

Beauty Not
B E H E L D

A Daily Guard Against the Lies of Self-Love Culture

Paige McBride

Foreword by Carl Trueman

Beauty Not Beheld: A Daily Guard Against the Lies of Self-Love Culture

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*To sisters, Emily and Grace, and to my dear friend Caelan.
May we all learn to see the world through the eyes of God.*

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FOREWORD

Carl Trueman

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A Word On
BEAUTY

“**W**omen hate their bodies more than ever before,” reported skincare company Dove in their 2016 global survey on self-image¹. The study questioned more than 10,500 women in 13 different countries between the ages of 10 and 60 and concluded that low body-confidence has become—quite literally—a pandemic. Interviewees were convinced that the unrealistic standards in the media are responsible for the issue. They felt that women were under pressure to conform to oppressive and unattainable beauty ideals. Dove was determined to use their platform to fight against these self-demeaning beauty standards and usher in a new age of self-love and body-confidence.

Dove is not the only voice in this movement, nor has the trend shifted since 2016. In fact, in 2021, this topic continues to be the major focus of most female influencers. Powerful women around the globe are banding together to protest these unrealistic standards and are

¹ *The Dove Global Beauty and Confidence Report, 2016.*

calling women to embrace their own definition of beauty. To quote a few among the many:

“Self-esteem comes from being able to define the world in your own terms and refusing to abide by the judgment of others.”²

-*Oprah Winfrey*

“I love the philosophy of just accepting who you are and just being happy...You define your worth! Don’t ever give anyone else that much power over yourself...Less judgment—more dynamic, unbiased self love.”³

-*Khloé Kardashian*

“I have my own definition of what I think is beautiful and sexy.”⁴

-*Selena Gomez*

“Your self-worth is determined by you. You don’t have to depend on someone telling you who you are.”⁵

-*Beyoncé*

² Oprah Winfrey, “What I Know For Sure.” *Oprah.com*, July 19, 2008. <https://www.oprah.com/omagazine/what-i-know-for-sure-oprah-winfrey/all>, accessed January 5, 2022.

³ Khloe Kardashian, cited by Samantha Schnurr. “Khloe Kardashian Reveals How She Found Self-Love and Acceptance.” *E!*, March 14, 2016. <https://www.eonline.com/news/748300/khloe-kardashian-reveals-how-she-found-self-love-and-acceptance>, accessed January 5, 2022.

⁴ Selena Gomez, cited by Rachel Heinrichs. “November Cover Star Selena Gomez: ‘I Feel in Control.’” *Flare*, *FashionMagazine.com*, October 1, 2015. <https://fashionmagazine.com/flare/november-cover-star-selena-gomez-i-feel-in-control/>, accessed January 5, 2022.

⁵ *Beyoncé*, cited by Peter Economy. “17 of the Most Inspirational Quotes From Beyoncé—Business Genius and Music Superstar.” *Inc.com*, June 4, 2019. <https://www.inc.com/peter-economy/17-of-most-inspirational-quotes-from-beyonce-business->

The common thread is clear: Largely, culture's response to the conundrum of poor self-image is exhorting women to forget other people's opinions and standards and create their own. In other words, culture wants to remind women, "*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!* So don't let some beholders get you down, you are the true and only important beholder!" This sentiment sounds empowering at first glance, but the results don't corroborate. Since this study in 2016, the number of voices chanting womens' empowerment have grown, and yet so has the number of women who hate the way they look and even hate themselves. Maybe it's time women turn to the Scriptures for their answers instead of their favorite celebrities.

If we really want to debunk all this, we need to get a bit philosophical. Are you ready? I promise I'll be quick. The popular view of beauty today is what philosophers call *aesthetic relativism*. In other words, **beauty is determined by the one perceiving it; it is subjective**. Beauty is believed to be located within the person looking, not within the so-called "beautiful" object. For example, when you gaze at the sunset, beauty is the experience you have as you gaze; it is not an attribute of the sky itself. Beauty is experienced by the *subject* (the person); it is not something in the *object* (the sky). Beauty is not inherent in the sky, it is within your enjoyment of that sky. Therefore, beauty is relative to the person perceiving it; it is subjective beauty, not objective beauty.

If beauty is purely subjective, then there is no arguing over what is beautiful and what is not because beauty is only related to personal

genius-music-superstar.html, accessed January 5, 2022.

preference. You cannot argue over preference. By saying beauty is purely subjective—merely a matter of preference— we make it impossible to critically evaluate beauty. If someone says you are ugly, you cannot argue it. You just have to accept that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and this beholder sees none of it in you. But if beauty is objective, then there is open discussion of whether something is beautiful or not. In fact, when someone says that you are not beautiful, you do not have to surrender and say, “Well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so I guess they’re right.” No! An objective beauty allows you to actually argue that you are beautiful even if that person doesn’t realize it. You cannot argue over preferences. You can only argue over facts. As long as we insist on subjective beauty, we will make it logically impossible to defend beauty when others do not see it. This is the standard way of thinking about beauty today.

If you Google the definition of beauty this is what you will find: “a combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that *pleases the aesthetic senses*, especially the sight.”⁶ Dictionary.com defines it this way: Beauty is “the quality present in a thing or person that gives intense *pleasure or deep satisfaction* to the mind, whether arising from sensory manifestations (as shape, color, sound, etc.), a meaningful design or pattern, or something else.”⁷ Finally, Merriam-Webster defines beauty as “the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that *gives pleasure* to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind

6 Google, s.v. “beauty,” accessed January 12, 2022, <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>. Google’s English dictionary is provided by Oxford Languages.

7 Dictionary.com, s.v. “beauty,” accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/beauty>.

or spirit.”⁸ What is the common thread in all of these definitions? Beauty is about pleasure. It is about pleasing ourselves. This ideology is not completely misguided; true beauty *does* bring about pleasure. That is why beauty is so powerful. The problem is that we often fail to enjoy that which will ultimately give us the *most* pleasure. Our sinful selves tend to trade in true pleasure and exchange it for a fleeting sense of satisfaction or titillation. So connecting beauty with pleasure is not incorrect, but to only recognize a subjective element in beauty fails to recognize the objective reality of beauty. In fact, we would likely experience a lot more pleasure when confronting beauty if we embraced its objective nature. Unfortunately, most today only understand beauty in subjective terms (what they feel), and therefore, diminish it to only a matter of preference.

What makes this view so appealing to women today is that an experience of beauty can be neither correct nor incorrect, neither right nor wrong. All preferences of beauty are considered equally valid; it is only in arrogance and judgment that someone can say that another should find one object more beautiful than another, let alone one body more beautiful than another! You can’t tell people how to feel and what to like, they have the right to their own preferences and opinions. Society’s standards and expectations are just the opinions of a few powerful people.

However, they should not control you. You can define beauty on your own terms. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and *you* are the most

⁸ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “beauty,” accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beauty>.

important beholder in your life. So don't let anyone tell you how to feel when you look in the mirror! This is the type of thinking that dominates our cultural imagination today.

So what's the point of getting all philosophical? Well, this relative definition of beauty sounds great at first—it seems to promise that people cannot impose their view of beauty upon others to shame them—but the logical implications of this statement are actually quite troubling. The relative definition of beauty fails to deliver on its promises in three major ways:

Relativism makes beauty and ugliness morally unimportant.

Relativism leads to debilitating narcissism.

Relativism gives people too much power and therefore cannot foster tolerance nor diversity.

