

Seeing People as God Sees Them

My family lived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa for about 13 years. You probably don't know, but Cedar Rapids has a decent art museum. I was only there once in the 13 years we lived there. One of the great American painters, named Grant Wood, was from the Cedar Rapids area. The name might not sound familiar, but he painted one of the most recognizable paintings in the world, American Gothic. [pic] Normally, it's at the art institute of Chicago, but they brought it to Cedar Rapids for a special Grant Wood exhibit.

Now, how many of you are into paintings? You can appreciate the subtleties of great paintings and stand in awe of a masterpiece? How many of you couldn't tell the difference between a Picasso [pic] and child's watercolor hanging on a refrigerator? [pizza face pic] Yeah, that's me, too.

Because I'm a novice, I wasn't prepared for what I would see that day. Because this is a priceless painting, I was expecting to see a steel cage with lasers and Mr. T. with a machine gun guarding this priceless treasure. But instead, I walked through a doorway, just to my left, hanging on the wall out in the open, there it was, American Gothic with a guard that looked like he was 15 years old sitting on a stool beside it.

I was completely unprepared because I have to tell you, it's *stunning*. The colors, the bold brush-strokes, the detail were like nothing I'd ever seen before in my life. If

you've ever seen a painting like this before, you know what I'm talking about. I can't explain it, but there's an uncommon beauty in a work of art painted by a master.

Now, imagine you were walking through the alley behind the art gallery and you noticed in the dumpster the top of a painting that's been covered in mud. You're curious, so you go over to check it out. You wipe a little of the mud off and notice that it's American Gothic—not a copy, but the real, actual priceless painting. One of a kind and irreplaceable. If you saw it muddied and torn, I hope you wouldn't just leave it there.

But also, I also hope you wouldn't restore it yourself. That would be disaster. I know this because it happened. This is a painting called "Ecce Homo" [Ecce Homo]—translated Behold the Man. It's a depiction of Jesus originally painted on the wall of the Sanctuary of Mercy church in 1930. The humidity in the church, had deteriorated the painting over the years. [Ecce Homo deteriorated]

An elderly woman from the congregation, named Doña Cecilia Giménez was distraught by the state of the painting, so she decided to restore it herself. Which made it a different kind of masterpiece. [restored] Today, people come from miles around to see the painting, which has boosted the economy of the small town, but didn't do much for the painting itself. The moral of the story is that restoration is best done by the expert.

But here's why I tell these two stories. Every single day, you look at works of art that are infinitely more valuable than any painting. The uniqueness, the beauty, the

intricate design of a master artist is on full display every single day of our live. But we have a hard time recognizing it. That priceless work is on display every time you look in the mirror. You can see it with every interaction people at home or at work at the grocery. It's in every face your see every day. Unfortunately, we have a hard time recognizing it.

The reason it's so hard is because each of these masterpieces is beaten up and covered in mud. Sometimes it's the result of the person's sin. Sometimes it's the residue of a hard life of abuse, neglect or just dumb luck. Sometimes we don't see it because we can't see clearly through our own mud. And as a result, rather than treating every person we see as a masterpiece, we're more likely to look right through them at best or treat them like trash at worst.

But as we get a picture of Jesus in the Gospels, his defining characteristic is that he saw people differently than everyone else. While people tended to see the mud of sin and hurt, and people who can't seem to get their stuff together, Jesus sees the masterpiece underneath. We see trash, Jesus sees treasure.

Now there are others who try to see with the vision of Jesus and catch a glimpse of the masterpiece underneath the mud of life, but we try to restore them ourselves. But our call as Christians and as the church isn't to restore people ourselves, but to bring

them to the one who can. So, over the next five weeks, I want this to be our mental hook that sticks in your mind as we work our way through this focus series.

A focus season is a time where we're all doing the same thing. Our small group teachings center on the message. So, if you're not in a group, I hope you'll do that. Pick up a focus guide book. It has a place for sermon notes, it has small group questions, a weekly family devotion and daily personal devotions related to what we're studying.

The purpose of focus seasons isn't just individual learning—although I hope you dive in and make it personal. But ultimately, we want to build a certain type of culture in the church. And we're doing it because we believe we're not called just to sit in pews and play church. The Church is the body of Christ, which means we should look like Jesus. We should be carrying out Jesus' mission. That's why the church exists at all.

