father. Yet Bessie is as aglow with the Spirit washing her father's feet as she is when she is in the limelight.

The reason? Her identity comes from her heavenly Father, not from how well she performs or from being recognized. She is simply serving in a different type of ministry during this season of her life. What would you do if you were in Bessie's shoes?

Don't be a somebody. Be a nobody through whom God builds His church and launches this generation into the final push that ushers in the return of Jesus Christ.

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Lack of Anxiety Promotes Healthier Lifestyle

Years ago when I battled many illnesses, my quest for wellness led me to the story of a Chinese professor and herbalist named

Li Chung Yun. He was reported to have lived more than 120 years. His secret? Inward calm.

Studies have shown time and again that people from all parts of the world who lived extraordinarily long lives had several lifestyle factors in common, including unadulterated foods, plenty of exercise and systematic under-eating. In addition, these ancients were generally happy with whatever their lot in life was; they did not envy or covet; they were respected by their friends and family; and they held positions that were important to the community.

In contrast, most Christians I know are living a frazzled life, totally devoid of "inward calm." I receive e-mails from many who are battling physical diseases, depression and anxiety. My mailbox is flooded with letters that express panic, discouragement, mistrust, anger over the past and unforgiveness. Too many of us are frenzied, exhausted, ill and full of strife.

It troubles me that New Agers have incorporated the healthful philosophy of inward calm into their beliefs, while we believers remain ignorant of its benefits. We refuse to love enough, forgive enough, pray enough, play enough, exercise, eat right and laugh often. The result is that illness and emotional pain disturb our well-being.

We need to understand that there is a significant relation between unrest—the opposite of calm—and disease. Bitterness, a form of unrest, can destroy us from the inside out. It is like rust that corrodes our spirits, steals our peace and makes it impossible to be healthy and whole.

The way to prevent bitterness from taking root is to use past hurts as opportunities to grow and develop spiritually. This will, in turn, help us to heal physically. We can begin the process by determining our level of unrest. Ask yourself:

Do you blame others for your problems?

Do you avoid expressing your feelings and views openly?

Are you resentful and hypercritical?

Do you avoid deep, lasting relationships?

Do you worry most of, if not all, the time?

Do you lack a sense of humor?

Do you complain about your physical symptoms?

Do you have self-pity, envy or anger?

If you can relate to any of these symptoms, you need to make some changes. Otherwise you are setting the stage for an emotional, physical and spiritual breakdown.

You can turn unrest into inward calm by making the following activities a regular part of your daily life: forgiving and allowing God to heal wounds from past relationships; praying and giving thanks to God continually; loving yourself and everyone else unconditionally; releasing all negative emotions, such as resentment, envy, fear, sadness and anger; doing things that nurture your soul; and keeping a sense of humor.

Can you truly be healed from unrest? Yes—if you have the willingness and desire to do the work. Looking deep inside takes courage, but God will hold you up as you go in “pursuit of the root” of your unrest.

With His help, the process is accelerated, and the end result will be well worth the painful detective work. After God’s peace permeates the past, the unrest will be gone at last! You will experience life as God intended you to: healthy, whole and free.

As you allow God to change your heart, there are some nutritional supplements you can take to support and promote inward calm. These include B-complex, passion flower, L-theanine (an amino acid derived from green tea), GABA, calcium and magnesium. A health care professional can help you determine which of these supplements will benefit you and what

amount you should take.

Jesus said to let today's trouble be sufficient for the day (see Matt. 6:34). He knew that unrest in body, mind and spirit could destroy us. As believers, we need to learn to apply the balm of inward calm!

Bertha Smith – Awakening China to the Gospel

Bertha Smith was born on Nov. 16, 1888, on a farm outside Cowpens, South Carolina. She was one of five children of John and Frances Smith.

A disciplined, precocious child, she had a dynamic conversion experience and came to Jesus Christ during a Baptist revival meeting in 1905.

While in college in 1910, Bertha realized that God wanted her to become a missionary. Then in 1917, she received her formal appointment to China from the Southern Baptist's International Mission Board (formerly Foreign Mission Board).

Are You Like Your Father?

One of my most poignant memories of my late father is of him

seated at his desk with his Bible open, studying. My dad was devoted to Jesus Christ and had an insatiable hunger for biblical knowledge.

I remember watching him many times as he pored over passages and prayed for understanding. Years later, I had the privilege of getting a seminary education, and one day during a class lecture, I thought of him.

