

with Jesus VISION

"This is my commandment,
that you love one another,
just as I have loved you."

John 15:12



any years ago I had some surgery performed on my scalp—three times, in all. On three different occasions divots of flesh were excavated from the top of my cranium under local anesthesia, and three times I came forth from surgery looking a bloody mess.

Throughout this period I nonetheless continued to attend such public gatherings as choir practice, but to spare the stomachs of those sitting in the rows behind, I would wear a cap to cover the bandaged wound. As one might guess, there were many who wondered why this overweight baritone was wearing a hat inside the church on a Wednesday night. So the director announced to the choir that I was saving them from having to look at the ugly result of surgery.

After this explanation was offered, generous measures of sympathy were extended me by my choir-mates. They expressed shock and regret that such an ordeal would befall me. Allowances were made for my temporary handicap, and I was, in a number of different ways, encouraged.

At another time, I began displaying the outward behavior of a more emotional and mental problem. This problem was a form of *agoraphobia*, literally a "fear of the marketplace" (after the Greek *agora*). This phobia was—and still is, but to a lesser degree—manifested in me in either a general feeling of discomfort, or, sometimes, outright panic when in a crowd of people. It caused me to avoid all together public events such as dinners or banquets, fellowships and parties, or any situation in which there would be people milling about.

This problem—for which I was under the care of a therapist—would cause me to take curious, even bizarre steps to survive being around people when it was necessary. When I did attend choir practice, I could only do

so by sitting in specific chairs, with certain "safe" people stationed on either side. Along with this, it was necessary for me to leave the premises immediately and quickly, once choir practice or worship services were over.

This problem was as real to me as the trauma of having surgery performed on my head, but with only a few exceptions people's responses were quite different. Even when the reason for my behavior was explained to some people, they would still grow quickly impatient, even *angry* with me. I developed a reputation in the church body for being stuck-up, anti-social, conceited; people assumed I didn't like them because I would leave the church right away without speaking to them. They thought I didn't want to be around them, when the truth was that I simply *couldn't* be around them.

But this they could not understand, because this time my wound was on the *inside*.

If there is an entreaty that is always at the top of my list, it is that God would nurture me into having the vision and heart of Jesus, who, in contrast to most of His creation, sees what is inside a person *first*, and very often ignores totally the outward appearance. Jesus accepts us with our turmoil and doubt. He accepts us with the darkness of our past and the lingering sins of our present. Jesus doesn't assume the worst when we behave strangely. He just loves us.

Jesus lovingly nurtures the potential lying deep inside—a potential that others often choose to ignore.

How very often we fail to see the potential in others by being side-tracked by their appearance or behavior. How easy it is to miss having a relationship with someone because they may have a darkly stained past.

Jesus accepts us with our past stains, and God the Father accepts us as kin because of our relationship with His Son. Neither of them sees us as we were; they only see us as who we are now—and who we will be for eternity.



a Woman with a Past

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

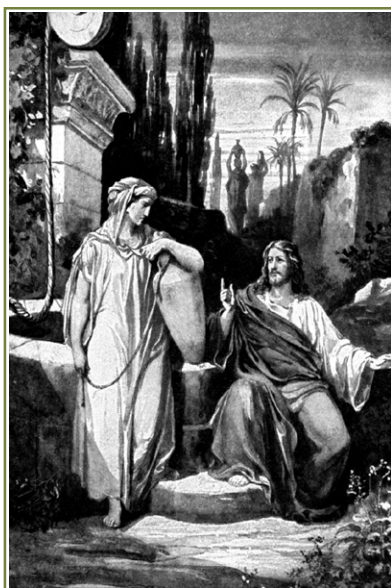
"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst.

Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

He told her, "Go, call your



husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet... I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.

They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

John 4:4-19, 25-30, 39-42 niv

The woman already had several strikes against her. First, well, she was a woman. In Jesus' time it would have been considered bad manners for a man—and especially a rabbi—to have spoken to a woman in public without her husband present. Second, she was a Samaritan. The Jews considered the Samaritans to be nothing more than "dogs" and would typically journey around Samaria to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem. A Jew would simply not speak to a Samaritan; it was not done. But Jesus not only purposely traveled through

Samaria, He stopped in Sychar to rest and be refreshed from Jacob's well. Third, this woman was, to be kind, not of good character. She not only had had many husbands, but was now living with a man to whom she was not wed.

There was a television documentary several years back that had as its subject the congregation and pastor of a small, fundamentalist church in the United States. Two scenes have remained with me. The first scene was of the pastor meeting in a restaurant with the wife or girlfriend of a back-sliding

parishioner. The pastor spent a lot of energy berating the woman, blaming her evil ways for the man's spiritual condition. The second scene I have not been able to forget was of several men from the church trying to "save" another man. Hour after hour they brutalized the man with Scripture, with retellings of his evil ways, and with every coercive trick they could muster. Hour after hour the man tried to explain to them that he simply wasn't interested. But they continued, verbally beating the man into submission until finally, exhausted, he broke, and "accepted Christ."