1. *Relativism makes beauty and ugliness morally unimportant.*

If beauty is merely a matter of preference, then so is ugliness. But this makes us more uncomfortable, especially in extreme cases. Most sensible people would agree that morbid images and child pornography are ugly and they would look down on others who find them enjoyable. Why? Because there is something that tells us that the image itself is ugly—objectively ugly. It's not a matter of opinion; it's not up for debate. This phenomenon is similar to the case of moral relativism. People are fine with certain moral discrepancies and they will say “you have a right to your opinion” until you say, for example, you believe

the Holocaust was morally good. They would respond in anger and proclaim that you are evil, and rightly so. Turns out, they cannot let morality be merely a matter of opinion in every case. So where does the line get drawn between moral issues that are non-negotiable and moral issues which are up for grabs? Similarly, where is the line drawn between which beauty preferences are just matters of opinion and those beauty preferences which are condemnable? Relative beauty does not allow us to evaluate beauty because it makes beauty a matter of mere preference. We cannot condemn anyone's opinion that something is beautiful, because if they find pleasure in it—even if we find it disgusting or repugnant—it is, by their definition, beautiful. You cannot make any judgment calls on a person's beauty preferences. If they like pornography, then it is beautiful and you cannot tell them otherwise. But there comes a point when we are uncomfortable with someone saying that something is beautiful that we *know* is unarguably ugly. We have a deep sense in our hearts that what the person prefers, what that person enjoys, what they find beautiful, is miserably wrong. In fact, we sense that they have committed some sort of sin in enjoying that ugly thing. They might find pleasure in it, but they ought to be shamed for doing so. Just because they enjoy pornographic images of a child, doesn't mean that the images are beautiful. Why do we think that? Because deep down we do have a sense of *objective beauty*. Objective beauty insists that some things are in and of themselves beautiful, and some things are in and of themselves ugly. It is not up for debate (just like the moral evaluation of the Holocaust is not up for debate). If aesthetics become completely relative, completely a matter of opinion, then beauty becomes basically meaningless.

Turns out, when we look a little deeper, relative beauty does not fully account for what we know about beauty and ugliness.

2. Relativism leads to debilitating narcissism.

The second danger of aesthetic relativism is that it locks you in a cage of self-introspection. It forces you to fixate on yourself because it puts the locus of truth within yourself. Not only is this not biblical, but it allows us to live in the delusion that what we think and feel determines reality. So if you do not like what you see when you look in the mirror, you are ugly. The only way to “be beautiful” is to *see yourself as beautiful*. Beauty itself is not really a thing, it is only the perception of a thing. The only hope for the relativist is to convince themselves that what they naturally think is ugly is actually beautiful. They have to force themselves to feel differently when they look in the mirror. This, therefore, leads to a constant focus on the self and its feelings. The task becomes quite worrisome and seemingly hopeless when we try to convince ourselves that every blemish and wrinkle is beautiful. It is an endless cycle of trying to like what we see. Beauty is only there when we feel it, right? Well, we all know that our feelings are like roller coasters. If our body-image is completely dependent on our feelings, it will be forever unstable. We will never win the battle. We will wake up day by day and relive this unstable cycle all over again. We must be endlessly devoted to *feeling* good about ourselves, because *being* beautiful is equivalent to *feeling* beautiful when beauty is only subjective. Rather than conforming our feelings to reality, we seek to conform reality to our feelings. It’s exhausting and sadly ineffective.

3. Relativism gives people too much power, and therefore, cannot foster tolerance nor diversity.

Finally, the last issue with relativism is that it cannot deliver on its promises of tolerance and diversity because it grants people the power to define reality. While it might seem nice to be able to define beauty for yourself, relativism does not account for our inordinate craving for acceptance and our deep seated desire to be seen as beautiful and significant. So even if we end up achieving our goal of believing we are beautiful, we are soon empty again because we do not just want to think we are pretty, we want *others* to think we are pretty. And therefore, relativism drags us helplessly into people-pleasing. This may explain why, although women are claiming to only want to be beautiful on their own terms, many girls end up trying to look strikingly similar to the people recognized as beautiful or attractive in the media and by men. We are so desperate to be seen and loved, that we end up conforming. If people determine what is beautiful, we will always end up bowing down to people. If beauty is completely a matter of being seen by other people, then we will not be convinced that we are beautiful until we are seen as such. But we know this is not right. A gorgeous, sublime waterfall that has never been seen by one person in all of history is still beautiful. It's beauty is not dependent on being seen. It is beautiful whether or not people notice it. That seems obviously true to us. But a relative definition of beauty gives people all the power when it comes to what is beautiful. And therefore, if no person sees that waterfall and takes pleasure in that waterfall, it is not beautiful. But that can't be right!

For all the empty promises of tolerance and diversity, relative beauty has left us in a culture where women are obsessed with appearance, trends, pictures, and “feeling empowered,” and yet are somehow more insecure than ever before. Not only does relativism create philosophical and theological issues, *it does not help*. It may be time to consider a new avenue of action. We need to define beauty biblically. Maybe we will find that the Bible does a better job of making sense of our encounter with beauty than we can.

So this is the conundrum of defining beauty: *We need a definition of beauty that accounts for the inherent quality of beauty in an object* (therefore it is not a matter of opinion and does not depend on people seeing it) but that *also accounts for the fact that beauty is related to individual perception and pleasure in an important way*. In fewer words, it seems right that our definition of beauty has both an objective and a subjective part. It is clear that beauty has something to do with pleasure. But that cannot be the only defining factor, otherwise we will be in the predicament we just spoke of. How can the Bible help us understand beauty as both a matter of fact and a personal experience?

In Genesis 1, God “*saw*” that his creation was good. Notice here, that “good” is not a matter of preference—at least not biblically speaking. Good and evil aren’t matters of opinion. Goodness is an absolute. God perceived something inherently good within his creation; he saw an *objective* good. But it wasn’t his “seeing” that made it good. It was good on its own, completely independent of his perception. His “seeing” was just an experience of that good. But we also take note

that the verbiage that “*God saw*” connects the goodness of creation with a certain perceptual satisfaction and pleasure. This means that the beauty of the creation and the perception of that beauty are indeed intimately connected. It links the objective quality of beauty in a thing with our enjoyment when encountering it.

Psalm 19 says that “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). In this text, creation functions as an instrument of revelation and communication. Created things have a God-ordained way of revealing the greatness of God. Here we find a biblical definition of beauty: ***the ability of a thing to communicate truth and/or realize goodness.*** A beautiful thing is that which communicates some sort of truth to us or reveals goodness to us in a vivid way. Creation is beautiful because it is a physical form that communicates something true and good about God. And this makes sense of why the human being is “good”: the physical form of human beings is an effective communicator of the glory of God. You heard this before: we are his image. A song is rightly called beautiful, because certain sounds and melodies have a way of getting us in touch with transcendence. We cannot put it into words, but we know that the song is beautiful. This definition of beauty is objective, because the ability to reflect truth and goodness is *not* a matter of opinion. You can do it well or poorly. Things can be objectively ugly: they communicate a distortion of God’s goodness. It doesn’t matter if someone receives pleasure from morbid images, they are condemned in doing so because beauty is not a matter of opinion. The images are not beautiful; they are ugly. And that person looking at them is delighting in that ugliness, which is the essence of sin. So

the Bible maintains an objective definition of beauty that makes it meaningful and incredibly important.

