

Chapter 2

Loving the Real God: Our Foundation of Christology



Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me
(John 14:9 NASB)?

Imagine the sadness that must have been in the Savior's heart as He uttered these words. Picture the scene in the upper room. Jesus' faithful followers surround Him. His closest friends encircle the room. Christ has already experienced the painful distraction of the disciples' argument about who was to be the greatest in the Kingdom. He has vulnerably shared how His body is about to be broken and His blood is about to be shed, only to be met with the dispute of His closest friends (Luke 22:17-26). Then, as a testimony of humble servanthood, Christ takes a basin of water and a towel and begins to wash the feet of each disciple. He washes the feet of Peter, James, John, and even Judas. He washes the feet of His betrayer, extending love and grace to him one final time. During the Passover meal, Christ turns to Judas and says, "What you are about to do, do quickly." Judas then departs to complete the terms of his agreement to betray Christ (John 13:26, 27).

As you revisit this familiar story, pause and reflect upon the heart of the Savior. What might Jesus have been feeling as He experienced the dread of crucifixion and the insensitivity of His disciples' response, and anticipated the imminent betrayal of one of His followers and the departure of His closest friends? What feelings might have been in Christ's heart in the upper room? Has your spirit connected with His Spirit on this level? Have you come to know Him in this way? Now imagine that this



Pause and Reflect

Jesus, my heart is moved with _____
as I encounter Your sorrow in a fresh way.

Now that you have taken the time to pause and reflect upon the heart of Jesus, allowing His Spirit to engage your heart with His, consider this: we, at times, are very much like the disciples we may not know Christ as He really is. We must be open to the possibility that each of us, at times, may be hindered in our view of Christ. As we journey together, we hope that you will be open to seeing Christ more clearly and loving Him more intimately. We pray that your heart might be open to the possibility of knowing Him in ways that are new and fresh.

My Personal Journey

While putting the finishing touches on promotional plans for one of my recent books, I was challenged with a fresh perspective on Christ's declaration of the Great Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37, 39 NASB). I began to ponder, Why am I so often hindered from loving God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength?

My own self-interest and misplaced priorities often caused me to struggle to love the Lord as I desired. But at other times, my love for God was hindered by something deeper: a distorted concept of who He really is. The Spirit impressed upon me the truth that my only hope of fulfilling the first part of the Great Commandment more consistently was to see God more clearly. If I was going to love the real God, I needed to truly know the real God.

God sometimes uses the simplest things in life to teach us great lessons. He gave me liberating insight into who He really is through my

If we are going to love the real God, we need to truly know the real God.

first grandson, Zachary. During Zachary's first several weeks of life, I was amused by Teresa's childish excitement over being with him. When she would hear him waking up from one of his many naps, a smile of joy would light up her face. Her exuberance communicated the message,

He's awake! He's awake, and I am looking forward to playing with him! One morning, after witnessing Teresa's response to Zachary, the Lord surprised me through a devotional reflection on Psalm 139:3:

You . . . are intimately acquainted with all my ways (NASB). As I pondered this passage, the Spirit reminded me that the Psalmist was referring to the special, caring involvement of the Lord in each of our lives. The Lord knows us intimately, and He delights in caring for us. The Holy Spirit seemed to say to me, David, when you wake up in the morning, My heart is filled with excitement over you. Just as Teresa's heart is filled with excitement over Zachary, I rejoice over you! My heart is filled with the same realization in the morning: He's awake! He's awake, and I am looking forward to sharing the day with him!

I was deeply touched by this realization, and the thought of a God who was intimately acquainted with all my ways blessed my heart. This refreshing view of God seemed so different from my previous concept of Him. Through much of my life and ministry, God seemed to say, He's awake, and I am going to watch him closely. At other times, I believed that God's response was, Oh no, he's awake. There's no telling what kind of mischief he will get into today. Occasionally, it was difficult to believe that God even noticed I had woken up at all. The Lord began to sadden my heart as I realized that for many years I had missed knowing the real God and missed His love for me. He began to reveal how my concept of God had hindered my intimate walk with Him and, just as importantly, my love for Him.



An Experience With God's Word

You . . . are intimately acquainted with all my ways (Psalm 139:3 NASB).

He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17).

Imagine the expression that was on the face of Jesus as you woke up this morning. In your mind's eye, picture His kind, gentle eyes and warm, tender smile. Imagine that as you awoke, God looked down and smiled at you, His precious child. With joy in His heart, He announced, I am looking forward to sharing the day with you! The real God, who knows you intimately, could not wait to care for you today. The Creator of the universe, who knows every hair upon your head and sees every tear that you cry, cannot wait to show you how much He loves you. The holy God of heaven knows your darkest secrets and deepest failures; yet because of His relationship with you, He longs to show you grace (Isaiah 30:18).

What does it do to your heart to consider a God who is acquainted with all your ways and longs to be caringly involved in your life? How does your heart respond to the amazing truth that God takes great delight in and rejoices over you?

As I reflect upon the real God, who cannot wait to care for me, I feel _____.

As I consider the real God, who rejoices over me and looks forward to spending the day with me, my heart is filled with _____.

