**Judging**

“You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Yet that’s become our national obsession in politics, business, socially, you name it. We’re fixated on the exterior, the paint job, the bling bling.

We’ve all conversed at a party with someone who gives you no eye contact ‘cause he’s scanning the room for bigger fish. Well, I confess; I slipped on that very banana peel this month in Chicago at a conference of senior officers of corporations large and small. (I was there representing “small,” of course! Make that minute!)

Three titans of industry spoke, and our emcee was a well-known U.S. Congressman. Whaddya know, of all the tables of eight at lunch, I just “happened” to find a seat next to this legislator…who’s now my first-name friend!

Marketing espouses that perception *is* reality. So, businesses invest millions in branding. But recent scandals revealed that many of them aren’t the paragons of profit they masqueraded as.

Maybe, as an individual brand yourself, you’ve felt misunderstood, mischaracterized or unfairly pigeon-holed.

**Here’s today BIG QUESTION: What are the most common criteria\* by which we Americans tend to evaluate each other?**

**(DISCUSSION)**

(\* wealth, power, fame, position, influence, family, education, appearance, possessions, by what we think they can or can’t do for us.)

Categorizing others is today’s sport of choice. We poll just for kicks. *PEOPLE* magazine is our national bible (small b). We tuck, we nip, primp and schmooze. That’s Job One. It’s all about image.

Maybe you’ve thought, “Is there anyone who really *knows* and *understands* me? Even those close to me know only what I *let* them. But if they X-rayed my private life, they’d excommunicate me.”

The Bible says God knows every iota about us, each thought, action and sinew. He knows us better than we know us -- because we’re even strangers to ourselves. **Let’s see Proverbs 20:24, p. 487.**

24 A person’s steps are directed by the LORD.   
   How then can anyone understand their own way?

Even a very strong man’s breath is a gift from God. Since God Himself is the **Giver of life,** only a fool assumes that he knows its full meaning.

About 1,000 B.C. Jesse’s kid David, the sheepherding songwriter, who would be Israel’s second king, spent his youth in Palestine’s fields, pondering and articulating God’s profound attributes --- like God’s being everywhere at once, knowing all things, being all-powerful, being sinless, and having no beginning or end.

If we were to judge this Hebrew teen David by his appearance as a smelly field hand, we’d assume he was rough, crude, untutored, a low achiever. But let’s slip into David’s sandals, and gawk at the insights God gives this kid while he’s tending earth’s dumbest animals. **Let’s read Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24, p. 467.**

**“Is Turn About Fair Play?”**

OK, so we apply wrong yardsticks in assessing others. **But by what criteria does creation’s Highest Sovereign Power judge you?**

**(DISCUSSION)**

How well does God know us? How important is it for us to know Him in a personal, connected way? **Let’s hear Jesus as He speaks to His dirty dozen in Matthew 10:26-34, p. 724.**

Do Jesus’ words in Matthew 10 motivate you? What *is* your biggest motivator? Guilt, lust, greed, competition, self-image, religion, altruistic service? Paul I.D.’s the world’s most compelling force. **Let’s read it in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, p. 860.**

The second you and I step down from the throne of our lives and give the Lord His rightful place, God gives us the spiritual inheritance that Paul cites in his letter to the believers in ancient Turkey. Get a load o’ this as we **read Ephesians 2:1-10, p. 869.**

Regardless of what others say about you, God invites you to focus on how much He loves you, and on what He’s done and will do to continue proving it. There’s no substitute for *knowing* that the One who made you loves you with no strings. For the Christ-follower, “what you KNOW trumps what you FEEL!”

Could it be that might be misjudging Christ? Paul did -- before he met Jesus and did a 180. First century Jews and Gentiles saw Jesus the God-Man, and most kissed Him off as a penny ante Messiah-imposter, God-cursed, and deserving His fate on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:16). Paul misread Jesus so badly that he led a Jewish jihad to wipe out Christ’s earliest followers (Acts 7:55-8:3, 9:1-2).

**“Take Some And Pass It On”**

After encountering the back-from-the-dead Christ, Paul sees Him for who He is – Lord of all, Son of the one true God, Giver of life, the One to whom all mortals will one day be accountable (Acts 9:17-22, Philippians 2:5-11, 3:17-21, 2 Corinthians 5:10).

God loves you, zits and all. Yet because of the cross, He sees *all* of us as ***forgiven*** (2 Corinthians 5:19), but not yet all are in His family….because some have yet to take that faith step of believing.

If Jesus could say, “Father, forgive these misguided ones who are crucifying me,” if God could transform His enemy Paul into His own top gun, then how can we view others as anything other than fellow sinners whom God loves as much as He loves us (Romans 5:8)?

God wants to rescue each of us from sin’s penalty and power, even *while* we’re running away from Him! And contrary to much popular speculation, He’s not waiting for us to clean up our act first.

Now Paul unveils the bio of every Jesus-follower (2 Corinthians 5:17). He announces that we’ve been made into “a new creation,” IN CHRIST, 100% forgiven! Our “old man” (old sinful nature) remains in us, subject to temptation, aging and physical death, but God’s Holy Spirit comes to live IN us, giving us a new nature (“new man”), empowered to overcome sin and live for Christ (Colossians 3:1-17).

It doesn’t get any better than the release God gives the new believer from the guilt and shame of his sin and past. And God’s priceless gift of forgiveness and acceptance is the gift we can keep on giving away, even to those who’ve wounded us deeply.

**How we treat people demonstrates how well we know what God really thinks of us. How could knowing that God loves and forgives you *completely* change how you treat others?**

**(DISCUSSION)**

**“Let’s Faith It”**

Why not take God up on His generous offer of forgiveness and adoption into His family as a full-fledged son of God by telling Him something like this before we leave today: “God, I don’t know why You’d let your Son be crucified to pay the debt I owe for my sins, to spare me from spending eternity in a place You call hell. But I take your word that Jesus’ death and resurrection are my paid-for ticket to spend eternity with You. Please walk through the front door of my life, be my Lord, and go with me through this world into the next. With all the faith You’ve given me, I now humbly accept Jesus as my Savior. Thank You, Father. Amen.”

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