Surrounded by my fellow graduate students in a stately lecture hall, my eyes began to water. I was imagining how much my father would have loved being in this class.

Secure in an Insecure World

(Part 1)

Since the 9/11 tragedy, fear has become as great an enemy as terrorists. Believers can refute fear by trusting the Word of God, which promises God will protect us.

How to Open Your Child's Window to God

One of the most memorable moments for Christian parents is their child's awakening to faith. What God wants, and what any clear-thinking Christian parent wants, is for children to come to the place where they "own" their relationship with God.

Some children take the long route on their journey of faith and make their commitment to the Lord in their teen-age years—or later. While this may be nerve-racking to the Christian parent, not every soul is on the hoped-for evangelical timetable of “accept the Lord in the preschool years, rededicate or get baptized in the teen-age years and serve the Lord for life thereafter.”

Helping your child own a strong faith in Jesus Christ begins with you, the parent. You must embrace the journey each child is on and get comfortable with the fact that you are not in control of this process. If you do try to control it, you may be ensuring that your child gets to his destination the long way.

DEFINING PARENTAL ROLES

What then is the parent’s role in a child’s faith development? There are two extreme schools of thought. The correct answer is usually in the middle. The following examples will help to illustrate my point.

Arnie’s parents not only were in church every time the doors opened, but also believed in keeping up appearances. As long as their four children were under their roof, church attendance and “correct Christian behavior” were to be observed.

Forget enjoying and loving God. To Arnie’s parents, the Bible was a rule book to be followed, and any deviation was met with swift punishment. Predictably, Arnie spent most of the ’60s and ’70s in a drug-induced stupor, never even considering that there was a God who could be enjoyed, loved, obeyed and served.

Pam’s family occasionally went to a mainline church where truth was relative. God was in nature, but the nature of God wasn’t in Jesus; it was in good works, social justice and higher education.

You lived faith by trying to be good and “tolerant” of everything. With no absolute truth, no need for a Savior and no knowledge of divine intervention, Pam had no North Star to look to when life started throwing fastballs at her.

Pam’s brother died of a drug overdose. Her sister became a lesbian. Her first marriage failed, and her college-aged sons were both kicked out of school.

With a bottle of pills in one hand and the phone in the other, she called a Christian she knew from work and said: “You act like life has meaning. I’ll give you 10 minutes to try to convince me it does.”

Both Arnie and Pam eventually found their way to the God of the Bible and the Savior from Nazareth. They most assuredly took the long route.

Perhaps a fallen world, fallen parents, ignorance and willful disconnection from God are reasons some souls must come to the edge of hell. But I believe that it is never God’s intention for it to happen this way.

Unfortunately, even “perfect” parents have children who must be snatched away from the enemy at the last moment. This fact, however, shouldn’t prevent us from doing the right things to help our children own their faith as they grow. What are the “right things”?

**Live and model enjoying God.

**Live and model loving God.

**Live and model following God.

**Live and model serving God.

Within our model of following God is the essential element of helping our child recognize that their relationship with God is their relationship with God. We can’t give them our abundant life in Christ, but there is a great chance that if we help them discover how they can serve God with their unique

gifts, our children will want to love and follow Him.

A FAITH OF THEIR OWN

Whatever age your children are, you can help them to realize the grace and forgiveness God has lavished upon them through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. The journey begins with the child's realizing he or she is a sinner.

Some little children understand their need for salvation. But others don't truly get it until they've experienced a bit more of life.

Parents help their children enjoy, love and obey God by giving them the full picture of their own sin and the full story of God's grace. Let me illustrate five ways you can do both:

Don't venerate Bible characters except Jesus. Bible heroes were all humans who most definitely weren't perfect.

How is God's grace shown? By the fact that these people made mistakes but didn't let their mistakes keep them from following God and doing big things for Him.

Don't venerate other adults the child looks up to. Grandparents, older siblings, aunts, uncles—whoever is close to your child can seem larger than life and may appear "perfect." In an appropriate way, talking about the total package or letting the significant adult talk about their human foibles won't burst your child's bubble. It will point to God's goodness and grace.

Encourage the other adult leaders your child admires to share their faith stories. Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, even the senior pastor all need to be real people who have overcome mistakes by the power of God. Invite them to your home and have them share their testimonies.

Read and listen to the testimonies of those who have strayed far from God and then realized how much they needed Him. Read

books or Christian magazines; bring people into your home or watch Christian television to allow your child to hear the faith stories of those who talk about the effects of sin and the grace of God.

