

I Can't See
GOD
Because
I'm in
the Way

Bruce Bickel & Stan Jantz



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

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Copyright © 2009 by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bickel, Bruce

I can't see God—because I'm in the way / Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7369-2619-5 (pbk.)

1. Spirituality. 2. Spiritual life—Christianity. 3. Christian life. I. Jantz, Stan II. Title.

BV4501.3.B483 2009

248.4—dc22

2009001237

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Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 / VP-NI / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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...Because I
Don't Know
What He
Looks Like

A kindergarten teacher was observing her students while they were drawing pictures. She occasionally walked around to see each child's artwork. As she got to one little girl who was working diligently, she asked what the drawing was.

The girl replied, "I'm drawing God."

The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like."

Without missing a beat or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

Getting a mental picture of God is easy when you are deciding for yourself what he looks like. But here's the problem: The God we envision is likely to be far different from the God who really is. We better learn to discern the difference, or we're at risk of following an imaginary imposter.



Ready and Eager for a Spiritual Do-Over

New beginnings are great. That's why January 1 is so popular with people. We get to put the old year behind us (deleting from our memory all of last year's embarrassing screw-ups and humiliations) and start over with a clean slate. The new year will be better, and to make sure that it is, we implement a few resolutions for the new year (to which we strictly adhere through mid-February if we're lucky).

As Christians, we often take the same approach with our spiritual life. We want to start over every once in a while. If our faith gets a little off track, we rededicate ourselves to being better about it. We often start on January 1. We might commit to a daily Bible reading program designed to get us from Genesis through Revelation in 365 daily passages. But by mid-February, we're bogged down in Leviticus, reading about dissecting goat innards for altar sacrifices, and suddenly we're not so committed to reading God's Word every day or all the way through.

And so it is with other aspects of our Christian life: We set our sights on a daily devotional time, a better prayer life, or a cutback in our bad habits (which usually constitute *sin*, but "bad habits" appears to be the preferred politically correct terminology). Many aspects of our Christian life need improvement. We know it and God knows it, and we deeply desire to commit ourselves to making progress in these areas. So we start with good intentions, but before long we're back to where we started. Undaunted, we want to try again, committing to doing better next time. We want continual chances for spiritual do-overs. Amazingly, God agrees.

We customarily commence our new exercise programs, diets, and financial budgets on January 1. But our commitments (and recommitments) to spiritual-life disciplines aren't confined to the calendar. If our spiritual life goes awry in May, we're usually eager to reinstitute a meaningful relationship with Christ as soon

as possible, and we don't want to defer doing so until January 1 rolls around. In other words, we know that losing ten pounds will require personal sacrifice, so we're willing to wait until New Year's Day for that one. But sensing more of God's presence in our lives is such a good thing—and it doesn't require abstaining from pizza—we want to get started right away. Spiritual motivation to get back on track with God isn't connected to a calendar. All it takes to get us spiritually psyched up is a powerful sermon, an emotionally charged set of worship songs, or better yet, the unadulterated influence of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe we shouldn't feel too bad about making up for lost ground in our spiritual journeys. Don't get me wrong. We shouldn't celebrate the fact that we have fallen away from the Lord when it happens. We should deeply regret it. But we can be excited about recommitting to the actions and attitudes that will reconnect us to Christ. First of all, the Bible tells us that we're in good company. The list of those who needed a spiritual do-over includes Moses, King David, and Peter. (Those guys were spiritual stalwarts. Too bad the thing I have in common with them is their flaws.) More importantly, however, when we begin a spiritual do-over, we're on the verge of revitalizing our Christian lives. Exciting things are about to happen. Personally, I'm always confident that I'll get closer to Christ than I have been in the recent past. I'm ready to experience God in a new and a better way. To put it succinctly, I'm excited to get started with the spiritual do-over because I'm going to taste Christ again for the very first time.¹

Eager to Enter the Promised Land

When I think of spiritual do-overs, I'm reminded of the Israelites at the end of their 40-year desert wandering. Like me, they had a long history of God's provision in their lives and their own frequent bouts of unfaithfulness. They were just coming off a long dry spell in their spiritual journey. But they were about to put all of that behind them and enter the promised land, a place where

they would experience a renewed relationship with their God and celebrate being in the center of his will. The long-awaited promise of a fulfilled spiritual life—dare I say an *awesome* spiritual life—was about to be realized.