But this definition also reminds us that beauty has an essentially communicative role, a perceptual purpose if you will. It is a way to reveal goodness and that is why it gives us so much pleasure. When we consider why people have such a wide variety in what they find beautiful, we realize that this is not because beauty is just a matter of opinion, but that it is because beauty communicates something infinite: God's goodness. Beauty is not just objective, it is transcendently objective. Therefore, from the many different places and perspectives human beings gaze, they find the glory of God revealed in manifold ways. This accomplishes what relative beauty wants to accomplish: diversity in beauty. When someone sees something truly beautiful that you do not notice, they do not just have a different opinion than you do, they are perceiving a part of the divine goodness that you have yet to enjoy. Therefore, it is an obligation for the Christian to contemplate the beautiful things recognized from different peoples, cultures, and places, for it is our duty to enjoy the manifold glory of our God.

The Christian church cannot be silent on this issue. For many believers, relative beauty has passed off as a “loving” approach, and because of that, many Christians have accepted this movement uncritically; however, a closer look reveals that relative beauty is not loving at all. It is fundamentally anti-biblical, and therefore, it should not surprise us that it has been ineffective. *Aesthetic relativism is not the antidote to our problem of self-image, but more likely the cause of*

it. What if the biblical view of objective beauty would provide women with a healthy self-image while also nurturing an environment of true diversity and acceptance among all women? What if we left behind the creed that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!” and what if we pursued the Bible’s doctrine of a beauty that is not dependent on the eyes of flawed beholders? What if we pursued the courageous mission of perceiving the beauty rarely seen: the beauty not beheld? Let’s dive in.

W E E K O N E

The

P E R C E I V E D

Self

Where It
ALL BEGAN

What They
TELL YOU:

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!”

READ GENESIS 1



What God
TELLS YOU:

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

GENESIS 3:6

If we want to understand identity and beauty in a biblical way, we must start at the very beginning. All throughout the creation narrative, we hear the repetition of God's satisfaction in his handiwork. Each day's creative work is bookended with two repeating statements. They go on as if a drum beat throughout the whole narrative: "And God said..." then "And God saw..." "And God said..." then "And God saw."

First, God's word is creating, and then his eyes are evaluating. In other words, his command brings something out of nothing, and his perception beholds that the "something" is good. Not one creation is made without the command of his word, and not one creation is left without his gaze of affirmation. One design after the next, without fail, we read, "and *God saw* that it was good." This all crescendos on the sixth day as God reflects on the entirety of his work and this time with all the more emphasis. We hear the pattern begin "and *God saw* everything that he had made..." but we are brought to a pause, a breaking of the pattern, and are commanded: "*behold*" (Genesis 1:31).

It is almost as if the author gives us a moment to try to look through the eyes of God so we too can affirm with him in his last evaluation, not just that creation is good, but that it is “very good” (Genesis 1:31). It is an invitation to bask in the creation through the eyes of God. We are offered the opportunity to look and enjoy alongside the King.

We do well to reflect on the importance of these repeated statements. Clearly, Moses wants us to understand something about *God’s word* (his creative power) and *his eyes* (his evaluation). Moses wants us to know that they are *authoritative*. Only God can create by his word and evaluate through his eyes. Of course, these are metaphorical ways of illustrating God’s power and perception. He does not have a physical mouth to speak words and physical eyes to see things, but these metaphors vividly describe God’s authority to create and evaluate. God creates by the authority of his “mouth” and he perceives and evaluates that creation through the authority of his “eyes.” This connects God’s role as the only Creator to his role as the only Judge. Just as he is the only one with the ability to call things into existence by his word, he is the only one who is ultimately able to judge and declare something “good.” Our text wants to pound the phrases, “And God said...And God saw,” “And God said...And God saw,” “And God said...And God saw” into our minds as if to set the tempo for the following chapters. Because the next time this “said/saw” couplet reappears, there is a new mouth and new set of eyes, neither of which have the authority of God’s mouth and God’s eyes. Hebrew literature clues you into the significance of an idea by repeating certain phrases or by clearly breaking those established patterns. So it is in Genesis 1 and 3. In

chapter 1, we are confronted repeatedly with the God who speaks and sees, and then all of the sudden in chapter 3 we encounter, for the first time, a new voice speaking and a new set of eyes seeing. The authority of the mouth of God is challenged by a new opponent: “*Did God actually say...?*” (Genesis 3:1). The invitation to “behold” alongside God is usurped by a new pair of eyes which see contrary to the eyes of God. This challenge to God’s unique ability to create and evaluate is a challenge to his authority. May we carefully consider the consequences of the tempter speaking as if to have the mouth of authority—like the mouth of the God of chapter 1—and a woman who becomes convinced she can authoritatively evaluate things as “good”—like the eyes of the God of chapter 1.

Upon the entrance of this crafty serpent character, it seems as though the tempo set in Genesis 1 and 2 begins to slow down. The song of creation takes an ominous turn. Adam and Eve’s ears perceive a new voice as they confront one whose words question the authoritative word of God we remember from Genesis 1. This is our first clue that something is about to go miserably wrong. At first, the woman seems fairly unmoved by the crafty serpent’s attempt, but her fall comes swiftly. The slowly fading tempo that began in Genesis 1 comes to a screeching halt and is replaced with a disturbing dissonance. Verse 6 of chapter 3 completes the “said/saw” couplet that was begun by the serpent whose mouth *speaks* contrary to God and concluded by eyes which *saw* contrary to God. The result is a fatal perversion and departure of the original “said/saw” statements of chapter 1: “the

woman *saw* that the tree was good for food” (Genesis 3:6), even though this was the very tree God said would bring death (Genesis 2:17).

This is the first time someone other than God “sees” (evaluates) creation. This is significant. We remember the invitation of chapter 1 to “behold” alongside God, but what is alarming here is that Eve’s evaluation of the fruit flies directly in the face of God’s designation of the tree as dangerous. It is not at all like the invitation in chapter 1 to “behold” as God beholds. Rather, what God saw as bad for Eve, she now *sees* as good. Based on the unauthoritative words of the deceiver, Eve makes what she believes to be an authoritative evaluation of the fruit, rather than accepting God’s authoritative word, and submitting her eyes to his vision of the good. Eve refuses the invitation of God in his beckoning call of Genesis 1 to “behold” alongside him and bask in his glory and in what he sees as good. Instead, she resents the opportunity to submit to that which is truly beautiful and attempts to see beauty in the ugly—a fruit that leads to death. In doing so, she begins to define the world *subjectively*. This means that she thinks that she (as the subject) gets to determine the truth. *Truth is dependent on her. She can make it what she wants.* She can decide through her independent evaluation whether or not something is true or false, good or bad. But notice that not only does Eve redefine the true and the good, but she redefines the beautiful: she saw that the fruit was “delightful to the eyes” (Genesis 3:6). By taking aesthetic delight in that which brings about death, Eve is trying to enjoy beauty (revelation of God’s glory) in that which is ugly (a distortion of God’s glory). This does not mean that the fruit was “ugly” in the sense that it had a malformed physical

appearance. The fruit was “ugly” based on it being a conduit of death. And by taking delight in the physical appearance of that which brings death, Eve makes a big mistake. Eve makes beauty a matter of human subjectivism, a matter of preference or opinion, by delighting in a death-bringing fruit in the same way God delighted in his good creation.