Loving the Real God: Our Foundation of _____

Pause now and say a prayer that communicates your gratitude, humility, and wonder toward the God who knows you and rejoices over you. Pray with a partner or member of your small group.

Heavenly Father, I feel _____ as I reflect upon your heart toward me. Thank you for being the kind of God who _____.

CHRIST: THE CORNERSTONE

As we journey toward relevance in our lives and ministries, we must begin with an assessment of our view of and relationship with Christ the cornerstone of our faith. Scripture reminds us that

No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid,

which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11), and that the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone of our faith (1 Peter 2:7 NKJV). Therefore, we begin our study of Relational Foundations with Christology (the study of Christ). He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the Cornerstone of our foundations.

Our view of God impacts every aspect of our Christian faith.
Every part of our spiritual journey is either hindered or empowered

Throughout this chapter, we will be challenged to assess our view of God, taking a careful look at how we see Him and how we interpret His character and response toward us. As we examine our view of Him, we will make reference to Jesus Christ and God the Father interchangeably. After all, Christ said, Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father and I and the Father are one (John 14:9; 10:30). Finally, it is important to note that this discussion of Christology precedes the other elements of Relational Foundations because our view of God impacts every aspect of our Christian faith. Every part of our spiritual journey is either hindered or empowered by our view of Him.

Our View of God Will Hinder or Empower Our Love for Him.

Trying to sustain an intimate walk with anyone other than the real God will leave us frustrated and empty. We will find that it is easy to love the God who is excited to care for us, but it will be difficult for any view of God that differs from that to inspire love. We will discover that our worship can be hindered if we are trying to relate to anyone other than the real God. Our prayer life may involve more duty and obligation than intimate fellowship and love. If we cannot see the real God, our relationship with Him will have little impact on our lives and our experience of love for Him will be incomplete at best.

Our View of God Will Hinder or Empower Our Ability to Experience His Word.

If we cannot see the real God, we will be hindered in meeting with Him at the point of His Word. Every sermon or Bible lesson is filtered through our concept of God, and any distorted view of Him chokes out the impact of the Word upon our heart. For instance, if you view God as One who is constantly disappointed with you, Scripture may seem to bring only God's criticism. Such a distorted view of God will push you away from a relationship with Him. Similarly, if God seems impersonal or distant, the most glorious spiritual truths may have little impact because you might assume that such truths are only meant for the important people within the body of Christ.

It is difficult to look forward to a devotional time with a god who is judging or condemning. We may be reluctant to read the words of a god who only inspects or criticizes. By contrast, as we come to see the real God, the God who is excited to love us, we will approach His Word with expectation and hope. Hearing, reading, and studying Scripture will become a joyous pleasure not to be missed. We will return to this discussion in Chapter Three in order to further our understanding and experience of this relational approach to God's Word.

Our View of God Will Hinder or Empower Our Love of Other People.
If we cannot see the real God who is love, our ability to demonstrate love will be hindered (1 John 4:8). We will discover that if our god is harsh

and condemning, we may display these same characteristics in our relationships with others. If our god is inspecting and critical, we may easily find fault with others. If our god is distant and remote, we may have a tendency to keep our emotional distance from those around us, or to cling to people as if they are our only hope. But seeing the God who is excited to love us will empower in us an excited love for other people. We will examine our relationships with people more closely in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

Our View of God Will Hinder or Empower Our Heart for Evangelism. If we cannot see the real God, our message to an unbelieving world may be characterized by irrelevance and little effect. We may struggle with being a living epistle of His life and love, focusing more on sharing the Gospel than actually imparting it to others through the example of our life (see 1 Thessalonians 2:7, 8). If we cannot see the real God, we may also struggle to look beyond the sins of others to see their needs. Effective, relevant evangelism will find the followers of Jesus telling stories of the real God's love at work in their lives and hearts. There will be an experience of God's Great Commandment love that empowers a Great Commission lifestyle. We will discuss additional principles of relational evangelism in Chapter Seven.

My Personal Journey

As the Lord began to renew and reshape my view of Him, the Holy Spirit allowed me to see how my previous concept of God had negatively affected many aspects of my life. Having come to Christ after many years of rebellion, I embraced my newfound faith with intensity and enthusiasm. Even as a young adult, I found myself immersed in Bible studies, Scripture memory programs, service at our local church, and ministry in the community. But my hindered view of Christ began to impact each of these areas of my Christian life:

My Love for the Lord

As my walk with the Lord continued, it became increasingly difficult to sustain the initial excitement that followed giving my life to Christ. I knew

that I loved the Lord, but my daily experience of love for Him seemed to diminish.

My Longing for the Word

I made commitment after commitment to have daily devotionals with the Lord, but I felt only defeat as I followed the encouragements I was given to look for sins to avoid and commands to obey. The list of things to do as a follower of Christ and the list of things to avoid seemed to sap my love for His Word.

My Love for Others

Since I tended to view God as inspecting and disappointed, I often took on that same role with the people in my life. Because of my own concept of God, I was careful to point out the sin in the lives of others, believing that it was my job to help them become more like Christ. As a result, my wife had a husband who frequently saw her faults instead of her needs. My children had a father who noticed their misbehaviors but too often ignored their heart. My fellow church members had a friend who gave more advice and spiritual pep talks than care and concern for the struggles of their lives.