Search for examples of people “learning the hard way.” I know a couple who took their teen-agers to a local juvenile institution. It doesn't take long in this type of controlled environment to see where a series of poor choices—or even one stupid choice—can lead.

ENCOURAGING EPIPHANIES

Dan, a former church youth leader, understands the importance of a young person's making small but significant steps in his walk with Christ. One young girl named Jennifer who was in his youth group for six years did this.

Although Jennifer came from a stable and loving Christian home, she was the strong-willed type. By age 13, she had pretty much tuned out parental sermons, family devotions and adult church. But because most of her friends were in youth group, she kept within earshot of the Lord.

At church camp, between her eighth- and ninth-grade years, she listened to the testimonies of about a half-dozen high schoolers. In their own words, they admitted their imperfections and their need for the Lord.

Something clicked inside Jennifer's head. If they weren't perfect, I guess I don't have to be either. The next summer, she came forward to, as she admitted, “give my life to Christ for the first time.”

Two years later she rededicated her life to Christ. Three years later, she became a camp counselor for junior highers. Today, she's a full-time Youth for Christ leader, raising her own funds to disciple other women volunteers and teen-agers.

From the outside, it seems Jennifer's parents had nothing to

do with all these epiphanies, but she admitted differently. "I'm sure they prayed for me a bunch, and they always found the money to get me to camp. I had to find the Lord on my own timetable and through my own discovery. I tested what they said all through high school, and I found out something: It was all true."

Thomas' parents had to be a little more proactive. They played into his artistic, inquisitive nature by choosing one man in the Bible who was like him. When he was about 8, they decided that David would be the biblical character they would constantly refer to.

To understand their son and to help him find his way to God, they first studied David's life. His ups and downs and his words served to help Thomas make his way.

When Thomas got pushed around on his seventh-grade football team, the lesson was "Goliaths will fall when courage and God are on your side." When he started writing poems, his mom read him some of David's psalms.

When Thomas was caught stealing candy with his best friend at a local supermarket, Psalm 51 served to show him that true repentance pleases God and makes you clean.

Giving Thomas the appropriate thirst for a "Bible friend" helped him make the transition to Jesus. Though David was a hero that was human enough to relate to, Jesus was a Savior real enough to trust.

KEEPING SPIRITUAL WINDOWS OPEN

Kids will not share a faith they've borrowed. If they own it, they will share it with others. Without this essential step, they won't see the wisdom of obedience or the joy of serving. Here are some ways to make sure that once your child's windows are open to spiritual things, they remain open.

Keep the date. Get a Bible and mark down John 1:12 next to the day and time your child accepted Christ. Then tell your child to go to that verse anytime he or she doubts his or her salvation.

Throw a party. Go all out for your children's spiritual birthdays. Buy presents, make a cake and invite church friends over. That way every year they can mark when they first made the choice to become a Christian.

Give them permission. Romans 12:12 talks about presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. Help your children see that they can rededicate their lives to the Lord as often as they feel they need to.

Raise the bar. Make sure your children are giving God room to do miracles. Encourage them to be courageous in prayer and unafraid to ask for anything. God will mark their lives with miracles that will undeniably prove His love and personal concern.

Growing by doing. Give your children opportunities to share Christ in actions and words. As a family, invite your neighbors for a meal and share the Christmas story or show the Jesus film. Brainstorm together for ways to show God's love by helping others.

We all know by experience that faith grows in starts and stops. Mountain peaks and lower-than-low valleys in spiritual progress are common.

Times of questioning are not only predictable but also necessary for some. The good news is that eventually, through prayer and persistence, tears and talk, a high percentage of people who grow up in a Christian home do put down the stake that says: "I give up. I'm yours, Lord."

While you're waiting for your child to show signs of a developing spiritual life, remember how God brought you to

true ownership of your faith. Thank Him for those who cheered you on spiritually and also prayed for you—even when you were far off. Now, trust God to be as faithful with your children as He was with you.

Read a companion devotional.

Cheri Fuller *is an inspirational speaker and award-winning author of The One Year Book of Praying Through the Bible (Tyndale) and 41 other books. For her resources visit .*

Watch Your Step!

Years ago at my brother's church, a slight, very shy young man was learning to pass the plate for the offering. The pews were far enough apart that he could walk between them with the plate.

However, one day, as he passed the plate, he arrived at two very plump and jolly older ladies. He attempted to get by them but slipped and fell across their laps.

The plate and the money went flying. And because of their silky dresses, the young man slid down to the floor.