Nowhere in the Gospels do you see Jesus treating people in such a manner. Oh, He got angry from time to time, that's for sure. But whenever He met someone whose eternal soul was of interest to Him, Jesus always treated them with compassion and respect.

Here was a woman who slept around. The Jews shunned her because she was a Samaritan; her own people shunned her because she was a shameless fornicator. Jesus had more than sufficient reason to avoid her all together, and no one

would have thought the less of Him. But instead, the sinless One sat down and as much said, "Listen, I know about your past. I know who you are—and I love you anyway."

The truly remarkable thing—remarkable at least in our eyes—is that He didn't stop there. Jesus was not just handing out forgiveness that day at Jacob's well. He was also handing out *commissions*. This Samaritan adulterer was given the responsibility to take the truth of Jesus Christ to her own people. Because of her, "many of the Samaritans believed in Him." Lives were saved for eternity because Jesus took a few moments out of His day to be kind to an outcast.

But of course, through the eyes of Jesus, there is nothing remarkable about this at all—because He has done the very same thing for each of us. Knowing our past, knowing the vile things we've done, knowing the hidden recesses of our lives that have never been revealed to anyone else—knowing the very worst about us, Jesus showed us the same compassion and forgiveness that He showed that Samaritan woman at the well.

"HE TOLD ME ALL THE THINGS I HAVE DONE..."

THAT IS ONE OF THE PRIME METHODS JESUS USES TO CHANGE US. HE FORCES US TO FACE THE TRUTH, THE WHOLE TRUTH. SHE WAS CHANGED! WHAT A DIFFERENT WOMAN! I WANT TO ADDRESS SOMETHING... JESUS NEVER ONCE TOLD HER TO LEAVE THAT MAN. HER LIVING WITH THE MAN WASN'T JESUS' PRIMARY CONCERN. HE DIDN'T REBUKE HER BECAUSE OF HER IMMORAL LIFE. SHE WAS AN UNSAVED SAMARITAN. UNSAVED PEOPLE LIVE LIKE THAT. HE DIDN'T SAY TO HER, "CLEAN UP YOUR ACT, AND THEN YOU'RE QUALIFIED TO BELIEVE." HE SAID, "I AM MESSIAH. AND I'LL TELL YOU ALL THE THINGS THAT YOU'VE DONE." DON'T READ PEOPLE A LONG LIST OF RULES OF SPIRITUALITY EN ROUTE TO SALVATION. LET THE LORD DO THAT. YOU PRESENT TO THEM THE SAVIOR. OUR JOB ISN'T TO CLEAN UP THE FISH BOWL, CERTAINLY NOT INITIALLY. IT'S TO FISH—JUST FISH. (CHARLES R. SWINDOLL)

*My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign;
My gracious Redeemer, my Saviour art Thou;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus 'tis now.*

*I love Thee, because Thou hast first loved me,
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree;
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus 'tis now.*

*I'll love Thee in life, I will love Thee in death,
And praise Thee as long as Thou lendest me breath;
And say when the death-dew lies cold on my brow,
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus 'tis now.*

*In mansions of glory and endless delight,
I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow,
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus 'tis now.*

(Frances R. Havergal)

Faith Over Flesh

Hebrews 11 is the classic "Roster of Faith." Here we see a catalogue of individuals who placed their trust in God, and, as a result, were used mightily in His kingdom. But Hebrews 11 is also a roster of normal, imperfect human beings. These were people who were used of God *in spite of* their failings.

Divide a sheet of paper into three columns. In the first column list all the names you find in the Eleventh chapter of Hebrews—from Abel through Samuel.

Find each person's story in the Bible and in the second column note his or her mistakes, weaknesses or frailties.

Then in the third column, note those things they did that warranted their inclusion in this "Roster of Faith."

Stones on the Ground

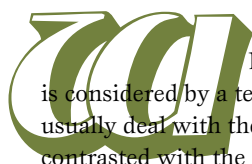
Then each went to his own home. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such

women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." John 7:53-8:11 niv



Whenever this story from the gospel of John is considered by a teacher or preacher, the thoughts expressed usually deal with the evil, hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, contrasted with the grace of Jesus.

But consider too: the woman's sin was real. *She was caught in the act.* Even if she had been set up, baited by the authorities, she (and her companion, by the way) did commit a sin worthy—by God's Law to the Jews—of death by stoning.

"If a man is found lying with a married woman, then both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel.