So, the leadership of the church spent about a year starting flesh some of this out. What does it mean for this church to take on the mission of Jesus? This was a big undertaking and probably the most visible fruit so far was our decision to partner with *Together for Good* and *Prison Fellowship*. But the goal wasn't just to find ministry partners, but to start us on a journey that will transform us. We want to be a place where people are continually reconciled to God and restored to his image. And this will take more than partnership with organizations. It will take a change of culture. The goal is to

build a transformational culture. This means that not only will we have to change some things organizationally, but each of us will have to develop the heart and vision of Christ.

Today, we're taking the first step by learning to see people as Jesus sees them.

Turn to Ephesians, chapter 2. The book of Ephesians is a letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church at a time when they were trying to figure out the purpose of the church.

The greatest struggle of the early church was bringing together two groups of people who had been enemies for generations. The Jews, who were the people of Israel and the Gentiles, who were basically "anyone who isn't a Jew."

There was deep animosity. The Jews *resented* the Romans, iron-fisted oppressors who worshipped other God's and mocked Jewish practices. The Gentiles couldn't understand why the Jews had to be so belligerent about their beliefs. If they would worship the pantheon of gods like everyone else, we could all get along. But they insisted on their archaic beliefs and made trouble for everyone.

In the middle of this political mess, a Jew named Jesus from a small town just outside of Jerusalem, caused a stir. He taught people to love their neighbor and pray for those who persecuted them, but after only 3 years he was crucified in a joint effort between the Jews and Gentiles. Even while he was hanging on that cross, he asked, "*Father forgive them. They don't understand what they're doing.*" But three days later, he

rose again and appeared to hundreds, causing them overnight to take on a new identity and form a family they called “the Church.”

What was even stranger was that not only did Jews put their trust in Jesus, Gentiles did, too. And now, the Church had to overcome centuries of prejudice and learn to see each other as God sees them. But it wasn’t an easy task. It would have been hard for either side to believe the others could amount to anything.

The Jews had words to describe Gentiles. Unclean, idolaters, immoral, pagan, dogs. And it would be hard to see them as anything else. The Gentiles would have had their own set of words for the Jews—unpatriotic, unreasonable, backward, and troublemakers.

But in this passage, is Paul trying to help them overcome their prejudice and change how they see each other. Let’s take a look. [read vs 1-10] As we work through this passage, I want to point out five keys to developing the vision of Jesus.

The first is to *look at yourself honestly*. Verses 1 & 2, **“As for you...you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you were [under control of the enemy.]”** OK, the first thing you might have noticed is that this is really harsh and even extreme language. *You were dead in your transgressions and sins. You were under the control of Satan.* To be honest, my initial reaction to this is to think it really doesn’t apply to me. I’ve been a Christian all my life and I’ve never really done anything that bad.

But that's exactly the point Paul is making. You see, if we're not careful, we can tend to judge other people more harshly than we do ourselves. Or maybe, more accurately, we're quick to rationalize the bad things we do but assign bad motives to others. I'm a good person who occasionally does bad things, but he's just a bad guy. We do that because it gives us a way to feel justified in judging them.

Now, Paul doesn't let us get away with that, but he does it in a way that's a little different than, say, one of our friends would. Our friends would try to boost our self-esteem. "You're not really bad. In fact, you're a good person and what you did isn't that bad anyway." Which, to be honest, is not that helpful because sometimes we do things that are hurtful to other people or destructive for our own lives. It doesn't help us to pretend that it's not.

This is why Jesus said, **"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in our brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"** It's only when we refuse to acknowledge our own mud that we can stop judging other people for theirs. That's the first step to being to seeing people as Jesus sees them.

The second step is to understand that *you're pretty much just like everyone else.* Verse 3, **"All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts..."** Feel better yet? Here's some more good news,

“Like everyone else, we were by nature deserving of wrath.” Well, we might not like the idea that we were deserving of wrath because of our sin, but at least we’re not alone.

You see, we can only condemn others when we see ourselves as fundamentally different from them. One of the reasons we have a hard time being honest with each other is because we think we’re the only one that’s messed up. If I’m the only one, others will judge me and I won’t fit. And how it often works in the church is that we look over the congregation and everyone presents their best self—and this isn’t just a church problem, everyone does it—but we look around and we think everyone is so put-together, if I share that my marriage is rocky or I’m struggling with porn or I’m don’t feel like a bad parent, or I have huge emotional hurts I can’t get over, then I’ll separate myself from everyone else.

But I’ve always experienced just the opposite. Any time I’ve been willing to confess a sin or struggle with someone, they will either reveal to me that they have the *same* struggle or they open up about a different struggle. In fact, I’m going to out everyone right now. You’re not all that put together. For all of our differences, that’s what we all have in common. And when you admit that, there’s no way you can condemn someone else or pull away from them because of their sin or struggles.