My Ability to Effectively Share the Gospel

Finally, because of my hindered concept of God, my efforts to share the Gospel with those outside the church were characterized by subtle and not-so-subtle messages of condemnation. Because my God was mostly concerned with sin, there were times when I focused only upon sin and the need for repentance, with the result that the good news failed to sound very good. While others did come to know Christ as I shared my faith, they often came to see God in much the same way that I had presented Him to

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them. Their view of God often became just as distorted as my own.

Thankfully, as God began to reshape and restore my view of Him, all of these things began to change. My view of people became drastically different. My ability to see the needs and heartfelt concerns of those around me increased, and as I experienced more of God's love for me, I was able to demonstrate more of His love to others.

Join me now in looking at your own concept of God and considering how it might be impacting your relationships with Him and with other people. Allow the Lord to reveal any areas of needed restoration so that He might enrich the relevance of your life and ministry.

ASSESSING OUR VIEW OF GOD

When Christ gave us the Great Commandment in Mark 12:29-31, He actually referenced the Old Testament Shema, the Hebrew call to worship. The Shema begins with a declaration about the God of the Hebrew people: Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One! You shall love the Lord your God . . . (Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 NASB). During Old Testament times, when pagan and idolatrous cultures were the norm and nations frequently worshipped gods of their own making, the first declaration of the Hebrew nation was about the one true God. The Hebrew call to worship clearly defined the One who is worthy of their adoration and loving obedience. We must also notice that before there was a call to love Him, there was a clear declaration of who He is. In much the same way, before we can truly come to love the Lord our God, we must come to see God as He truly is. In essence, this chapter is our own call to worship. We will spend the next few moments giving clearer definition to the real God so that, by seeing Him more clearly, we will gain greater freedom to truly love Him.

Many of us may have never even considered our view of God. We have believed certain things about Him and have never questioned them or been challenged with an alternative. But for the next few moments, we

would like for you to consider how your view of God might differ from who He really is. You may discover that when different people read the same Bible verses, their perceptions and characterizations of God can be quite different.

Read the following verse of Scripture several times. Imagine that Christ is standing before you in the upper room. Listen as He speaks these words. Listen to the inflection of His voice. Where is the emphasis? What tone of voice accompanies these words? What are the subtle implications behind the words you hear?

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments (John 14:15 NASB).

John 14:15 can be an effective assessment tool as we seek to discover our own view of Christ. Now that you have read the verse several times, contemplating the tone of voice and words of emphasis, consider the following possibilities. Can you identify with one of these concepts of God? Does the voice that you heard reflect one of these characterizations of God?

Is Your God an Inspecting God?

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments (John 14:15 NASB).

Some of us view God as an inspecting god. As you read the verse above, you may have imagined a tone of expectation and demand. An inspecting god might raise his eyebrows as he utters the words, If you love me you will keep my commandments. The words might carry a questioning tone, conveying the sense that there is a test to be passed or a measurement to be taken. If you love me, then you'll do what I say! I'll wait and see just how much you really love me. You may have even imagined your inspecting god shaking his finger at you as he speaks these words. His stern tone and gestures warn of his constant inspection.

If we have an inspecting god, it seems as though he is constantly recording what we do on a heavenly tally sheet. Every time we sin or fail to

measure up, he frowns and records it. He may also keep track of things we have done well, but he inspects our every move and relates to us only on the basis of the number of positive and negative tally marks we have accumulated.

If our god is an inspecting god, we may become defensive and consider innocent comments or events to be personal attacks. If we believe that our god is constantly seeking to find fault with us, it is easy to assume that others are doing the same, and thus we may react defensively to anyone who attempts to share their disappointments, or even their needs.

My Personal Journey

I can still recall one of my reactions to Teresa during our early years of marriage. We were driving down the freeway together when she casually pointed out a purple car in the lane next to us. Since her favorite color is purple, her eye was simply drawn to this vehicle. All Teresa said was, "Look, isn't that a pretty car?"

My next thoughts came quickly and gave evidence of how defensive I was about any comments that could be interpreted as critical: "She doesn't like the car we have. She doesn't think we'll ever have a nice car!" My view of God as an inspecting god left me self-protective and somewhat cynical. Since my god was constantly inspecting me, I interpreted Teresa's casual comment as an inspection as well.

If we have an inspecting god, our lives may be filled with an underlying anxiety about the number of tally marks we have been given, and we may be prone to inspecting other people. If our god is closely and suspiciously monitoring our behavior, we may be inclined to do the same to those around us. Our spiritual life may be robbed of gratitude and joy. It is hard to get excited about times of prayer, solitude, or meditation with the Lord if they include a daily inspection. It is hard to experience consistent joy under the scrutiny of an inspecting god.

Is Your God a Disappointed God?

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments (John 14:15 NASB).

Some of us may view God as disappointed in us. As you read the verse above, you may have heard a voice that seemed full of dissatisfaction: If you love me, you will keep my commandments. This kind of god might look down at you with arms crossed, shaking his head as he says, If you really loved me, then you would be able to keep my commandments. In fact, I have known all along that you did not really love me, and what you just did proves it!