The Power of Your Weakness

It was a Saturday afternoon I'll never forget. I was 17 years old and hanging out at a friend's house when I found myself kneeling next to an old Jeep, my trembling hands clasped together as I cried out to God. It was more out of sheer exhaustion and desperation than any religious formality.

At that point I realized my life was killing me—from my very own choices. I was living from moment to moment, crisis to crisis, looking for the next experience—drinking, stealing, sex, anything—that would make me feel alive inside again. For years, I had been trying to escape from the pain of life's circumstances.

As I knelt there, alone, I didn't realize what I was doing and didn't really care. But I knew I was giving up—and that's all that mattered to God.

Before that afternoon in my friend's garage, I had felt so disconnected from God, from myself and from those around me that I had escaped into a world of distractions. Alcohol, stealing and promiscuity were not the problem; they were my feeble attempts to solve the problem.

The real dilemma? I didn't know who I was. I didn't know who God thought I was. In other words, I didn't understand grace.

The Distractions of Life When I look back at that pivotal time in my life, I am amazed at how far God has brought me. I now understand more about grace than I did then—mostly from asking some soul-searching questions that I'd like to share with you now.

Do you really know who you are? Do you see yourself as God sees you? Are you living the dream that you and only you were meant to live? Do you imagine a future that releases you to be what He made you to be? Or are you too distracted by a sinful

life or religious roles to even think about it at all?

Our attempts to clothe ourselves in the distractions of life—both the sinful and the spiritual—are open betrayals of the fact that we have forgotten we are sons and daughters created by almighty God. Stripped of our royal robes and noble purposes, we live our lives trying to clothe a cold and embarrassing nakedness with the skimpiness of possessions or position.

John Eldredge and the late Brent Curtis, in their book *The Sacred Romance*, put it this way: “Very seldom are we ever invited to live out of our heart. If we are wanted, we are often wanted for what we can offer functionally. If rich, we are honored for our wealth; if beautiful, for our looks; if intelligent, for our brains. So we learn to offer only those parts of us that are approved, living out a carefully crafted performance to gain acceptance from those who represent life to us.”

The heart that truly understands grace relates to God not through obedience and duty as much as desire and gratefulness. But to move from mere obedience to gratefulness requires us to have our identity rooted in who Christ has made us to be.

The Power of Weakness I recently counseled a married couple who began to argue loudly during the session, ignoring me in an angry exchange that revealed each spouse’s exceptional skill at the art of wounding the other. As the verbal combat escalated, something strange happened. They suddenly became aware that I was still in the room. You could see the shock all over their faces. They were horrified that I, their pastor, had seen this side of them.

Immediately they became pleasant again, and even exchanged some mild compliments with each other. I addressed their obvious discomfort by asking them if they were more comfortable before or after they let me see the dark side of

their marriage.

It was clear they regretted embarrassing themselves in front of me. It wasn't until I told them that I liked them better and could help them more when they weren't concerned with what I was thinking about them that they felt free to be themselves again.

But notice that, for them, to feel free wasn't the same as feeling good about their marriage—at least not for a long time. For them, freedom meant having the permission to feel bad about their marriage and about themselves, and to not be afraid to show it.

As Christians, we are not called to be without weakness. We are called to understand our weakness so we can exchange it for the strength of the cross—itsself a picture of great power clothed in the ultimate weakness of death.

With His sacrifice, Jesus became the original Wounded Healer. Jesus calls all those who come after Him to heal His broken world, not through their own strength, but through the redemption of their broken lives.

God chose us because we were broken, not because we were whole. He picked us out of the crowd because we were falling apart, not because we had it together. He came to heal those of us who were sick, not those who have no need of a physician. As Paul wrote, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27, NIV).

So if God has chosen us not because of our strength but because of our weakness, why are we trying to hide our broken lives instead of being comfortable with who we really are?

Forgotten Beginnings Why are so many of us uncomfortable with who we are or where we are in life? Because we are not firmly

convinced that we bear the image of the One who made us.

Genesis paints an amazing picture of our creation: "God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:27, NKJV).

In this incredible passage, God has just finished creating the world. He looks at it and is pleased. He says that it is good. From God, this is high praise indeed. And yet, it is not complete. He sees nothing that is truly a reflection of Himself.

As He turns to make man, He creates him in a way that does not reflect any other part of creation. God doesn't model man after the most glorious mountain. He doesn't model him after the vast seas of the earth. He doesn't turn His attention to His creation but to Himself.