The resemblance of my do-over situations to the promised-land scenario often leads me to read the book of Deuteronomy. When reading through the Old Testament, I usually skip from Exodus directly to Joshua because the intervening books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are the biblical equivalent of tryptophan for me.² But in the context of a spiritual do-over, Deuteronomy is appropriate and relevant reading material. It is a collection of farewell addresses that Moses gave to the Israelites as he prepared to die and they prepared to cross the Jordan River into the promised land under the direction of their new leader, Joshua. So in a sense, the book of Deuteronomy contains the famous last words of Moses to the Israelites as they prepared to embark on one of the biggest spiritual do-overs the world has ever witnessed. I figure if God thought those words were good enough for the spiritually dim-witted Israelites, then those same words might be equally applicable to me.

Boiled down to its essence, Moses' advice to the Israelites at the verge of their spiritual do-over is simply this: "And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength."³

Perhaps this isn't a surprise to you. After all, "God" is the answer to most spiritual quandaries. Yet this verse is always interesting and instructive to me. The core of Moses' advice is not about adhering to the orders of their new leader (Joshua). And he doesn't emphasize avoidance of the immorality of the Philistine culture. Rather, Moses says that loving God wholeheartedly is the key component of success for the Israelites as they embark on their divinely appointed spiritual do-over.

As we will see, this succinct directive to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength contains a lot of substance. It also

conveys a lot of freedom. Moses is telling the Israelites, and me, that a spiritual do-over—even a colossal one—doesn't require a lot of religious hoopla. Getting your spiritual act together isn't primarily about following your pastor/priest or acting puritanical. You don't need to utter some mystical incantations as a prerequisite to purify your soul, and you don't need to endure a pentathlon of penitence to achieve acceptability before God. Rather, our ability to reengage our Christian faith is simply a matter of loving God. But unlike the past, when our love was halfhearted, our new spiritual do-over will be successful because our love for God *this time* is wholehearted.

Jesus Agreed with Moses

If you don't find Moses' sermons to the Israelites to be particularly relevant or persuasive, let's shift to Jesus' teachings. But don't expect to find a different outcome. Like Moses, Jesus was a proponent of this "wholehearted love for God" concept. In fact, Christ would apply this spiritual principle not only to do-overs but also to our entire faith. He used a parable to explain: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field."⁴

A little backstory might help with this parable. In the first century AD, safe-deposit boxes hadn't been invented yet. And even if they existed, they would have been useless because you wouldn't have a bank branch in your neighborhood. And you couldn't hide your valuables in your house because home security systems consisted of nothing more than a goat at the doorway. So people used to bury their stash (meaning cash and jewelry, not drugs) in the ground. If this was you, then you wanted to make sure you owned the ground or at least had a leasehold interest, because whoever had a right to use the ground had the ownership rights to whatever was buried there.

You're probably thinking, *Well, if I hid my treasure in the ground,*

I would take it out of the ground before I sold the property. That's what most people did, but they also tended to keep the existence of the buried treasure a secret. Burying a treasure doesn't work very well if everybody knows about it. And when a person with a secret stash died unexpectedly because of a plague or a fatal oxcart collision, his secret died with him. That's apparently what happened in the prelude to Christ's parable.

When the story starts, we find an unassuming pedestrian taking a shortcut across a field. He stumbles on a small protrusion in the ground, and his curiosity pays off when he digs down and uncovers a buried treasure box containing valuables of unimaginable wealth. This was no slow-thinking guy, so he immediately recognized a shrewd business opportunity. He ran into town and checked the county records to determine who owned the property. Then he struck a deal for the purchase of the property. The seller (oblivious to the existence of the buried treasure) demanded a high price because he could sense that the buyer was anxious. The price was so high, in fact, that the buyer was forced to sell everything he owned to be able to raise the cash for the purchase. But the price he paid was infinitesimal compared to the value of the treasure he obtained.