While our culture wants to reserve “the beautiful” to a category of opinion and personal conviction, the Bible suggests that the moment we began to see beauty as something we could determine was the very moment we fell into chaos and pain. When Eve thinks her eyes can “delight in” whatever she wants, she makes a serious mistake. And so too, when we think our eyes can “delight in” whatever we want—and so call beautiful whatever we want—we make just as serious a mistake. Whereas the Bible sees this scene as the root of all evil in our world, *our culture might view this scene as a sort of archetypal liberation of the ultimate kind of woman.* American culture teaches us that it is liberating for women to define beauty on their own terms and forsake the oppressive ideals of others. Eve fits the description of the empowered, independent women our culture tends to praise. She does what she wants and defines beauty on her own terms. She will be controlled by no one. She will not be told what is beautiful, not even by God. It is almost as though we coined the saying, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!” straight from Genesis 3:6, reading the passage as an affirmation of female empowerment and independence. We tell young girls, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!” as a way to boost their self-esteem and teach them confidence and independence, but we make the mistake

of Eve. We believe the empty promises of subjectivism. This idea has become so embedded in our cultural perception that often Christians don't even realize its origins in the Garden. Oh, what a pity it is to have culture exalt that which the Bible teaches to be the fundamental disease of humanity!

Genesis 3 describes this spiritual disease in terms of our physical capacity to see. Just as Genesis 1 uses "God saw" as a metaphor for God's authoritative perception of the world, Genesis 3 uses our eyes as a metaphor for our sinful perception of the world. Just as we "see" physical things with a perceptual immediacy, we also "see" the world around us with a perceptual immediacy when we evaluate and interpret it. Just as you open your eyes and immediately see without any active decision, so you also are prone to immediately evaluate the world around you and "see" things certain ways. Think of how we use the phrase "I just don't *see* it like that" when we disagree with someone. It means that we do not naturally construe the situation the way they do. By saying we "see" it differently, we mean that we naturally interpret and evaluate it differently. But as the offspring of Eve, we need to understand that we are born wearing defective glasses, seeing the world (naturally and immediately) on our terms, rather than on God's terms. So before we go any further in our discussion of identity and self-image, we must warn ourselves of the danger in the Garden. *We must realize that our perception of things is often misleading: our "eyes" often do not see.* Just like our first mother, we are prone to see that which brings death and *delight* in it. We are prone to see ugliness and call it beauty. Remember the mistake of Eve: The fact that you

“see” something as delightful and appealing, does not make it truly beautiful. Just because you feel something, does not make it true. The goal of this devotional is to help us behold that which is truly good and beautiful, as invited to in Genesis 1, and conversely to train our eyes to correct our immediate, mistaken perceptions of the good and beautiful that we inherited from our mother Eve. We have to get back to embracing what God said and saw, instead of trusting what Satan said and what we saw.

REFLECTION & APPLICATION

1. *What is a command of God that seems unappealing or unnecessary to you? Find a way to submit and obey that command this week. This is a way to recognize that you do not always “see” the good and beauty that God sees and you trust him enough to do it anyway.*
2. *Identify one thing in your life that you delight in that God says brings death. Confess and pray for forgiveness.*
3. *If someone asked you what’s wrong with saying that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” how would you answer?*

Manufacturing

THE SELF

What They
TELL YOU:

“Life is all about finding your authentic self. You decide who you are. Don’t let anyone decide for you.”

READ GENESIS 3



What God
TELLS YOU:

“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”

GENESIS 3:4-5

As we have already discussed, the “said/saw” motif of the creation and fall story clues us into the essence of our sin. Sin concerns how we “see” or “behold” the world. We have considered how this motif teaches us of the perils of *subjectivism* (believing that how we define the world, what is right, good, and beautiful is dependent on the individual’s opinion). Now we will consider how Eve actually came to embrace subjective truth. What was the lie that convinced Eve that a system like subjectivism was even possible or, for that matter, good? This question will be our focus in meditating again upon the story of Genesis 3 today. First, we see that the serpent’s original tactic to convince Eve of a world of subjective truth seemed fairly ineffective. He asks, “*Did God actually say...?*” (Genesis 3:1). But his questioning of God’s command is not enough to sway her. She responds to the doubting serpent by correcting his lies (Genesis 3:2-3). She appears to be fairly unmoved by his schemes. But her firmness does not last long. It only took a handful of words to completely fog her clarity on God’s word and God’s goodness. What exactly was the lie that had the power to allure a woman already living

in paradise? It was a lie about her identity—an identity that she was given in Genesis 1.

Eve was the image of God (Genesis 1:27). She and Adam had the privileged role among all the other creatures—to be walking, talking reflections of their Creator. While all of creation sang God’s glorious praise by realizing his eternal power and divinity (Romans 1:20), human beings were the only creation granted such a prestigious status as God’s very image. What is an image? An image is something that represents a reality. It is a reflection of something or a portrayal of something. So as the image of God, we are his representatives, those who are made to reflect and portray him on the earth. The declaration that humankind is the image of God means that we cannot understand “the self”—our identity—apart from its proper relationship to God because we were made to reflect and represent him. Therefore, to “know yourself” necessitates first that you know how you relate to God. If we are the image of God, then in some sense it is more important that we understand who God is than who we are because we cannot reflect something we don’t know. Being the “image of God” means that *the self is essentially dependent*. It must go outside of itself to define itself. It cannot find meaning only by looking inward. And it will make no sense of itself if it insists on obscuring that which it is dependent upon. In other words, if we persist in our ignorance of God, we cannot make sense of the “self” because to be a “self” is to be the image of God. It is only in remembering humanity’s God-given identity that we can understand the danger of Satan’s temptations in Genesis 3:5. Eve’s identity was to be defined by her purpose: She was

to communicate something about who God is by being his image. She was made to point to Another. It was only in fulfilling this purpose that she would flourish.

Knowing this, in his second attempt at deceiving Eve, the serpent tries to distort the goodness of Eve's designated identity as God's image. This time around, he does not even deny the fact that God forbids the fruit (like he originally did in verse 1); instead, the snake dangles a false identity in front of Eve as if her God-given one was insufficient or inadequate. In doing so, he insinuates that God has hidden intentions behind forbidding the fruit. He admits that God did indeed say to not eat the fruit, but it was only because God knows that "when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God, knowing good and evil*" (Genesis 3:5). Instead of questioning God's commands like his first attempt, he questions God's goodness. He makes God look like the bad guy. He wants Eve to take hold of a new theology, one in which God is seen as capricious and selfish, withholding that which is truly good from his creation. Apparently, the role he gave them as image-bearers was not generous at all, it was a scheme to keep them from becoming his equals. According to the serpent, God's commandments were the way in which God suppressed Eve's full potential to be just like him. He could keep his unique superiority by forcing Eve to follow his rules. So the serpent reveals Eve's "full potential," she can be just like God. How can Eve be just like God? Remember who has the authority to define what is "good" in chapter 1 of Genesis? God alone. So now, the way Eve can assert a God-like status is to be the arbiter of what is "good." She believed *she*

could “see” and determine certain things to be good, just like God did in chapter I. It was this allure of self-exaltation—her ability to be like God—that took Eve: hook, line, and sinker.

She likely still remembered that God said not to eat the fruit, but now she does not see God as one with her best interests in mind, but as one who restrains her from reaching self-actualization. The reality of God’s command is powerless when her vision of the Commander is warped in this way. And not only does she take on this new theology, she adopts a new anthropology—a new view of humanity. When she confuses the identity of God, she also confuses the identity of herself. She now does not identify human beings with the purpose of reflecting God, but sees their goal as assuming the role and status of God. *She ceased to believe she was who God said she was and began believing she could be whatever she wanted to be.* The devil, in one foul swoop, has convinced Eve to believe lies about God and herself in order to secure her disobedience. She rejects her essentially dependent identity as God’s image for an identity she can engineer on her own. For Eve, in that moment, God and his commands seemed un compelling. Even worse, they seemed to her to be the enemy to her most “authentic self.” The self who can be like God is essentially independent and autonomous, and can define good and evil. God’s authority was now the obstacle she had to tear down to establish her own authority. And while she may have thought she was stepping into freedom and empowerment, she had actually just secured her demise.