"If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city, and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you." Deuteronomy 22:22-24

The reprehensible motives of the scribes and Pharisees do not diminish the clear fact that the woman had indeed sinned.

We cheapen God's grace, and the blood of Christ, when we forget that it is real sin in our life that has been forgiven. Christ did not suffer and die for "almost-sin"—for little white lies that really don't count anyway. He died for real, dark, despicable actions and thoughts—as well as our basic sin nature.

Jesus took the woman as she was, as she was presented to Him in her public guilt. Nowhere does he argue the woman's case; nowhere does he argue that she really had not sinned. Quite to the contrary, he suggests that not only her, but

everyone else was just as guilty. There was plenty of blame to go around.

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. Romans 8:1-2

Absolute sin requires absolute grace. Because there is nothing halfway about our sin, there is nothing halfway about God's forgiveness. He takes us as we are—complete in our sin—without reservation, without condition save the one: Jesus Christ.

So if God, in His absolute purity and holiness, accepts us as we are, not expecting us to, on our own, meet his standards before He will have a relationship with us, why is it we expect more from our brothers and sisters? Why is it we have conditional relationships with each other, when holy God requires less? Are we holier than God? Are we so perfect that we don't dare risk soiling that perfection with the imperfections of others?

When conflicts arise—when some weakness in a brother or sister is becoming an obstacle to a healthy relationship—try this: Just love them. That's all. Don't deny their flaws, for they are certainly as real as your own. Don't send them a book or tape that spells out their failings in no uncertain terms, as if it is something you mastered long ago. Don't encourage them to sign up for the latest 12-step program. Just love them. Accept their flaws, and just love them as family in Christ.

And soon *your* failings will become as insignificant as theirs.

*I would love to tell you what I think of Jesus
Since I found in Him a friend so strong and true;
I would tell you how He chang'd my life completely—
He did something that no other friend could do.*

*All my life was full of sin when Jesus found me,
All my heart was full of misery and woe;
Jesus placed His strong and loving arms around me,
And He led me in the way I ought to go.*

*Ev'ry day He comes to me with new assurance,
More and more I understand His words of love;
But I'll never know just why He came to save me,
Till some day I see His blessed face above.*

*No one ever cared for me like Jesus,
There's no other friend so kind as He;
No one else could take the sin
and darkness from me—
O how much He cared for me!
(Charles F. Weigle)*



I PASSED BY A PLOT OF LAND WHICH SOME LANDOWNER HAD BEEN ENCLOSING, AS THOSE RASCALS ALWAYS WILL FILCH EVERY MORSEL OF GREEN GRASS. BUT I NOTICED THAT THE ENCLOSERS HAD ONLY FENCED IT IN, BUT HAD NOT DUG IT UP, NOT PLOWED IT, NOR PLANTED IT. AND THOUGH THEY HAD CUT DOWN THE GORSE, IT WAS COMING UP AGAIN. OF COURSE IT WOULD, FOR IT WAS STILL A MEADOW, AND A BIT OF FENCE OR RAIL COULD NOT ALTER IT. THE GORSE WOULD COME PEEPING UP, AND BEFORE LONG THE ENCLOSURE WOULD BE AS WILD AS THE HEATH OUTSIDE.

BUT THIS IS NOT GOD'S WAY OF WORKING. WHEN GOD ENCLOSES A HEART THAT HAS LAID OPEN TO SIN, DOES HE CUT DOWN THE THORNS AND THE BRIARS AND THEN PLANT FIR TREES? NO—HE CHANGES THE SOIL SO THAT FROM THE GROUND ITSELF, FROM ITS OWN VITALITY, THE FIR TREE AND THE MYRTLE SPONTANEOUSLY START UP. THIS IS A MOST WONDERFUL RESULT. IF A MAN REMAINS AT HEART THE SAME GODLESS MAN, YOU CAN MEND HIS HABITS, MAKE HIM GO TO CHURCH, CLOTHE HIM, KEEP HIM FROM ALCOHOL, AND TEACH HIM NOT TO TALK FILTHILY, AND THEN SAY, "HE'S NOW A RESPECTABLE MAN." BUT IF THESE OUTWARD RESPECTABILITIES AND RIGHTNESSES ARE ONLY SKIN DEEP, YOU HAVE DONE NOTHING. AT LEAST, WHAT YOU HAVE DONE IS NOTHING TO BE PROUD OF.