Christ's parable explains what it means to love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. It means being sold out to God. We should be eager to give him all we've got. Like the buyer of the field, we need to be willing to sacrifice everything we consider valuable in life in order to obtain a spiritual life of much greater worth. When compared to what a life with Christ can be, what we're holding on to is of little value. Our relatively small priorities, our selfish desires, and our deteriorating material possessions are all worthless when compared to a life of close fellowship with Christ. Devoting all of our time, energy, and resources to God—in other words, loving him wholeheartedly—is a small price to pay for the huge reward of intimate fellowship with God Almighty.

Putting the Principle into Practice

Moses' call to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and Jesus' invitation to be completely sold out for God, are exactly the kind of exhortations we need when we initiate a spiritual do-over. We should have this goal of a wholehearted love for God emblazoned in our frontal lobes if we are to keep from falling away from him as quickly and often as we have done in the past. And remembering the concept is the easy part. Implementing it is the challenge.

Apparently Moses was hip to the fact that loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength sounds easy but isn't. Accordingly, he elaborated on his thesis statement with several practical guidelines for spiritual living. For example, Moses told the Israelites that their love for God must include a healthy dose of fear: "You must fear the LORD your God."⁵

But Moses wasn't referring to dread and trepidation. He wasn't suggesting that we be terrified of God as if he were some kind of holy ogre. To the contrary, Moses used "fear" in the sense of respect and honor. He wants us to revere the Lord.

Fear of the Lord is a predicate to loving him. It's hard to love someone you don't respect, but love for someone you admire comes naturally. And there is more. Authentic reverence (fear) for God will mean that we desire to act and think in a manner that pleases him, so Moses added the following component to his description of what wholehearted love looks like: "Do what is right and good in the LORD's sight."⁶

Doing what pleases God isn't as difficult as it may seem. Initially we might think that we will have to struggle to resist the tug and pull of temptation. But just the opposite should be true. It makes sense and is fairly straightforward: If you truly love God and fear him, you'll *want* to do what pleases him. And you'll want to refrain from those activities and attitudes that offend him.

Here's the point Moses was getting at: Our realization of who

God is should be enough to compel our love and obedience. God doesn't demand it, like a feudal tyrant forcing allegiance from the peasantry, but he deserves it because of who he is. However, with all due respect to Moses, given my proclivity for falling away from God, I'm more concerned about the converse to his point: If our love and obedience continually short-circuits and requires repeated spiritual do-overs, something must be seriously out of whack.

I used to think that the problem was my love for God—that I didn't love him enough. But I've come to realize that my problem wasn't that I didn't know *how* to love but rather that I didn't really know *whom* to love. I was only loving and fearing part of God, not the whole of him. I was focused on the aspects of his character that put me at ease, and I intentionally overlooked the ones that made me uncomfortable. I'm beginning to realize that the attributes of God that I ignored are the very ones that I need to grasp more fully if I'm going to break the cycle of repeated spiritual do-overs.

You Can't Love God If You're Following an Impostor

After my daughter graduated from college, she moved to Nashville for a few years. After her stint in exciting Music City, she returned home to the more sedate Fresno for a few months before relocating to Seattle. While in Fresno, she lived close to our family home, and we kept bumping into each other at our neighborhood haunts. Many times we would see each other at the gym when our workout schedules overlapped. She always chided me for avoiding the treadmill, which happened to be her favorite exercise. I, on the other hand, preferred the weight machines (because I could exercise while sitting down).

My daughter was shocked when she entered the gym one day and saw me on the treadmill. She knew that the sweaty runner was me because of my standard workout apparel: white shoes, black shorts, white T-shirt, and grey baseball cap with my grey hair sticking out from underneath. As sort of a cardio initiation

prank, she sneaked up behind me. Timing my strides perfectly, she hopped onto the treadmill. The running platforms on those treadmills are hardly long enough for one person, so you can image the close proximity of two people on the same treadmill, with four legs in synchronized motion. Expecting to surprise me, she then tapped me on my shoulder. I turned around, or at least the man who she thought was me turned around. Instead of me, he was apparently a very handsome guy who could have been my stunt double. My daughter was so startled that she stopped running, but the treadmill didn't stop, and she was hurled backward and fell on her anatomical cushion about six feet behind the treadmill. Under the glare of everyone in the immediate proximity, including my treadmill twin brother from whom I must have been separated at birth, she exclaimed, "You aren't my father, and I'm not following you anymore." Immediately thereafter she fled from the gym in embarrassment, only to turn back one last time at the door to verify again that the man on the treadmill wasn't me.