If we have a disappointed god, we may live out our Christian faith with a sense that we will never measure up. Our god looks down at us but seldom likes what he sees. He notices our attempts at living a righteous life, but ultimately shakes his head in displeasure. He shrugs his shoulders as he watches us as if he has given up, certain that we will never make it. For this kind of god, no amount of right behavior will ever be good enough.

If our god is disappointed in us, it will be difficult to experience contentment and peace in our spiritual journey. If we believe that we will never measure up, our personal worth will always be in question, and we may strive to perform for God and others in order to feel worthy of their love. If we have a god who is disappointed, we may be inclined to use our own disappointment as a form of coercion. Statements like, You will be at tonight's service, won't you? or I sure hope I can count on you to help in the nursery may permeate our ministry efforts to motivate others. Likewise, an attitude of nothing is ever good enough may pervade our homes and family relationships. If our god is a disappointed god, we may become hard to please, find ourselves driven by perfectionism, or seek to control the things and people around us.

Is Your God a Distant God?

If (you) love Me, (you) will keep My commandments (John 14:15 NASB).

Some of us may see God as a distant god. As you read the verse above, the voice you heard may have seemed cold or disinterested. A distant



Pause and Reflect

Look back over the three characterizations described above. Can you see yourself in any of these descriptions? Can you identify with any of the illustrations? We know that each person's view of God is uniquely their own, and that your view of God may not be described perfectly above, but consider for a moment how you at times might be hindered in seeing God as He really is.

Take time to consider your own view of God. When you are not experiencing Him as excited to love you, how do you see Him? Is your god sometimes inspecting, disappointed, or distant (or defined by some other characteristic that makes it difficult to love him)?

At times, I am hindered from experiencing God as He really is excited to be lovingly involved with me. Instead, I see Him as

_____.

(For example: disappointed in me, distant from me, inspecting me, angry with me, uninterested in me, constantly testing me, or another description of your choice.)

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO HINDERED VIEWS OF GOD

As you have begun to reflect upon your personal view of God, you may have considered some of the same questions that I asked as the Lord

began to reshape my view of Him: How did I come to see God in this way? How did my view of Him become hindered and distorted?

After many years of trying to help others with their concept of God, as well as pursuing a better understanding of my own, the Holy Spirit brought insight into three factors that often contribute to hindered views of God: family relationships, religious experiences, and painful life events

Family Relationships

Both formal research and intuitive thought leads us to the conclusion that family relationships can have a significant impact on our concept of God, particularly during our early, formative years. Positive or painful interactions with caregivers shape our experiences of trust, intimacy, and affection. It is through the lens of these early interactions with family members that we come to view other relationships, including our relationship with God.

There were many aspects of my childhood that shaped my life and concept of God in positive ways, but I have also come to recognize that my view of God as an inspecting god partially grew out of early interactions with my father. As a Marine drill sergeant, my father was a strict disciplinarian, and he carried many of his military traditions into our home. Inspections of closets, clothes, and shoes were commonplace. He even held frequent bed inspections, during which a quarter was flipped onto the bed to see how tightly the bed was made. If the quarter did not bounce high enough, the covers were thrown to the floor and the bed was to be remade. My father had the best of motives he wanted his son to become diligent, dependable, and disciplined but his methods were sometimes painful. My relationship with an inspecting father became connected to my view of an inspecting God. In later years, however, it was a blessing to experience the deepening of an adult friendship with my dad that was actually used by the Lord to help me see God as He really is.



Pause and Reflect

Could aspects of your family relationships have, at times, hindered you from experiencing God as He really is?

At times, I may have been hindered by . . .

Religious Experiences

A second source of my hindered view of God were some of my religious experiences. I became a follower of Jesus at the age of 21, just as the Holy Spirit was ushering in the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and 70s. God allowed me to pass on to others the wonder of His work in my life with great zeal and passion. Over the next few years, He multiplied His blessings in my life and ministry, but I was also frustrated by the challenges of rigid church structures, religiosity, and the pressure to conform. In the midst of these clashes between revival and the status quo, a much more subtle attack was underway.

It was during this time of spiritual renewal that a very popular devotional guide found its way into my hands. With hundreds of thousands of copies sold, this daily devotional became a foundational part of our campus ministry. But looking back, I grieve over the long-term impact of this devotional on my life and the lives of those around me. As we read this devotional day after day, our concept of Christ became tragically distorted. Each devotional reading contained a lengthy Scripture passage followed by three penetrating questions:

1. What sin is to be avoided?
2. What commands are to be obeyed?
3. What now needs to change in your life?

The impact of this devotional was subtle, but severe. I was trained to read the Bible only in order to identify sins, commands, and things that were wrong with my life.

As I look back upon those years, there is no doubt that I needed more of Christ's sanctifying work in my life. But ever so slowly, the wonder of being saved by Christ was replaced by the dread of these daily encounters. The childlike excitement of experiencing the One who wrote the Scripture was being hindered by this approach, which suggested a god who was inspecting and displeased.



Pause and Reflect

Could some of your religious traditions or experiences have, at times, hindered you from seeing Christ as He really is?

At times, I may have been hindered by . . .