What is most relevant for our discussion on identity and current cultural trends is that the moment Eve accepted a subjective definition of the self, she lost herself (*even* if she had a deceptive feeling of finding herself). In non-philosophical terms, Eve believed that she could determine who she was. *She believed that she could define her identity.* She believed she could be like God, even when God had already given her a definitive designation, not as God, but as his image. In pride, she trades the paradise of being God's reflection for a lie that tells her she can be whoever and whatever she wants to be. In other words, she embraced "her truth" instead of *The* truth. She "finds herself" by looking within and disregarding the standards and labels of another. Is this starting to sound familiar? It is the typical advice you would get today if you face an identity crisis of any kind. People tell you to look within, to focus on yourself, and to ignore any outside expectations of who you ought to be. But this very advice is a continuation of the original mistake of Eve.

When we try to construct our identities on our own (independent of God), we demonstrate exactly what sin has done to us: We think we can decide who we are, and when we do that, we believe ourselves to be God. We think we can take on his role as the ultimate "see-er" of the world, defining what is good, beautiful, and right, and what it means to be a self. And that is not just a shift in theology, anthropology, nor philosophy, *it is the epitome of arrogance.* Be weary when you hear people say "You can be whoever you want to be!" for they do not realize what they do when they make such a proclamation. Genesis would have us think twice before we buy the lie that there is freedom and

empowerment in defining yourself on your own terms. Behind such a belief is a mistaken theology and an arrogant view of humanity. And not only that, but behind such beliefs are empty promises. They are a ploy of the deceiving serpent. He wanted Eve to think self-creation was good for her. But that was merely a trick. Self-creation did not lead her to freedom, it led her to shame. If we learn from Eve, we must affirm that independence is not the mark of a true woman. True womanhood is rooted in being God's image—an essentially dependent identity. If we want to think of ourselves in healthy ways, we must start with this crucial recognition: we are not God, we are his image. And that is *good*.

REFLECTION & APPLICATION:

1. *Can you think of a time you disobeyed God because you thought you were “missing out” on something? How are you making the same mistake as Eve when you do that? Remember, our disobedience denies not only the commands of God, but the goodness of God.*
2. *Why does understanding who God is help us understand who we are?*
3. *The greatest mistake of identity is to think we can define ourselves however we like. Why is that true? Can you think of ways that you try to define yourself apart from God?*

All Eyes
ON ME

What They
TELL YOU:

“Never be ashamed of who you are!”

READ GENESIS 3



What God
TELLS YOU:

“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”

GENESIS 3:7

Today we continue on in our careful trek through the story of creation and the fall. We have considered God's authoritative word and evaluation in Genesis 1 and we have seen that thwarted in Satan's word and Eve's evaluation in Genesis 3. We have realized the dangerous business of subjectivism—particularly, its danger when it comes to defining beauty subjectively and its danger when it comes to defining the self subjectively. We can now begin to connect the dots between the sin of subjectivism (defining things however we want to) and our current state as human beings. Directly following the description of Eve's turn toward subjective truth and the rebellion that it entailed in verse 6, verse 7 describes the immediate consequence: "*and they knew that they were naked*" (Genesis 3:7). This crude statement now describes the standard condition of humanity in all of history. Remembering the emphasis on God "seeing" things in Genesis 1, when we read the much-dreaded words that Eve "saw" something contrary to God's word, we anticipate something huge. We wonder if the couple will drop dead instantly after their first bite. After all, God did say that the day they eat of it they will surely die (Genesis

2:17). Instead, the result of verse 7 seems rather anticlimactic. They don't drop dead, they just realize they are naked. But what does that really mean? We would expect that Adam and Eve were not physically blind nor were they stupid before their rebellion. We would assume they could acknowledge that their skin was uncovered. So what is this realization of nakedness? What's the big deal?

In actuality, this reality in verse 7 is much more dramatic than we might first think. In this very moment, as Adam and Eve grasp their nakedness, they are introduced to self-consciousness for the first time. And this new *sense of self* demands to be acknowledged. It cannot be ignored. Adam and Eve are suddenly held captive in their subjectivity. They cannot deny this debilitating sense of self. And this sense of self is the revelation that they are *exposed*. They know they are being seen—and not in a good light. They feel vulnerable, embarrassed and humiliated. They want to be covered up. They want to hide. The immediate result of their sin was a crippling sense of what we know as *shame*. Their shame is the awareness that they are being “seen” in a bad way. They wanted to “see” things however they pleased, and now they cannot bear being “seen” by each other and their God. Their assertion of independence has led their minds to be dominated by their sense of self. The author wants to make an explicit connection between the manufacturing of their own truth/identity and their feeling of shame.

Our culture has a similar fixated obsession over our “sense of self.” Many today think the essence of life is a journey of “finding ourselves,” of “self-realization.” We tend to think that the day we come

to know ourselves most authentically will be the day we have achieved freedom and joy, life to the fullest. And so we focus on ourselves and prioritize ourselves to tap into our true self. Self-awareness and self-knowledge becomes the key to a good life. But it is interesting that the Bible seems to associate self-consciousness with sin. It's as if, before eating the fruit, Adam and Eve lived in a blissful state of self-forgetfulness, of self-unawareness. This would not mean that they did not know that they were "a self," they certainly had a sense of self, an identity. They knew they were a self, but didn't have to think too much about it. Think about when parts of our body are working properly. They do not draw much attention towards themselves. If your foot is doing a good job at being a foot, you don't really notice it. But once your foot malfunctions, suddenly, it's the only thing you're paying attention to. It's not that before your injury you didn't realize the existence of your foot; it's just that when your foot does what it's supposed to do, it doesn't demand non-stop attention. But when your foot isn't functioning properly, it constantly begs for attention. So too, when our identity is functioning properly, it doesn't usually demand constant recognition and attention.¹ But when our identity is bruised, it becomes a fragile ego that always needs to be noticed and coddled. The insight from Genesis 3:7 is this: The moment Adam and Eve began to fixate on themselves was actually the moment they entered into shame. Their assertion of subjectivism actually led to an inescapable focus on the subject. They were caged in self-absorption.

¹ This illustration is from Timothy Keller, found in his book *The Freedom of Self Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (LaGrange, KY: 10Publishing, 2021), pg 15-16.

Subjectivism and independence from God was not their path to freedom, but to their bondage to sin. Self-awareness had led them to a state of disgrace in which they ran and hid from that which was good—God—because of fear of exposure for what they truly were—no longer good.