In the spiritual realm, many of us are making the same mistake as my daughter. We're following an impostor god that looks like the real God in many respects. But the god we're following is a cheap knockoff of the real thing. As if we were assembling a Mr. Potato Head, we've conjured up this fake god with many traits of the real God, but we've conveniently omitted the parts of the real God that challenge us.

In my own case, I had an idea of God in my mind that was correct as far as it went. But my concept wasn't all of God. And if you are interested in only part of him, you are trivializing the rest of him. Thus, loving and revering God is impossible if you have only a selective image of him.

Know and Love the God Who Is,
Not the God You Have Concocted

My tendency has always been to focus only on the characteristics of God that were pleasant and to ignore the aspects of

his character that required more of me. I wish I had been doing this unconsciously, but I did it so often that I'm too guilty to attribute my offense to spiritual sleepwalking. In the final analysis, I knew what I was doing, but I didn't love God wholeheartedly, so I didn't change.

For me, thinking about God in general has always been easier when I picture Jesus in particular. After all, Jesus was the visible image of the invisible God.⁷ I had an expansive portfolio of mental images of Jesus:

- *Bobblehead Jesus*. At times, my concept of Christ had him sitting on the shelf like a good-luck charm. He was there when I wanted to look at him. He was a good reminder of my faith, and he brought a lighthearted lift into an otherwise dreary day.
- *Action-figure Jesus*. I could call on this Jesus for help whenever I was in trouble. I could picture him swooping down out of the sky—his robe ruffling in the wind like Superman's cape—as he invaded human time and space to come to my rescue.
- *Baby Jesus*. I didn't reserve this nativity-scene image of Jesus just for Christmastime. I reflected on it whenever I needed a sense of tranquility. I ignored the reality that the baby Jesus probably cried a lot and that the manger setting was tainted with the stink of manure from the stable animals. (Those elements didn't enhance the tranquility I was after.)
- *Shroud of Turin Jesus*. This is the image I relied upon when I wanted to reflect on the mystical and metaphysical Jesus. Mystery and wonder are associated with the Shroud, and often I needed a little bit more of that in my faith.
- *Shepherd Jesus*. When facing the reality of my own going astray, I thought about Jesus as the shepherd, willing to leave the 99 for the sake of the one lost sheep.⁸

- *Soft and tender Jesus.* We've all been figuratively beat up at times. The worst kind of attack comes from other Christians. This is when we need a Jesus who came to the defense of those who were ridiculed by the religious establishment. We want him to treat us the way he treated the woman caught in adultery.⁹ Her accusers in the religious hierarchy were sent away speechless, and Jesus showed love and forgiveness to the woman without a word of critical judgment.
- *Tough-guy Jesus.* A soft and tender Jesus is fine, but I don't want him to be namby-pamby. At times, I needed to know that my faith was placed in a God who can take a stand and protect me when the going gets tough. This is when I envisioned the Christ who can overturn the tables of the crooks in the Temple in an outrage of righteous indignation.¹⁰

As expansive and accurate as this list is, it isn't exhaustive. It includes accurate images of God's character, but it is limited to the ones I wanted to envision. Conspicuously missing are the images of God's character that make me uncomfortable. In particular, I intentionally chose to ignore two portraits of God:

- *The holy Jesus.* I don't want to be reminded that God is holy.¹¹ To say God is holy is to say he is separated from evil. If I admit that holiness is part of God character, then the charge of Moses to "do what is right and good in the LORD's sight" requires that I abstain from my favorite evil practices. Most of my evil stuff doesn't seem all that bad to me, but it sets off alarm bells when measured by God's holiness standard.
- *The suffering Jesus.* I don't want to be reminded about the pain and agony that Christ endured at Calvary. This is why I much prefer the Protestant cross to the Catholic crucifix. For the Protestants, the cross is empty—it's a cross with nice, clean, unencumbered lines. The Catholics,

however, keep Jesus on the cross, usually slumped over from the torture he endured. I know it can be argued that the cross should be empty because Christ doesn't remain on the cross—he was buried and rose again. But if I picture only an empty cross in my mind, I can conveniently forget Christ's suffering and his sacrifice for my sin. To have an appropriate fear of God—a reverence for him that reflects the suffering at Calvary—I need a constant reminder of what Jesus endured on the cross. I need a constant reminder that my sin has a consequence that took Jesus to the cross. Only then will I be more inclined to refrain from it.