Painful Life Events

As we walk through life in a world of tribulation, we inevitably encounter painful events, critical losses, and life-altering traumas (John 16:33). Such events often leave us wondering, Where was God when . . .? If such questions are not sufficiently processed, our hearts are left with unresolved pain and uncertainty. When we are uncertain of God's care or His presence, we are left vulnerable to misconceptions of who He really is.

I have come to realize that my distorted view of God was impacted by certain painful life events. Ironically, one of these events occurred during our family's celebration of the Christmas season. I recognize now that I was going through a time of spiritual stagnation, but life with Teresa and our three children seemed to be going quite well. Our ministry as a couple had even been receiving considerable accolades. But just when I thought that God's exceeding abundance was right around the corner, the bottom fell out.

Our family had just celebrated the purchase of our first, new house. We were able to choose a neighborhood, a lot, and a view that were ideal. We had deliberated over the building plans and carefully chosen the dec-

orations and finishing touches for our home. We even arranged to lease the house for a few months before the actual purchase so that we could celebrate Christmas there. We were grateful for what appeared to be God's blessings. But as we settled into our new home, the financial challenges of our church soon commanded our attention.

I served on the staff of a large church in our city. The church was growing, but was financially overextended in a relocation and construction project. All of the church leaders were shocked when the purchasers of our old facility defaulted on their payment and the loan institution holding the church note went bankrupt. In a matter of a few weeks, 14 ministers lost their jobs. I was among them. My unemployment meant that the purchase of our new home was impossible. We were forced to move out after only a few weeks of residence.

We piled our belongings in the back of a pickup truck, took down the Christmas decorations, and loaded up the presents that had been placed under the tree. Our last trip to the house brought the most tears. In one of the saddest and most telling scenes, my young son, Eric, unplugged the Christmas tree, and we loaded the still-decorated tree onto the truck. Eric and I rode in back with the tree, in order to avoid losing all of the decorations. I remember riding in silence most of the way, not really knowing what to say to my son or my family.

More than any other family member, this life event hit me hard and personally. I struggled with feeling like a failure. I even labeled myself as inadequate because I, as the husband, father, provider, and leader, had not passed inspection.

My self-doubts and disappointment turned to questions about God. Had He not seen this coming? Why did He not stop us from designing, building, and moving into this new house? Why did He allow us to experience this loss and embarrassment? Could God not have provided for His church? Did He not notice how faithful our family had been? How could

He treat us like this? All of these questions stole the blessing of my Christmas that year. Although my family adjusted amazingly well, I still struggled and questioned the heart of God.

As God's plan played itself out, my rational questions that had no answers gave way to a healthier, more relational focus. I still have few answers as to why God allowed these events to occur as they did, but I did encounter the real Jesus in a very special way. My self-doubts and despair gave way to renewed joy and gratitude as I meditated on God's Word. During the last week of December, when Teresa and I typically spend time on goal-setting for the New Year, God led me to the Book of Isaiah. As I meditated on the children of Israel's wilderness journey, I was struck by God's heart toward His people. My heart was gripped by His Spirit as my eyes fixated on His Word: In all their affliction He was afflicted (Isaiah 63:9 NASB).

The real God was afflicted, touched, sorrowed, and saddened by His children's pain. My eyes filled with tears not tears of sadness, but tears of wonder and gratitude for the real Jesus, who noticed and cared. In the midst of my pain, Jesus became Someone who was compassionate, comforting, and understanding. From that moment, everything about that painful time became new. As I will share in later chapters, God brought much good from this difficult circumstance. But none of His subsequent blessings could compare to that moment of encounter with the afflicted heart of a saddened Jesus!



Pause and Reflect

Could certain painful life events have, at times, hindered you from experiencing Christ as He really is?

At times, I may have been hindered by . . .

We hope that you have taken this opportunity to assess your own view of God and reflect on how you might have been hindered in seeing Christ as He really is. It is our prayer that you will continue this journey of knowing Him and experiencing His heart on a daily basis.



An Experience With God's People

Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32).

Consider how you might respond to these questions: How might you be hindered from seeing the real God? How might your hindered view of God have impacted your life and ministry?

I am sometimes hindered in seeing Christ as One who is excited to love me. Instead, I sometimes see Him as ...

(For example: I am sometimes hindered in seeing Christ as One who is excited to love me. Instead, I sometimes see Him as distant and detached.)

I think that this hindered view of Him has impacted my life and ministry in the following ways . . .

(For example: I think that this hindered view of Him has impacted my life and ministry in the following ways: I tend to forget that God is concerned about the details of my life, that He loves me enough to care about the "little things." I also have a tendency to be somewhat detached or distant from other people, especially when I am feeling stressed or overwhelmed.)

Share your responses with your partner or small group. As you hear the responses of others, you will want to communicate your care and concern. Avoid giving advice or spiritual pep talks to one another during this time. Instead, focus upon living out Ephesians 4:32 as you respond with comfort and compassion. Give a response that is kind and tenderhearted. Your response might begin with caring words such as . . .

I am saddened that . . .

I am sorry that you . . .

I regret that . . .

I feel compassion for you because . . .

(For example: I am saddened that you have a distant view of God at times. I was especially saddened when you talked about feeling detached and separated from your kids, or I felt compassion for you as I heard you say that you sometimes view God as disappointed and displeased. My heart hurt for you when I heard you say that you only wished you could please Him.)