He paints a self-portrait. He designs us to be a likeness of Himself. We became the pinnacle of all creation. We became image-bearers of the Most High God. And for a while, it worked out great.

You know the story. Adam and Eve were given the choice to continue being exact likenesses of God or to roll the dice and choose their own image. They gambled and lost, big time. They traded the glory of God for the glory of man—earning for themselves the sin nature that we, as their descendants, still carry today.

In that instant, we became something less than what we were meant to be. Like a mirror that no longer reflects anything, we became altogether worthless. Our self-image, which was designed to grow from the image of God in us, withered in the tragic soil of the fall.

New Beginnings It's no wonder so many of us struggle to know who we really are. Even though we know in our heads Christ died and rose again for us, our self-image is rooted in the

fall and not the resurrection. We have accepted an image of loss instead of redemption. We will not recover our identity until we understand the true power of grace. So, what exactly is grace?

Grace is God's desire to be in relationship with you regardless of your circumstances. That includes everything you have done or had done to you in the past, present and future. God's love is not based upon how you relate to Him through mere obedience. God's love for you is based upon His inexhaustible desire to be close to you. His grace offers several benefits.

Grace allows the believer to live free. I can remember living apart from Christ, and it was anything but free. I was constantly plagued by a sense that I had to create a good life. "You only go around once," was my motto. It was up to me to make it a good trip.

I no longer believe it's up to me to make my own success or happiness. My responsibility is to respond to what God puts in front of me, and through my response, His Spirit will continue to unveil the person God has created me to be. As Paul says, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). It's His job, not mine. I no longer have to perform for God or myself.

Grace allows us to move beyond the past. After counseling people for more than a decade, I can say with conviction that everyone I've ever met has a history he or she is running from. The good news of God's grace is that the past can remain where it is—in the past! We deny the power of the resurrection when we allow the past to decide who we are.

The idea conveyed in Scripture is that we are new creations. The old life has died and lives only to the degree that we

give it life. The Bible says, "A new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining" (1 John 2:8).

Before grace, all we knew was darkness. Now it is our choice to let it pass and embrace the true light that is already shining in us.

Grace allows us to help redeem the world. We live in a time in which it is not enough to share the message of the gospel. We must share ourselves along with the words. In order for the world to be transformed it needs our stories of brokenness.

It was not a coincidence that Jesus came into this world as a helpless baby. It was no coincidence that He lived as a servant. If He wanted, Jesus could have lived like a king. But He knew that was not our experience. He knew that we were hurting and that we were confused and in need of someone who could identify with us. Jesus didn't come into this world to save us from brokenness but from the illusion of wholeness.

That's our mission in today's world. We aren't called to live as plaster saints. We are to live as wounded healers. Our stories, especially the ones filled with anguish, are the bridges God uses to walk into the lives of others. "They overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:11).

True Grace vs. Tolerance If grace is the tool God uses to transform the world, then tolerance is the tool Satan uses to usher in hell on earth.

Tolerance is certainly the buzzword of the day. And at first glance, it looks a lot like grace. It's nice. It seems forgiving, patient and kind. But tolerance is a road that leads to death.

Dorothy Sayers once said: "In this world it's called tolerance, but in hell it is called despair. The sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, enjoys nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing but remains alive because there is nothing which it would die for."

Despair is the natural conclusion of a life lived in tolerance. Grace finds its roots in the cross and the resurrection. Tolerance finds its roots in apathy and fear.

Christ's offer of grace to us through His death on the cross demonstrated His convictions, His belief that mankind needed a rescuer and His determination not to leave us to our own devices. He was bruised, He was cut, He was nailed, and He was pierced so that we could have a relationship with God.

Tolerance allows others to continue in sin because it is too afraid to offer help. Our world is full of people who are watching in silence as those around them perish apart from Christ because they value other people's freedom to choose their own way more than they value the people themselves.

When my son was a toddler, he darted out into the street in front of a car. I had a choice at that moment. I could sit in silence embracing my son's choice and allow him to be killed, or I could help him.

Obviously, I reached out and jerked him back to safety. It would have been monstrous for me to be apathetic in a moment like that. Nevertheless, the cardinal rule of tolerance is no interference even though interference is actually the most compassionate act.

What true grace offers us is the opportunity to be a friend of God, and we are closest to God when we are most aware of our need for grace—when we are most aware of our own brokenness. It is this brokenness that creates the space for God, and it is through the embracing of our weakness that His sacrifice is

made real to us.

Read a companion devotional.

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