Over the years I've managed to conjure up a profile for God that minimizes the consequence of sin in my life. If my conceptualized god doesn't really object to sin, I don't need to worry about it. And that has been the problem. My sin didn't take me away from the god of my imagination, but it certainly disrupted my fellowship with the God who is—the God who cannot abide sin.

Sin Lingers

As it turns out, God is much more intolerant of sin than I am. He thinks it is a big deal. A very big deal. I, on the other hand, apparently have a much higher threshold of tolerance for it. At least this is the assessment I must make if I examine my track record. Intellectually and theologically, I know sin is bad. But evidence would suggest that I approach sin much like I deal with the unhealthy habit of eating potato chips—it is very pleasurable for the moment, so I give in to the urge more than I should, but I know that ultimately it is not beneficial for me, so I don't over-indulge. In the perspective of all of life, I apparently think that a little sin—like a few potato chips—can't be too bad if taken only occasionally and in moderation.

I manage to stay away from the egregious (and publicly noticeable) sins. I prefer the incognito variety. That way my wife, kids,

friends, and neighbors still consider me to be a good guy. As a result, a lot goes on in my head that isn't obvious to a casual observer. I'm an expert at losing my temper without causing any veins in my neck to throb noticeably. I'm quick at composing a snide and hateful remark without letting it slip out of my mouth. I can instantly flash a hand gesture at a driver who cuts me off on the freeway while managing to keep it obscured from the view of anyone riding in the shotgun seat. And as for my visits to the bookstore or the newsstands at the airport, I have developed extrasensory peripheral vision so I can stare at the sexually stimulating covers on the men's magazines while standing directly in front of the display section for business and finance periodicals. Other examples come to mind, but there is no need to get salacious in this discussion.

I'm not proud of this un-Christlike behavior, and I'd prefer to rid my life of it, but I allow it and live with it. And my guess is that you might be doing likewise, so we ought to be asking ourselves why. Why do we refrain from big sins but feel comfortable with lesser ones? I've been thinking about this question for a while, so allow me to postulate an answer that might be applicable for all of us. I think we assume that severe transgressions will have disastrous effects but that insignificant sins have little impact. Certainly that is true as far as legal ramifications are concerned. (Murder results in jail time, but you probably won't be incarcerated for flipping your middle finger at another driver.) But on a purely theological basis, this rule of proportionality between actions and consequences doesn't apply. All of our sins, regardless of how seemingly inconsequential, have a detrimental effect on our relationship with God.

If we were arrested for criminal conduct, I'm sure we'd be on our knees in the jail cell, praying for forgiveness. We would be faced with the stark reality that our behavior had broken our relationship with God, and we'd approach him with a reverent and repentant attitude. However, if our transgression is only a "little white lie," we think nothing of it, and we go on with life—including our

spiritual life—as if nothing had happened. But the fact remains that we knowingly violated God's principles with any untruth, and we're arrogantly and presumptuously pretending that such an affront to God is of no consequence. We mistakenly think that we can sin and that God won't notice. But our sin doesn't dissipate into thin air without a residual effect.