BUT SUPPOSE THIS MAN CAN BE SO CHANGED THAT JUST AS FREELY AS HE WAS ACCUSTOMED TO CURSE HE NOW DELIGHTS TO PRAY, AND JUST AS HEARTILY AS HE HATED RELIGION HE NOW FINDS PLEASURE IN IT, AND JUST AS EARNESTLY AS HE SINNED HE NOW DELIGHTS TO BE OBEDIENT TO THE LORD. THIS IS A WONDER, A MIRACLE WHICH MAN CANNOT ACCOMPLISH, A MARVEL WHICH ONLY THE GRACE OF GOD CAN WORK AND WHICH GIVES GOD HIS HIGHEST GLORY. (CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON)

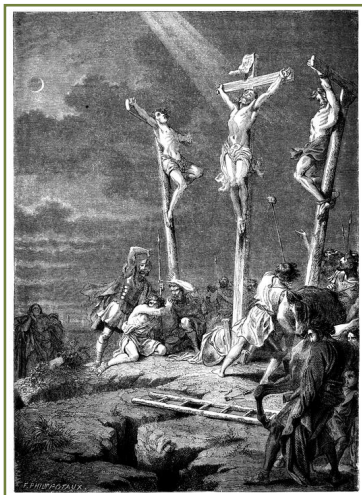
Never Too Late

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.”

The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.”

There was a written notice above



him, which read: this is the king of the jews.

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:32-43 niv

There are two things about the thief on the cross that have always fascinated me: what he *did*, and what he *didn't*.

First, this man was a true low-life. He wasn't hanging from an instrument of crucifixion because he had been caught spitting on the sidewalk. He was not being punished for kicking the neighbor's dog. Crucifixion was a capital punishment reserved only for the worst crimes committed by the worst types. Originally this type of death was reserved for slaves—property, non-people—but it eventually included the lowest criminals from any class. Even then, however, it was never used for Roman citizens; this was a death considered too hideous for even the lowliest citizen of Rome.

The Jews considered death by crucifixion to be shameful. Only the accursed of God would suffer such humiliation.

“If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.” Deuteronomy 21:22-23

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is

everyone who hangs on a tree.” Galatians 3:13

So, while we don't know his particular crime, it's safe to say that this man did something more than just snatch someone's purse. He was the worst type of criminal, the scum of the earth.

Even more than what he *did* as a criminal, however, I am fascinated by what he *didn't* do as a believer. Here was someone whose walk with Christ was compressed into, at best, a few hours. Within that very brief span of time he passed from criminal and condemned sinner, to redeemed believer, to inhabitant of heaven. What things were not accomplished during that brief period?

- walking the church aisle, baptism, new member's class
- right-hand of fellowship, communion, tithing
- returning those things he had stolen from others
- apologies to those he had wronged
- a good bath, haircut, and a new suit of clothes
- a church letter and position on a committee

With touching simplicity the criminal confessed that he was a sinner deserving death, and that Jesus was a sinless king who had the power to save him from that death. And that was enough for Jesus—and who better than He, in the

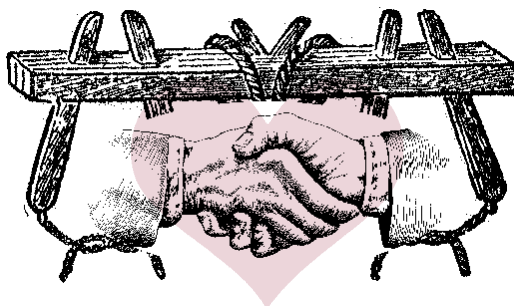
very moment of His sacrifice, to know what was required to be “saved.”

We are surrounded by brothers and sisters who have met the requirements of God’s grace—but not ours. God, through Christ, has opened his arms to them, saying, “Come to me with all those dark parts of your past; come to me with all your fragility and weakness and ignorance. I welcome the chance to love you.”

If that is the Lord’s response, how, then, can we require more?

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Matthew 5:7

“For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” Matthew 6:14-15



*Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.*

*Before our Father's throne we pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.*

*We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.*

*When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again.*
(John Fawcett)

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. Romans 12:9-17

Truth over Tradition

Let me propose an ambitious project. It may very well be a time-consuming, but eye-opening experience. Be diligent and thorough, and the results will be well worth the time—possibly even life-changing.

Begin compiling a list of behaviors and appearances that are expected of people in your church body for them to be “accepted.” Notice I didn’t say to list those things that are required for them to be official members of the congregation. I’m not talking about salvation or membership, but *the standard of social acceptance within the group*.

What are the accepted standards in your church—such as standards of dress (what would happen if someone wore shorts to church on a hot August day?), and behavior. How should people behave in your church so as to feel welcome? What are the standards of giving and stewardship of time and belongings? What if someone has never been baptized, never taken communion—and doesn’t want to. Would they be made to feel welcome? Would they be included in activities, choir, drama?

Now for the important part of the project. Once you’ve compiled your list—or even while you’re still compiling it—take each item you’ve listed and back up your church’s position with Scripture. Use God’s word to verify the validity of each of these standards of acceptance.

Now, what will you do about those items that cannot be substantiated by Scripture?



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