After each person has shared their responses to the questions above and received comfort from their partner(s), take a few moments to pray for one another. Ask God to make the prayer of Philippians 3:10 come alive in each person's heart, so that each of you might know Christ in a deep, personal way. Pray that God would reveal His true identity and heart to each person present. Your prayer might sound like the following:

Heavenly Father, I ask that Your Holy Spirit might reveal the true identity of Jesus to my brother/sister in Christ. May he/she come to know the real God the One who is excited to love him/her. Please remove any mistaken view of who You are, in order that he/she might know You and the love of Your heart. It is in Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

KNOWING THE REAL CHRIST

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments (John 14:15 NASB).

Now that we have assessed our view of God, let us go back to our Scripture passage in John 14:15. We have seen that our God is not an inspecting, disappointed, or distant god. If each of these views is inaccurate, then how would the real Christ speak the words of this verse? To

find our answer, we must go back to the context of the passage. The fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of John took place in the upper room, where Jesus began to comfort and prepare the disciples for His upcoming death and departure. It was a sacred time of tender care from the Savior toward His followers.

Christ began to reassure His followers with several promises: Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you (John 14:1, 2). Next, Jesus gave the promise of His return: I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going (v. 3). The Savior went on to make a promise about all that they would do as a result of their faith in Him. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father (v. 12). Finally, notice the verse immediately preceding our Scripture of interest: If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it (v. 14 NASB). This, too, is a verse of promise. Now, pause and reread John 14:15 as it was intended as a promise for every believer. If you love me, you will keep my commandments!

It was within the context of this list of promises that Jesus made the declaration of John 14:15. This verse is a promise that was meant to bring reassurance, blessing, and security to our hearts. Indeed, Christ might have smiled and proclaimed the certainty of this connection: If you love me you will keep my commandments. If you and I have a love relationship with one another, you will keep the commandments. It will happen. I promise. When you woke up this morning, Jesus was not checking to see if you were keeping His commandments in order to prove your love. Rather, He was longing for you to love Him, knowing that as you do, you will keep His command-

The real Christ is not inspecting, disappointed, or distant. He is excited to love us, and longs for us to share in His love!

ments! This is the same promise that Paul relates to the church at Galatia when he reminds them, So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:16). The real Christ is not inspecting, disappointed, or distant. He is excited to love us, and longs for us to share in His love!

The real Christ is attentive and caring, sensitive and compassionate. He does not have a tally sheet in heaven, and is not too preoccupied to care about each of us individually. He is not detached or distant, disappointed or displeased. In fact, Christ, the Savior of the world, wants a relationship with us! The real Christ wants to be close, intimate friends with you and me. He is excited when we wake up in the morning, and cannot wait to talk with us and relate to us. He is delighted to know us and be with us. The real Christ generously and graciously gave up His life because He could not bear the thought of eternity without you. He is pleased with you because He sees you with the eyes of a Master Creator, One who admires His handiwork and values each of His treasures because they are unique and wonderful. Of course, the real God is also holy, without spot or blemish, and His plan is that, out of our deep love for Him, we would live out His commands. For this reason, He has sent His Spirit to empower us with His holy life and abundant love. This is the character of the real Christ, the One to whom we have the privilege and honor to relate.



Pause and Reflect

What does it do to your heart to consider that the real Jesus desires a love relationship with you?

As I come to see Christ as One who longs for me to share in His love, my heart is touched with

—.

(For example: As I come to see Christ as One who longs for me to share in His love, my heart is touched with gratitude, humility, and deepened love.)

Can you imagine the joy that is possible as we are able to experience the love of the real Christ? Our life can overflow with gratitude and love. Our worship will be meaningful and fulfilling as we celebrate the special relationship with our trusted Friend. Our prayers will be more than an obligatory routine; they will be filled with expressions of thanksgiving, faithfulness, and vulnerable need as the Spirit prompts and empowers us. The life we live will become more and more His life as we walk worthy of our high calling in Christ, fulfilling the challenge to be holy as He is holy (Ephesians 4:1; 1 Peter 1:16). As we experience the love of the real Christ, our ability to love others will increase through the empowerment of the Spirit. Our ministry will be characterized by grateful service instead of compulsion or dutiful obligation. Finally, as we come to experience the love of the real Christ, our lives and ministries will reflect the heart of God. We will begin to look more like Him, and as our appearance changes, we will bring Him the glory of which He alone is worthy (2

Corinthians 3:18).

Reshaping Our View of God

Many of you may be asking a critical question at this point in our journey together: I have come to realize that my view of God may need some reshaping; I cannot always see the real God clearly. But how do I go about removing the hindrances to seeing Him clearly? What can I do to reshape my view of Him?

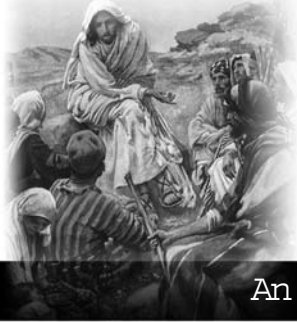
Scripture again gives us insight into the loving and abundant provision of God as the psalmist declares, *In your light we see light* (Psalm 36:9). Our view of Him is reshaped as we look beyond our human experience and life events toward the light that only He can give. It is God's light that reveals who He really is, and while God certainly reveals Himself in creation and circumstances, much of His light comes through relationships. God reveals His true identity through the testimony of His Son, through the revelation of His Word, and through the love of His people. You may recognize these three elements of transformation as the road signs we encountered in Chapter 1, but we might also describe them as three sources of light.