This entrance of self-consciousness illuminates what exactly the biblical term shame describes. It relates not just to a poor sense of self, but also to the recognition of others' seeing you as that self. It is a feeling that all eyes are on you and you are exposed for what you truly are. It is a crippling sense of the condemning eyes of God or humanity upon you. This is the essence of shame. *It is the feeling that you are being seen or exposed in a bad light.* We know the feeling. It's not a foreign, ancient idea. This is our daily life. For many of us, it is what we dread most in our world. Notice, though, that shame is first an embarrassment before God. Because of the manipulative and evil ways humans treat one another, one can often be haunted by an unwarranted sense of shame. If someone is treated with disregard and complete disrespect, as if they weren't the image of God, they take on a ruined sense of self. They begin to think they deserve to be treated poorly and that they are not worthy of dignity. This is what I will call victim-shame. The person is truly a victim of their shame. This type of shame is to be corrected. This kind of shame is anti-gospel. But the shame Adam and Eve felt, what I will call sin-shame, was perfectly warranted and not to be corrected. We can understand this by considering the phrase that comes before their realization of their nakedness. Genesis 3:7 says, "and their eyes were opened and

they knew they were naked.” This insinuates that this revelation that they were naked was a true one. It came from eyes that were working as they should. Their eyes were “opened.” They “saw” something true this time, and it was their nakedness. The shame they were feeling as they realized their nakedness was not improper. It was spot on. God did not respond to Eve saying, “What are you doing hiding in that bush?! Get out here, you have nothing to be ashamed of!” Instead, God beckons them to come out from hiding, *not because they shouldn't feel guilty for their sin, but because he is gracious*. But despite seeking confession from the couple, God just gets excuses. Consequently, he condemns the couple and the serpent. And in this way, he affirms their sense of shame as appropriate. What they did is worthy of punishment, and therefore, worthy of shame.

From here on out, the Bible uses nakedness as a symbol of shame, exposure, and humiliation. This might provide us an insight for our current day and age. Our sexually-liberated culture might advise Adam and Eve to forget the fig leaves, they don't need to cover up! We even might read this passage and think that clothing is just a result of the fall so we don't need to wear it. But before we interpret Genesis as saying that we shouldn't wear clothes, let us look at how God responds to their nakedness. He does not tell them to ditch the fig leaves and celebrate their bodies. He doesn't advise “body-confidence” in that sense. Rather than getting rid of their covering, God actually provides a *more* thorough covering for Adam and Eve, insinuating that their covering for their shame was inadequate; they needed something more. Their nakedness needed to be covered. If they hadn't done

anything wrong, there would be no need for a covering. But God condemns the couple and shows that they are going to need a better covering for their mistake than a fig leaf. So to deny Adam and Eve's need for clothing would be to deny their need for atonement.

So recognizing the inadequacy of a few leaves to cover their sin, God makes a gracious (and bloody) provision of clothing for the couple. He uses the skins of an animal to clothe them. A sufficient covering for their shame required blood to be spilled; a plant would not do. An animal's blood was shed on their behalf for a satisfactory covering of their shame. This act is a glimpse of God's grace and provision for sinners in their shame. Indeed, it is a picture of what would become the entire economy of salvation: substitutionary atonement. Something would shed its blood in place of humanity in order to atone for their shame. God would not say, "no need to be ashamed!," but God would say, "Be ashamed of what you've done, and be astounded at how I will atone for it. Watch me make something glorious out of something shameful." Therefore, just as nakedness is a biblical symbol of shame, clothes are a biblical symbol of salvation. They are a reminder of God's grace towards his wayward people. He is a God who makes a provision to account for our mistakes, even when we don't deserve it. Does your clothing reflect a God who graciously covers our shame and gives us life, or does it reflect a mistaken sense of empowerment that has nothing to be ashamed of? Did you ever think that your clothing could be a reflection on your salvation? Don't deny the reality of your sin-shame. Acknowledge it and allow your clothing

to be a daily reminder that God provides a covering for us when our sin exposes us. That is the gospel.

REFLECTION & APPLICATION

1. *Shame is ultimately caused by our rebellion against God, not by low self-esteem. Do you ever dismiss a feeling of shame because you think it is just low self-esteem, when in reality it is because you know you have failed to live as God has commanded?*

2. *Shame is appropriate for the sinner. We should feel shame before a holy God. Think of a situation in which you should feel shame (an example of sin-shame). Think of a situation in which your sense of shame should be corrected (victim-shame).*

3. *The gospel is all about covering our shame so that we no longer have to hide before God. Therefore, clothing can be a symbol of salvation. How can you make your clothing reflect that truth, instead of being about exalting yourself and showing off?*

Always

THE VICTIM

What They
TELL YOU:

"You deserve better."

READ GENESIS 3



What God
TELLS YOU:

"He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'"

GENESIS 3:11-13

We have learned that the story of the fall has some crucial lessons for us to learn about truth and selfhood. We have seen that the fall of humanity consisted, in large measure, through a twisted sense of self. We have reflected on the ways we ought to think of ourselves, while also exposing the ways we tend to think of ourselves. We have considered how sin leads immediately to self-consciousness, a perception of the self that we are exposed. Therefore, our sense of self is often dominated by shame, and that is not necessarily wrong. Now we must investigate one final tendency of our self-perception revealed in Genesis 3: *victimhood*. It is a self-perception that pushes back against the true self-perception of shame. When Adam and Eve originally experience shame, they have a sense that they are responsible for their actions. They are recognizing that they have done something wrong. That's why they feel ashamed. And so they run and hide. This is subconscious acknowledgement of their accountability before God. It is a recognition of the validity of their shame. They know that they ought to be punished for what they have done, that's why they hide. But they soon experience a contradictory

spirit of pride that leads them to claim innocence and blame shift, as if they weren't culpable at all.

This scene quickly proves that the new self-understanding Adam and Eve have adopted is quite dysfunctional. First they run and hide in shame, acknowledging that they are responsible for their disobedience. But then upon questioning, they attempt to claim some sort of innocence. For the man, it was the woman who made him eat; he can hardly be held responsible for her mischief! Better yet, it was the woman that God gave him. Maybe God should share some of the blame here! As for Eve, without the option of blaming her partner in crime (literally), she reminds God that the serpent deceived her. She was duped. Just innocently confused! After all, didn't we mention that he was the "most crafty" of all the beasts?! So in response to the God-given opportunity to take responsibility and confess, Adam and Eve scramble before their Judge and revert to blame shifting, despite their deep felt sense of shame and accountability. This new sense of self has led them into a contradiction. They cannot deny the reality of the shame they feel, and yet they want to claim that they have not messed up in any serious way. They refuse to allow their shame to produce confession, as it should. Instead, they persist in contradiction, as they plead innocence while still too embarrassed of their nakedness to come out from behind the trees. The lies (their pride) and the truth (their shame) are fighting for dominance and right now their pride is winning.

Instead of humbly confessing before their God and Judge, Adam and Eve are satisfied with pointing their fingers at each other, the serpent, and even at the Judge himself. But their denial of shame is not met with the expected freedom from its power. After condemning the serpent, who of course is also held responsible in the eyes of the Just Judge, God condemns the couple. Their blame shifting has done them no good, they are guilty nonetheless. *Their denial of reality has no power to change the reality. Their denial of shame has no power to cure their shame.* But in his persistent grace, God gives a glimpse of hope for the couple and their legacy in humanity. Though they continue to avoid the recognition of their shame, God recognizes it and seeks to cover it. Their nakedness is not to be ignored, it is to be covered. Sadly, Eve and her children will continually try to point the finger, grasping at every opportunity to prove another person guilty and themselves innocent. But God will soon set up a system of reminder, where they daily learn to acknowledge their responsibility and quit pointing the finger. A system where they can cover their shame through the substitutionary blood-shedding of animals in the temple. The aroma of sacrifice was not just a pleasing aroma to the Lord, but was a constant reminder to the people that they are responsible for their mistakes and yet God has made a way to forgive them. They are to consistently call back to God's original provision for his guilty children. They are not to avoid their responsibility and guilt, but they are to rest in his grace towards those who do confess. All this, of course, foreshadows the ultimate clothing of the naked through the precious blood of Christ Jesus who, though he was not guilty, would bear the shame of the guilty, that they might experience the justification of the godly.