I'm reminded of my first date with my wife. We met in college when I was a sophomore and she was a freshman. She was out of my league, but I noticed her on the first day she came to campus, and I put the moves on her before any other guy could get to her. I didn't have a lot going for me in those days, but I was driving a nice sports car. It was a BMW coupe. This was the vehicle that I parked in front of her dorm when I picked her up for our first date. In a display of courtesy (that has dissipated over the years of our marriage), I escorted her to the car and opened the passenger door for her and then closed it after she was seated. At that very moment, the excitement of the circumstances caused volcanic eruptions in my gastrointestinal pipeage. I suddenly realized that I had better relieve myself of what was undoubtedly a buildup of noxious fumes before entering the vehicle. So I slowly strolled around the backside of the BMW while I successfully managed a controlled release of gases from my own backside. Believing that I had successfully avoided a disastrously embarrassing situation, I opened the door, sat in the driver's seat, closed the door behind me, and gave my date a look of confident suavity. To which she replied, "So, it followed you into the car." Apparently there was a residual odor that lingered beyond my recognition.

And so it is with our sin. Whether we are cognizant of it or not, the impact of our sin has a residual effect on our relationship with God. The impact lingers even though we may refuse to acknowledge it. To live in denial of our sin, to expect that our relationship with God continues unaffected, is to deny God's holiness. Acting as if nothing is wrong displays a blatantly unrepentant heart. How can we expect to enjoy an intimate relationship with

God when we are living in defiant disobedience to his precepts? How can we be sincere in our love for a holy God when we have absolutely no regard for his holiness?

Tattoos Are Not a Sin, but They Remind Me of Mine

My cavalier attitude toward God's holiness was revealed to me in a stark and abrupt manner a few years ago. It was the summer after my son graduated from high school, and I was on a cross-country trip with my writing partner. Before I departed, my son and I had an intense discussion about tattoos. He wanted one, and I said no. I told him I didn't have any objection to tattoos, but less-enlightened members of my generation might judge his character by outward appearances. I didn't want his prospects for employment after college graduation to be deterred by depictions on his epidermis that narrow-minded prospective employers wouldn't appreciate. The final words before my departure made clear that he would have no tattoos as long as I was the financial source of his sustenance.

Imagine my fury while traveling somewhere between Chicago and Seattle when my wife called and told me that my punk kid had gotten a tattoo. How dare he? How could he disrespect me so flagrantly? After all I had done for him and sacrificed for his benefit, how could he so easily defy me? I was going to deal harshly with him, so I planned to fly home to Fresno as soon as I reached Seattle. The list of penalties I would impose on him started with cutting off his tuition and got worse from there. The longer I drove, the more trouble he was in.

Then a weird thing happened. Unfortunately, I have no witness to the event that I'm about to describe because my writing partner was asleep in the shotgun seat of the car. But maybe this is the way God wanted it because this was just between him and me. I was driving in silence because radio reception was non-existent as we drove across Montana. But out of the silence came an audible voice that distinctly said: "What about your tattoos?"

My non-Pentecostal proclivities allowed me to dismiss the voice the first time, but a few moments later it returned. “What about your tattoos?”

Sensing this was a God voice, I replied, “Lord, you know I have no tattoos. My skin is as pure as the new-fallen snow.” (I couldn't help myself. I thought a little humor might diffuse the uncomfortable solemnity of the situation.) And then I heard the statement that cut to my heart, a statement I'll always remember (at least I hope I do). God said to me in words that were as penetrating as they were clearly enunciated: “What about the times when you defy me each time you intentionally sin?”

God slew me with that statement. It hurt because it was so true. I recognized defiance in my son's relationship with me, but I was totally oblivious to it in my relationship with God. Many times I had sinned with absolutely no regard to how God felt about it. How dare I do that to him? How could I disrespect him so flagrantly? After all he had done for me and his Son's sacrificial death for my benefit, how could I so easily defy him?

My son escaped much of the punishment I had planned for him. I gladly extended grace and forgiveness to him in acknowledgment of the much greater forgiveness and grace that God had bestowed on me. Both my son and I learned lessons from his tattoo, but my learning curve was greater than his.¹² I had been worshipping a God of my own design—one who wasn't bothered very much by sin. My god was fine with that. The God who is was not.

My son's childish defiance was easy for me to see, but I had been blind to my spiritual defiance of my heavenly Father. I had become insensitive to how much my sin offended and disappointed God because I had conveniently overlooked God's attributes of holiness and righteousness. I had made him into a god I wanted rather than revering him as the God he is. As a result, I had grown comfortable with my sin, and by tolerating sin in my life, I had no chance of experiencing the abundant life that Christ promised I could have.



