

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

The Chamber of Loving Scrutiny

So, to be a pastor in the Methodist Church you are required to have a psychological evaluation...I hope that puts some of your minds at rest. I don't think you're required to pass a psychological evaluation (go ahead; you can worry again), but you must sit down and be interviewed by a clinical psychologist, and he or she writes an in depth assessment of your interview. I did not like that, even though I understood that it was required – it wasn't because I had any strange twitches or behaviors, and I understood that perfectly healthy people see therapists all the time. I was just afraid that the therapist might push some buttons that would expose some deep issue with my parents or siblings, some trauma that I had repressed, and I didn't want someone who was a stranger looking into my head, and then sharing his findings with the District Committee on Ministry.

I think we all have an aversion to that kind of scrutiny. Job interviews are stressful because there are people who are checking you out, digging into your past, interviewing people who know you, and discovering things that you might not want them to find out. And that kind of scrutiny starts at a young age and continues for most of our lives. We start getting report cards and soon we are ranked among other students. We compete against other students for admission to colleges or schools or jobs. We are given a credit score based on our income and debt and our ability to pay off debt. Even in our social lives we face scrutiny and we in turn scrutinize – there is an unwritten code among a group of friends, and in order to get into that group or remain in that group there are standards of behavior that must be met. I'm reminded of a movie I saw back in college called "Animal House," and there is a scene of a fraternity "rush" when the fraternities are all open to any student interested in joining, and those that are too "different" from the rest of the frat boys are invited to sit in a corner of where they sit with other guys who are also too "different" to be members of that fraternity, and they are ignored and never invited back. Yes, in every area of our life we are scrutinized...which is to say we are judged. And we judge as we are judged.

And because we face so much scrutiny, so much judgment, we can be in a constant state of tension, always conscious of saying the right thing and having the right expression on our face, and not being too aggressive and not being too meek. We may even be conscious of not being too successful: my son reminded me of this when he used to come home with “good” but not “excellent” report cards, because the straight A students were often teased by other students, and I understand this because often teased students who did too well in school. They were brainiacs...nerds.

And we often make the serious mistake of thinking that God judges us like the world judges us...or even that God is a harsher judge than the world is. And if you think that, I’m pleased to inform you that God is not the harsh judge that you imagine him to be, and the Bible offers example after example of people who were close to God...who walked with God...who did some seriously bad stuff and yet were blessed and loved by God: Abraham; Jacob; Joseph; Moses; David; Peter. And the author of the passage that was just read to you: Paul. They all committed some serious sins, but that did not stop God from loving them and reconciling them...and ENTRUSTING THEM (as today’s scripture lesson puts it) with the Good News of God’s love and reconciliation. I’m sure that there were plenty of people who questioned God for his choice of messenger: “How could God choose THAT guy? He once killed a man...or THAT guy, to killed a man AND took his wife...or that guy who almost gave his wife away to the Pharaoh?” WE can judge those people who God chose because judging comes too naturally for us. But God doesn’t judge us like the world judges us; God loves us in a way that that world CANNOT love us.

And we need to get it through our heads that God loves us in such a way, because as long as we feel the pressure of being judged we can’t really be authentic with God. We treat God the way we treat world when it judges us, by hiding our faults and our weaknesses for fear of being rejected. God’s love does not reject anyone. And God, being God, knows our faults already far too well. So when we try to present ourselves to God as somehow deserving of his attention and blessing we’re not being sincere with God. We’re attempting to cover up things that we may be able to cover up with the world, but we can’t cover them up with God. In the book *Dimensions of Prayer* Douglas Steere writes about a woman who told a group of people that she lived in a lovely apartment where everything was clean and well-placed and very elegant, but the woman confessed that she had one room that she kept locked and would not let anyone enter because it was a cluttered mess...and upon sharing that story other people confessed that they too had those messy rooms in their homes where they would not let anyone enter. So it is with us when we invite God into our hearts in prayer; there are things we just want to keep locked away. And so for homework I had you answer two questions:

1. What is it about me that I wish God didn’t see?
2. Who are the people that I have the hardest time loving?

And perhaps the answers to those two questions are related; perhaps the things that you would like to hide from God have to do with you are very judgmental, that you are unwillingness to let go of your hatred for some people. I like Steere's observation that "hate is a prolonged form of suicide." Your feelings toward some people may be those rooms that you don't want to open to God. Because deep down you probably know that God loves the people that you find difficult to love.

And it's difficult for some people to really get it into their heads that GOD CAN LOVE US JUST AS WE ARE. But that's the whole meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection: *"Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love for us. In the name of Jesus Christ YOU ARE FORGIVEN."* You can't possibly confess everything that you've ever done that was wrong, that was sinful, and you don't have too, because GOD HAS FORGIVEN EVERYTHING THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

And it is our faith in that wonderful fact that allows us to become what Paul called "new creations" in Christ Jesus. What does that mean? Well for something to be new, something about the old has to change. I just gave you one example of a change that we experience: we no longer see God as judging us for every little sin we commit; we see that his love has destroyed the power of sin in us and reconciled us to him. In other words WE SEE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IN A NEW LIGHT. THAT IS A MAJOR CHANGE.

But it's not the only change that God wants to make in us. God wants to GIVE US A COMPLETE MAKEOVER, and in order for him to do that we have to ALLOW HIM to do that, and in order to do that we have to see our relationship with him in light of his love, not his judgment. That's step one.

Step two is to INVITE GOD TO TELL YOU WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE IN YOU. YES, THAT'S HARD.

People are judging you to see if you have what it takes to do the job you're applying for. I'm reminded of the cliché where a woman asks her husband, "Does this dress make me look fat?" A husband may answer quite diplomatically, "No dear," but God will be honest. But God's honesty is not intended to hurt you; God's honesty is intended to CHANGE you, to make you better than what you were. You'll never fall outside the arms of God's love, but you will be happier with yourself as you allow God to do that voodoo that he do so well, to make you a new creation, so that every aspect of your life will send the message of God's love and grace to others.

Next week, we'll explore ways that we can remain in that chamber of loving scrutiny for a time so that God can make those changes in us that he so desires to make, and I want to consider

the following question: Have you ever been grateful to God for NOT answering a prayer in a way that you originally hoped he would answer it? And may God draw you into a deeply meaningful prayer life this week.