It is important that we understand the ways in which our culture teaches us to perceive ourselves. We must fight for awareness of the assumptions and beliefs that dominate our surroundings, because it turns out that there is nothing new under the sun. The lies that Adam and Eve believed in the garden are alive and well in America today, just in new forms. Self-love culture teaches us that we just need more love and attention. We just need to give ourselves grace and celebrate our flaws. We preach to ourselves that we deserve better from the world around us. But the Christian must fight to see herself in truth. And this means that she cannot primarily see herself as a victim. Ultimately, she is not a victim of the world around her. Her participation in rebellion against God has made the world the way it is. She is responsible for her mistakes. She will be held accountable. And if she cannot let go of her victim-identity, she will never grasp the gospel. Only when she realizes that she has a debt to pay will she realize the great love of the One who paid it in her place.

REFLECTION & APPLICATION:

1. *When we sin, God seeks confession from us. Try offering a prayer of confession. It is a way to fight your victim mindset and acknowledge your accountability before God. Not only that, but it is a way to remind yourself that your God loves to forgive those who confess. Try to incorporate confession into your daily life.*

2. *Can you think of situations in your life where you only focused on how other people messed up, instead of admitting your part in the situation?*

3. *What is a victimhood mindset and why does a victimhood mindset ruin our relationship with God and others?*

Affirmation

HUNGRY

What They
TELL YOU:

"You are worthy of love and affirmation."

READ PSALM 23



What God
TELLS YOU:

*"I acknowledge my sin to you and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you
forgave the iniquity of my sin."*

PSALM 32:5

The Psalms are the believer's emotive toolbox. The psalter acknowledges the many extreme emotions that take hold of us and then provides a framework through which believers can work through those feelings and perceptions. Because of this, the psalms provide us with lots of wisdom when it comes to self-perception and even self-talk. Whereas popular opinion would tell you that self-talk is about building confidence and affirming yourself, the self-talk found within the psalms seems more occupied with the truth, questioning the self when it forgets the truth (Psalm 42:5), and often commanding the self to embrace the truth (Psalm 103:1-2). As it turns out, modern psychology and feminist movements were not the first ones to consider the value of self-talk. The book of Psalms offers us a biblical way of thinking through our emotions and talking back to them. Psalm 32:5 is a particularly intriguing example of self-talk. David recalls a situation in which he was bogged down by his sin and gives us a quick inside view of the conversation that was going on within himself through it all. The psalm begins with David's declaration of the blessings of forgiveness. He basks in the freedom

and security that comes with the knowledge of good standing before God (Psalm 32:1-2). But then he backs tracks to give us some context. His appreciation of God's forgiveness only came after he learned a hard lesson about facing his sin. He remembers a time when he repressed the presence of his sin. He kept silent about it. He did not confess it. It is almost as if David took the conventional wisdom of our day for those who struggle with low self-esteem: "Don't beat yourself up, give yourself grace; you don't have to focus on all your flaws! Your imperfections are not a problem, you are perfectly imperfect!" This is a typical example of the self-talk that is encouraged today. It emphasizes our need for affirmation rather than confrontation.

And so David kept silent, apparently under the impression that his sin did not need to be acknowledged, let alone focused upon. But as he persisted in his avoidance technique, he was burdened by an equally persistent pain. His bones seemed as though they were wasting away. He groaned all day long. His strength had dried up (32:3-4). Why? Because day and night *God's hand was heavy upon him*. Despite his efforts to forget about his guilt, the shadow of the righteous Judge of humanity follows him day and night. The fact that David locates the source of his pain in the heavy hand of God suggests that this experience of physical and spiritual suffering was a manifestation of sin-shame, the kind of shame that feels the burden of God's presence and their exposure before it. It was the kind of shame that led the guilty to hide in the bushes in Genesis 3. They were aware of the holy presence of God, and felt uncomfortable before him due to their rebellion. David's experience is likely comparable. David feels this

shame because, despite trying to ignore his sin, he cannot ignore the feeling that God sees what he has done. It is in this context that we read the conversation inside David's head in verse 5: "I said, 'I will confess my transgression to the LORD.'" David decides to try a new kind of self-talk. A self-talk that pushes him to confront the truth. David takes a new route concerning his sin, guilt, and shame. Instead of keeping silent, he is going to fess up. This is the turning point that enables him to proclaim the original joys of verses 1 and 2.

David's decision in verse 5 to acknowledge his shame before God might sound like negative self-talk to us. Our contemporary conscience may be a bit offended, thinking "You have nothing to be ashamed of!" But for David, and I will argue for us all, this strategy of confession (that we might reject as oppressive and depressive) works awfully well. It is by confession that David can move into freedom and praise. His first exclamations of joy are totally dependent upon his prior confession and confrontation with the reality of his shame. *It was the avoidance of his shame that kept him from joy, not the recognition of it.* This speaks to the powerful ways in which forgiveness (and therefore, the gospel) works. When David refused to acknowledge his sin and shame, he could not enjoy the blessings of forgiveness. Therefore, forgiveness is therapeutic because it meets our true needs, not avoids our true needs. It acknowledges the weight of our shame and compensates for it. This means that the joy and freedom of the gospel is dependent upon the recognition of our shame. But the popular view in our current society is to *deny our need of forgiveness and emphasize our need of affirmation.* This emphasis reveals a non-biblical view of the self in which our true

illness is not an offense against a holy God, but is a deficiency in the love, affirmation, or significance we believe we need and are worthy of. You can see how this connects to the victimhood mentality.

But the Bible recognizes both your need for forgiveness and your desire for love and acceptance. David understands the power of shame firsthand, and wants to share with his audience the most effective way of handling it. Psalm 32 gives us the do's and don'ts of shame-coping. His first strategy, suppression and avoidance, fails miserably. He could not seem to lose a pervasive sense of discomfort within himself. Sound familiar? Culture gives us a lot of “empowering” tips and tricks to avoid the feeling of shame, but they usually don't deliver fully on their promises. Maybe for a short time, but rarely long term. It seems most of us just cannot shake the sense of shame that haunts us. It doesn't matter how much we affirm ourselves with positive self-talk or even if others shower us with affirmation, shame continues to be a problem for us. So David says no to shame-denial and yes to shame-recognition. He says goodbye to ignoring his need for forgiveness and says hello to the joy of being pardoned. He stops insisting on the “positive self-talk” that only affirms himself, and starts accepting the fact that he ought to be punished for his sins.

Self-love culture would have you think that affirmation is the center of the gospel. When we scroll through our social media feeds, the prominent message on many Christian accounts is affirmation-based: “You are loved,” “You are worthy,” “You are beautiful,” “You are enough.” By emphasizing this, we have turned the gospel into a self-

esteem project instead of an atonement project. And we have done this by convincing ourselves that our deepest problem as a human being is a lack of self-love, self-confidence, self-appreciation, self-care, self-this, and self-that. So if that is where we locate our greatest needs, in order for the gospel to be relevant, we turn it into a self-esteem boost. The main message of the gospel becomes “you are affirmed,” rather than “you are redeemed.” But as we have seen in Genesis 3, the real problem of humanity is our guilt and shame before God. We have disobeyed God and face punishment for it. We have failed to image him as we were made to and now we have a deep sense of humiliation and embarrassment. The reality of our sin (guilt) and the sense of self that comes with it (shame) are our true problem. And that’s why the gospel is about justification (declaring the guilty as innocent) and glory (the transformation of shame). The gospel is this: *God finds a way to justify the guilty so that he can glorify the ashamed.* But if we do not accept the pressing reality of our guilt and our shame, then we cannot see the gospel as Scripture would have us see it.