The Light of God's Son

Jesus boldly proclaimed that He is the light of the world (John 8:12), so as we encounter the real Jesus and experience His love, we experience one source of His transforming light. And when we have seen the real Jesus, we have seen the real God (14:9).

The Light of God's Word

When we walk in the light of God's Word, we experience a second source of His transforming power. Psalm 119:105 makes it known that His Word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. As we experience God's Book and are drawn into a deepened relationship with Him, we see Him for who He really is. Our concept of God is reshaped as the Holy Spirit leads us into a deepened love relationship with the God of Scripture. We come to find that His Word is living and active, bringing transformation as we encounter Him at the point of His Word (Hebrews 4:12).



An Experience With God's Son

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him (Luke 15:20).

The well-known story of the prodigal son gives us a picture of the real God. The most gripping scene in this biblical account finds the father waiting for his wayward son. He scans the horizon day after day, straining his eyes and hoping to catch a glimpse of his son the son who demanded an early inheritance, ran away from home, and squandered every cent his father had so graciously given him.

Before you read the familiar story of the prodigal son and his father, please take a moment to reflect on your own life. Do you have anything in common with the prodigal?

Has there ever been a time when you have made selfish demands? It could be as subtle as preoccupation with your own plans, agenda, and goals, or as overt as manipulating others or pursuing iron-fisted control. Have you made demands of the Lord, hoping for Him to meet your needs in your time and your way instead of His?

When faced with difficulties and challenges, the prodigal son tried to take care of things himself. Has your own self-reliance ever led you to foolishly conclude that you could take care of it? Have you ever minimized your need for God or other people because of a mistaken conclusion that you are better off on your own?

The wayward son also discounted his own worth to his father. Have you ever questioned your worth to your heavenly Father, thus allowing self-condemnation to rob you of joy and passion for the Lord? Have you mistak-

only concluded that you are not worth the loving care of the Father?

Finally, have you, like the prodigal, fallen victim to a lifestyle of poor choices and pain-filled consequences? Have you been in places that you should not have been? Have you been demanding toward those you love rather than giving honor to them? Have you squandered precious things? Have you made life choices that you regret?

Even now, as you read the story of the prodigal and his father, allow the Lord to sensitize your heart to the real God. Spend some time meditating on this passage of Scripture. Ponder not only the story itself, but also the ways in which the heart of the Lord is revealed through the story.

Picture in your heart this man who has selfishly taken from his father and wasted all he was given. He finds himself feeding pigs, and eventually comes to question his own value and worth. Then he decides to go home. Picture him walking along dusty, winding roads. Finally, he turns the last corner toward home and catches a glimpse of the livestock in the distance. For a moment, imagine that this prodigal is not just any prodigal. The prodigal is you. You are returning home; you see your former residence in the distance.

Now allow the Holy Spirit to lead you in experiencing the testimony of God's grace. Experience afresh the power of God's love for each of us, which is revealed in Luke 15:20, when the father sees the prodigal: But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Imagine that Christ is waiting for you to return home. When He sees you in the distance, He is moved with compassion in spite of your selfishness, pride, condemnation, and sin, and He runs toward you. He leaps quickly, anxiously off the front porch because he cannot wait to see you. He embraces you, kisses you, and whispers in your ear. He does not offer lectures or criticism. There is no rebuke or scold. His voice is filled with

compassion as He embraces you. There is a ring, a robe, and the announcement of a party. The real God welcomes you with outstretched arms, ready to embrace you and excited to love you!

Let God now fill your heart with gratitude for the grace that you have received. Ask Him to bring you back often to a time of fresh reflection upon the grace of the embracing Christ. Pray that He would fill you with wonder and gratitude for His care that would compel you to love those around you.

Spend the next few moments praying with your partner or small group. You might offer a prayer of gratitude and then one of calling. Your prayers might sound like the following:

A prayer of gratitude Fill my heart, Holy Spirit, with the wonder of an embracing, celebrating Christ; may my joy and gratitude for being so loved empower my love of others.

A prayer of calling I sense your calling, heavenly Father, to love others around me with this same caring initiative. Make my heart especially sensitive to passing on your love to my _____ (for example: husband, wife, child, friend, family member, or co-worker).



For Further Study

EXPERIENCING CHRIST: THE KEY TO SIGNIFICANT LIFE CHANGES

Jesus was often misunderstood and misrepresented during His time on Earth, just as He is today. But the New Testament reveals that many people experienced significant positive changes in their lives when they encountered the real Jesus.

We pray that the following Scripture passages might be used by the Lord to renew hope and excitement in specific areas of your life. Approach each passage prayerfully, asking the Spirit to encourage and impact your heart. Notice the dramatic life changes that occurred as these 1st century followers encountered the Savior.