We are to love God with all of our heart, soul, and strength. But we'll be wasting our time if we're directing that love to a fake god that we formulated according to our own selfish preferences. The real God exists, and part of our wholehearted love requires that we discover and worship him in all his fullness—as he is, not as we prefer him to be. When we remove our misconceptions about him, we will be much more likely to love him because of who he is.

Getting a Glimpse of God

ABANDONING YOUR RELIGION FOR A RELATIONSHIP

Sometimes seeing God is difficult because he gets lost in all of the trappings and extraneous details that we associate with Christianity. We lose sight of him because we're too concerned with doing Christianity correctly. We're too busy looking at ourselves—examining what we're doing and how we're doing it. It's hard to see God when we're preoccupied with looking at ourselves.



Many of us Christians have reduced our faith to a religion (yes, I am complicit). Christianity has been misconstrued—by its own adherents—to be a checklist of things to do and things to refrain from. You get points for checking good things off the list, and you get demerits for doing the bad things on the list. You become a better Christian by following the list religiously, and our gospel message is all about the list instead of our Savior.

Christ-centered believers appropriately recoil at such notions.

But we make a mistake if we reject the teachings of the Old Testament on the erroneous notion that the Ten Commandments are the origin of “checklist Christianity.” Moses knew a thing or two (or ten) about the inscriptions on those stone tablets, and he certainly didn’t consider them to be a checklist of behavior that qualifies one to be worthy of God’s favor. Just the opposite. The Ten Commandments describe a person who is engaged in a love relationship with God.

Moses enumerated the Ten Commandments in one of his farewell addresses to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 5). Several verses later (Deuteronomy 6:5), he summarized the Ten Commandments by entreating the Israelites to simply love God with all their heart, soul, and strength. Instead of saying that the Big Ten are a checklist of required behavior, he presented them as a lifestyle that will naturally follow if one is wholeheartedly in love with God. When viewed from this perspective, the Ten Commandments are more about a relationship than they are about rules to be religiously followed.

Jesus explained the same view of the Ten Commandments when a Pharisee tried to stump him with what seemed to be a theological brainteaser. Of course, it was only a complex theological question for those who viewed the Ten Commandments as rules rather than the lifestyle reflection of a relationship:

One of [the Pharisees], an expert in religious law, tried to trap [Jesus] with this question: “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?”

Jesus replied, “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”¹³

Jesus referred to Moses’ statement in Deuteronomy. And in so doing, he confirmed that God is more interested in a relationship than a religion of rules and regulations.

I'm the first to admit that I like checklists, especially religious ones. They allow me to conform on the outside without having to be transformed on the inside. (Maybe that is why God abhors them.) And my self-esteem is stroked if I think God loves me better and more than he loves those who don't have as many points as I have accumulated. And sometimes I even get to the outrageous place of suspecting that God is happy to have me on his team because I am such a high achiever: Is it any wonder that he saved someone like me, who has racked up so many points on the checklist?

But then I come crashing back to reality when I realize that God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt *before* he gave them the Ten Commandments. He didn't save them because they were good and followed the checklists. He saved them because *he* is good. God gave them the Ten Commandments in the post-rescue shelter and safety of Mt. Sinai to remind them what a life looks like when it has been dedicated to him. Only *after* he had already extended grace to them did he give them ten descriptive profiles for their appropriate response.

My affinity for checklists is totally misplaced. I like them because I think they make me look good. But I should be using them as a benchmark to see if I'm properly responding to God's goodness. I'm inappropriately using them to bolster my religion, but God wants me to use them as an indicator of the quality of my relationship with him. The apostle Paul says this is the appropriate way to worship God:

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.¹⁴

Paul is saying that our lifestyle and attitudes shouldn't be governed by rules, but should be the outgrowth of our

relationship with Christ. When we consider all that God has done for us, shouldn't we desire to live in a manner that pleases him?



Moses, Jesus, and Paul all agree. We should dump all notions that we relate to God by means of a religion. We should forget the rules and abandon the checklists. They aren't necessary if we are serious about developing a wholehearted, loving relationship with God. If you are only involved in a religion, you won't see God; you've got to be in a relationship with him for that to happen.