When we resist the reality of shame and try to convince ourselves we are not in need of forgiveness but only of affirmation, we suffer two consequences. First, we feel the heaviness of God’s righteousness upon us as David did. We keep silent in regards to our sins and so we waste away. We groan in confusion, wondering why our sense of self continues to be a burden to us. And second, the gospel fails to meet our (supposed) needs. We find the Scriptures unhelpful when we insist that God is the vending machine that doles out affirmation and self-confidence boosts. The Bible starts seeming irrelevant and

we end up reading self-help books instead of Scripture. David would have us do otherwise. He knows that the gospel of forgiveness is what we really need. No, the gospel does not always affirm you. It does not always say you are enough. It does not always say you are worthy. Rather, the gospel affirms Jesus and says he is enough and he is worthy. Rather than avoiding our shame, let us, alongside King David, bask in the reality of a God who is quick to forgive and atone for our sins and our shame.

Comparison:

THE GAME OF LIFE

What They
TELL YOU:

*“Never be ashamed of showing off and being proud of your body
and your accomplishments. You should celebrate who you are.”*

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 13



What God
TELLS YOU:

*“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy
or boast; it is not arrogant”*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

We have seen how the fall of humanity took place within the realm of self-image. We have explored all the mistaken perceptions of the self that have come with the fall. We have broken down the many different ways in which we perceive ourselves incorrectly, including our perception of beauty, our attempt to make ourselves something that we are not, and our insisting that we are the victim instead of the criminal. But there is one last piece of the puzzle when talking about our sinful perception of the self. Not only did the fall ruin our self-perception, but it also distorted our perception of other “selves.” Just as we adopt a crooked view of ourselves, we also take on a crooked view of our fellow image-bearers.

This leads us to one of the most famous passages in all of Scripture: I Corinthians 13. It is a marvelous description of the center of Christian ethics: love. Amidst controversy concerning the spiritual gifts in public worship, Paul completes his advice to the Corinthian church with a reminder of priority. As he speaks of the diversity of gifts within the body, where some are apostles, some teachers, some work

miracles, some administrate, some serve, and some speak in tongues, he calls the Corinthian church to remember a “more excellent” way than all of these gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31). Without this one thing, the flashy spiritual gifts of the Corinthians turn out to be nothing. And this “more excellent way” is the way of love. The Christian life, according to Paul, is primarily a life about love. And no matter what else you do or what else you have, if you do not love, you do not know the Christian life.

Our culture eats up the Christian emphasis on love. It is one of the parts of Christianity that scratches our cultural itches. And in a lot of ways the popular cultural emphasis on kindness, compassion, and love is a wonderful aspect of contemporary culture. But it also has its issues. We are also a needy society when it comes to how we view ourselves. We tend to think of ourselves in terms of needs, rather than duties (which is a rather new view of the self historically). We tend to emphasize all the things we deserve, rather than our obligations. Because of this, we can sometimes interpret the Scripture’s call to love in a distorted way. We make life about fulfilling our desire for attention, significance, and affirmation, and justify that by saying the gospel is all about love. But we fail to realize Paul’s definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13, not to mention Jesus’ example of love. Let’s take a look.

There are so many treasures of wisdom found in this short, dense passage. But today we focus on verse 4’s claim that love cannot coincide with envy, boasting, or arrogance. Defining envy will be key

to understanding the standards of love and the mistakes we make in our perception of other people. *Envy is the disposition to view other people and their qualities or possessions in terms of competition.* More specifically, you see everything in terms of *you*. When you see a beautiful girl, you don't just think, "She is beautiful." You think, "She is more beautiful *than me*." When you see someone with good style, you don't just think, "She has good style," you think, "She has better style *than me*." Envy means that you see people based on how they compare to you, and therefore, *envy is an essentially self-absorbed worldview.* You become jealous of other people's qualities and possessions because you build your sense of self around how you stack up next to others. Your self-esteem and self-worth is a ranking game, and therefore, someone else's win becomes your loss. And because of this you begin to despise others who have a quality or possession that you lack. The fact that you are less beautiful than the girl means that her beauty is a problem for you, rather than something you can enjoy and celebrate. The fact that you do not have as many cute outfits as that girl means that she bothers you, rather than inspires you.

Do you see how envy is anti-love? Envy cannot coincide with love because it insists on seeing another person's gain as your deficit. Envy perceives the other in terms of how they threaten or benefit *me*. Love perceives the other in terms of how I might threaten or benefit *them*. Envy sees people in light of competition and status, while love sees people in light of solidarity and companionship. Envy is the loathing of the good of another. Love is the desire for the good of another. All the more, the Christian notion of love goes beyond

merely wanting and celebrating the good of another, but Christian love often sacrifices some good for itself in order to achieve a good for the other. Christ did not consider his own good when he died on the cross. His motivation was the good of the other. Therefore, *Christian love is essentially others-oriented*. It is essentially selfless, which is why it clashes with envy which is essentially selfish. Biblical love says the world is not about me. Self-love says I need the world to be about me. And similarly envy says, everyone in the world is a competitor for me. People become objects that either boost or hinder our pride. People's qualities and achievements are seen in terms of how they help or hurt our own sense of self. This tendency towards comparison was seen in the Corinthians as they tried to one-up each other with cooler spiritual gifts and possibly ostracize those who did not have certain flashy, spiritual gifts. Paul fights back against their culture of comparison, saying it cannot thrive while love thrives; envy and love are mutually exclusive, they cannot flourish together. At the root of a culture of comparison, is a culture of self-absorption which contradicts love. Love cannot envy.

We can even see the embryonic beginnings of envy in the fall. Rather than embracing her call as the image of God, Eve saw an opportunity to increase her comparative ranking. She was not satisfied with imaging God, she wanted to be God. She despised her role of inferiority. She started seeing the world in terms of who-has-what and who-doesn't-have-what and she connected that to her sense of self. Rather than delighting in God's unique greatness and superiority, she saw it as a threat to her own happiness. Her position beneath the authority and

rule of God became a threat to her identity and security. But in reality, God's kingship and exclusive deity was the glue that held together her identity and her security. Ever since Eden, we have continued to see God and people in that same light. Envy plays an essential role in our sinful state.

What might this mean for the church today? It means that we must be wary of self-love culture because it fosters self-absorption which fosters envy which ultimately contradicts love. In other words, self-love culture insists that we focus on ourselves and see ourselves as the priority and that is, quite simply, the opposite of the biblical definition of love. We are not to see others as a threat to our identity. We are to see our ability to love others as a part of our identity because being made in the image of God means we are made to *love*—not just *be loved*. This has a very practical application. Our culture encourages boasting, especially when it takes the form of showing off our bodies. It is praised as a form of self-confidence and empowerment. But we must remember that boasting and arrogance are the offspring of envy. And all of these are contrary to love. If we do want to always be compared to others, let's not give other women more opportunities to compare themselves to us. "Showing off" is not loving, it is the fruit of an envious heart that wants to assert it's ranking above others. Love does not envy and love does not boast.

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