From Self-Preoccupation to Glorifying Praise (See Luke 17:11-19.)
The Samaritan leper referenced in this text experienced a significant transformation: rather than single-mindedly focusing on his own life (including his miraculous healing and his hope for restoration to his family and community), he returned to relate to Jesus the One who had given those blessings. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked Him (v. 16), and as a result, Christ affirmed him as one who brought praise to God (v. 18). There may be no greater life or ministry objective than this: to bring praise and honor to God!

Read a related passage in John 17:1-3, then pause to listen as His Spirit floods your heart with reminders of your own manifold blessings. Allow the Spirit to lead you into a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to the One who gives these blessings.

From Denial to Bold Witness (See Matthew 26:69-75 and Acts 2:14-41.)

Peter's transformation from one who fearfully denied Christ to one who courageously witnessed at Pentecost gives evidence of his encounters with the real Jesus. We witness Peter's brokenness and tears of contrition when he looked into the eyes of Jesus immediately following the denial (Luke 22:61). We see how Christ took special notice of Peter after the Resurrection (Mark 16:7), and how He restored and commissioned him at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:15-22). These encounters with the real Jesus helped prepare Peter to receive the divine empowerment of the Spirit that enabled him to boldly witness to the resurrected Christ on the day of Pentecost: Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd . . . and about three thousand were added to their number that day (Acts 2:14-41).

Pause now and ask the Lord to bring additional boldness to your own life. Pray that He would reveal His special care for you, perhaps even in the midst of your own denial or abandonment of Him. Ask Him to show you how He takes special notice of you. Pray that His Spirit would bring any needed restoration to your life and ministry, empowering you with the same transforming power that Peter received.

From Skepticism to Service (See John 3:1-21; 19:38-42.)
Nicodemus probably would not have been voted most likely to believe based on his encounter with Jesus (John 3:1-21). This Pharisee may have felt fearful, unsure of himself, concerned about his future, embarrassed, or insecure as he waited until dark to approach the Savior (v.2). Within the safety of darkness, Nicodemus posed the question, "How can a man be born again?" and in so doing, revealed the uncertainties and misunderstandings of his heart. Christ patiently addressed the leader's questions, revealing His desire to bring change to this man's heart and life: "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (v. 7, 8).

Something about this encounter with Christ piqued the curiosity of this

religious leader. We do not hear about his immediate conversion following that evening discussion, but we do read of Nicodemus after Christ's death. We cannot be sure how often Nicodemus listened to the Master as He spoke to the crowds. We do not know how often he may have witnessed the miracles of Christ or sensed the Messiah's compassion. We do know, however, that these encounters must have occurred because Nicodemus' life was transformed. Perhaps he heard Christ cry out at Calvary: Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34). Nicodemus might have overheard Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross: Today you will be with me in paradise (v. 43). Or maybe he heard Christ's declaration of faith upon His death: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (v. 46).

We can be certain that something was changed inside of Nicodemus because the same man who was afraid to go to Jesus during the light of day boldly approached Pilate, asking for permission to bury Jesus' body. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus took the body away, brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, wrapped the body and the spices in strips of linen, and laid Jesus in the tomb (John 19:38-42). The one who had approached Christ in secrecy and uncertainty was now apparently willing to be identified with Him.

Pause now and consider any uncertainties or questions in your own heart. Have you, like Nicodemus, been afraid to boldly identify yourself with Christ? Have you been fearful, embarrassed, reluctant, skeptical, or insecure? Ask the Holy Spirit to empower you with the same power that transformed the life of Nicodemus. Ask Him to make the changes inside of you that prompted the bold steps of this religious leader. May the Spirit lead you to serve the Savior in courageous ways!

From Knowing Scripture to Experiencing Scripture
(See Luke 24:13-35.)

The disciples who walked along the Emmaus Road were certainly famil-

iar with Scripture; they knew the Word of God. We know that these disciples rationally embraced the truths of the Messiah because they made their way to Golgotha during the Passover. They were among the crowd who saw Christ's torture and crucifixion. Yet Scripture tells us that they were kept from recognizing him (Luke 24:16).

It is important to notice that Christ did not leave them in this state of knowing Scripture, but missing Him. The Gospel recalls that, Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (v. 27). As Christ seized the initiative to reveal Himself, transformation took place in the lives of these disciples: Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us (v. 32)?

How long has it been since your heart burned within as the Spirit revealed the Son through His Word? Perhaps it has been too long. Pause now and ask the Lord to meet you in His Word, bringing revelation and life. Ask Him to join you often and open the Scriptures to you, making them come alive by His Spirit. (Further discussion and emphasis will be placed upon this topic in Chapter Three.)

For additional study (personally or in a small group), consider the following Scripture passages, which speak of the revealed Christ and the lives He transformed:

John 11:17-36 (Christ's compassionate response to Mary, Lazarus' sister, makes an impact upon the unbelieving Jews.)

Luke 10:38-42 (Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, giving priority to listening to Him.)

John 4:4-42 (The woman at the well brings others to Christ.)

Luke 19:1-10 (A tax collector's priorities are transformed.)



Additional Resources

Judson Cornwall, *Let Us Worship* (So. Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publications, 1983).

Rob Currie, *Hungry for More of God* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003).

Ron Owens, *Return to Worship: A God-Centered Approach* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999).

Alan D. Wright, *Lover of My Soul: Delighting in God's Passionate Love* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1998).