Now, that’s just in the church, but there’s an even more important point I want to make now, and it’s this: Church people sometimes feel the need to hide our past or

current sin or struggles from people *outside* the church, because we think it will ruin our witness. But hear me now: people outside the church aren't turned off by the sins or problems of Christians. They're turned off by Christians who pretend they don't have any.

Now, I believe that God doesn't just forgive us, but he transforms us. So, I hope there are many of us in the church who have struggled with many things in the past that God has healed and are no longer an issue for us. But when we pretend that we're not subject to the same struggles and temptations of people outside the church, they will look at us and say, *"I can't relate to that. This is not the place for me."*

And for all of us, all the way until we die, there will be areas of our lives that God is continuing to restore and refine in us. And not only is it OK to admit that, it's absolutely *essential*, if we are going to grow or if we're going to develop the vision of Jesus. Paul says, we're all messed up together.

Now, this would be a terrible sermon if we stopped there. But, this is where we come to the Sir Mix-a-Lot moment. I cannot lie. He loves big buts and here's maybe the biggest "but" you'll ever see.

Verse 4...like everyone we were deserving of wrath... **"But...because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved..."**

This is where it all turns to good news, because Jesus specializes in restoration projects. That's good news, because that's what we all are. Every single one of us needs to be restored. And again, you'll see this if you're honest.

If you're honest, you'll see that you're judgmental. Even if you don't consider yourself religious, you're can be just as judgmental, and you need to be restored. If you're honest, you'll admit your mind is a lust factory that needs to be washed and restored. Or you hold onto bitterness and unforgiveness even though you know it's eating you up inside. You still carry guilt or shame for something you did or something years ago. You might think Jesus is only there for you when once you get your stuff together, but Paul says Jesus wants to take whatever sin-stains you have and restore you *now*.

But it's even better than that. It's not just *your* sin that Jesus deals with. Sometimes we're are muddied and torn by other people's sin. I know that's true for many of you. Maybe it's abuse or neglect that happened years ago that you want to put in the past, but can't seem to do it. It could be the ache of broken relationships or lost opportunities. Maybe you have hurts that you can't bring yourself to share with anyone else. And because of that, you see yourself as damaged and you're beginning to think that's all you'll ever be. Jesus wants to restore you. He doesn't do it reluctantly, he *longs* for it.

You see, I know many people picture Jesus something like this. [Jesus icon] He's wearing a nice robe, holding his Bible, with the halo around his head. We've got the holy

part down. But as I read this passage and as I read through the gospels and see where Jesus spent his time, it seems to me, this is a more accurate picture of Jesus. [dumpster diver] You see, Jesus knows that *not everything that's dirty is trash*.

While we were still sinners. While we were still covered in mud, Jesus took nails in his hands and feet, experienced the pain and loss, and took upon himself what we deserved, not just so we can be forgiven, but we can be *restored and re-created*. We're all in this together. It cost Jesus the same price to restore you as it did anyone else, no matter how messed up you think they are.

So, the question is, why would he this for us? Paul's answer is that you're *worth the investment*. It's not because of anything you've accomplished, but look at this in verse 10. "For"—and anytime you see the word "for" at the beginning of a sentence, substitute the word "because." Here it is, Jesus did all this **"Because we are God's handiwork..."**

Here's what the New Living Translation says, **"We are God's masterpiece."** You're not self-made, you're God-made. That doesn't mean that we're perfect just the way we are—like pop songs like to say. But it means that even when other people only see mud, Jesus sees through the mud to the masterpiece. We see only what people *are*, Jesus sees the potential for what we could be. And for Jesus, whatever price he had to pay, he didn't do it reluctantly or out of pity, he did it because you are a masterpiece.

You see, the fifth key to seeing like Jesus is for you not just accept that for yourself, but to understand that every person you meet is a masterpiece as well. Now, look at this at the end of verse 10, **“We are God’s masterpiece”** and then if you’ve ever wonder what your purpose in life is, here it is. You were **“created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for you to do.”** You are not a charity case and neither is anyone else you meet. Every single person you meet is someone uniquely made in the image of God. Created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for them to do.

When he created you, he created you with unique traits and abilities. He gave you resources and gifts and interests. He created you in his image to contribute to the glory of God and the flourishing of the world. The mud of life is what keeps us from fulfilling our God-given potential.