

Distortions

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Romans 12:1-3 (CEB)

So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you.

Have you ever picked up a curved piece of glass and looked through it?

Even though the piece of glass is clear --- when you look through it ---

Nothing is quite right.

The curvature of the glass causes everything to become distorted

The very center may stay normal, but as you move toward the edges --- everything changes

Too often --- many people live their lives looking through curved glasses

We distort the world around us --- and often have a hard time finding our way.

The problem is --- not only do we distort the world around us --- we distort the image of God.

There is a phrase that I often find myself using in response to people who tell me that that they don't (or no longer) believe in God.

As they tell me all the reasons they don't believe in God --- I have been known to quip back: "I don't believe in the God that you don't believe in either."

I love the puzzled look they give me

The image that we have created of God is often distorted from the image of God presented in the biblical story.

Now before I get too far down this path --- I will fully admit that the biblical story does not always present a consistent image of God --- it too has distortions.

But the image of God that I have learned to cling to is the image of God presented in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

As a Christian --- a follower of Jesus --- I do my best to filter my life through the piece of glass that Jesus gives to me.

I want to pause and talk a little about the idea of why I think that our images of God are important.

First, please realize that images and ideas or beliefs are not necessarily the same thing.

Images are not abstract ideas that we simply assent to.

Images are pictures.

Powerful combination of thoughts and feelings.

When we were infants --- long before we could use and understand words --- we thought in pictures and images.

We created a memory bank of images and those images are loaded with emotional context.

Our mother's face when she is happy --- and when she is sad.

Our father's face when he is angry or laughing

These --- along with a myriad of other images are stored in the deep recesses of our memory.

These images became linked with the soothing we felt or with the increased fear we felt in interacting with these important faces and voices.

These emotionally laden images of parents or of other early caretakers form the basic foundation of our expectations in relationships with all other people, including God.

What is fascinating to me is that our declarations about God --- what we might call creedal or doctrinal affirmations about God may not be the same as our images of God.

- We may BELIEVE that God is a God of Love
- But our image of God may be one of a warrior or bully

When our image and belief do not align it is often our image that wins out.

These internalized images often can contain significant distortions about what we BELIEVE about God.

Why is this important? Let me offer three suggestions.

First, our images of God can have a significant impact on our behaviors even without our conscious awareness.

A second reason is that they often impact our spiritual well-being.

And a third reason is that our images of God are related to our images of ourselves. Unfortunately for every distortion one has of God there is usually a corresponding self-distortion.

A. W. Tozer, in his book, The Knowledge of the Holy, wrote:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

Without a clear view of God --- our very life often becomes distorted

A distorted image of God is simply a belief in a lie that can keep us from trusting, from being vulnerable, or from stepping out in faith on God's promises.

For years I BELIEVED that God is love.

I would proclaim that in my words

But my actions did not always match that statement

I believed that God is love --- except, or only if . . .

God is love to people who are like God

But if you are not a Christian

Believe in other Gods

Don't believe the right things about God

Then God is a vengeful God . . .

I don't know where that came from

Even though we like to talk about unconditional love --- most of us really don't practice it.

We are told to "Love others as yourself"

But we tend to distort that in a variety of ways.

We hear: "Love others instead of self" or maybe even

"Love self instead of others"

Greek philosopher Xenophanes said,

"Men always create gods in their own image."

Our view of God is distorted because we tend to project our flaws, defects, and inadequacies on God.

We project our bad qualities onto God as a defense mechanism because it is too painful and threatening to admit that these negative things are actually true about us.

Thus, we see God as the one who is

selfish,

lazy,

indifferent,

immature,

disingenuous,

mean,

exploitive,

condemning,

shallow,
arrogant,
incompetent,
critical,
hateful,
condescending,
petty,
dumb,
cruel,
confused,
fickle,
shaming,
cold,
indecisive,
and unkind.

But --- God, as found in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus --- is not anything like that

Rather than be fair and honest about just how different God is from us, we unconsciously bring God down to a human level by projecting our worst qualities onto God.

So how does one move past our distorted images of God?

Let me share a story.

Julie Lavender shared this story:

Most mornings as I put my contacts in, I pray, "Thank you, God, for the gift of sight." But one morning after a difficult night at church with teenagers, I used the time instead for a gripe session. "I'm done, God. I'm through volunteering with youth. They're not appreciative. They're disrespectful. They're just a bunch of self-absorbed kids who can't focus for even one minute on anything else." All the while, I fought with my contacts. I fumbled one, flipped the other. Aloud, I half-heartedly asked God, "What are you trying to tell me — that I'm seeing this all wrong?"

With some thought, I realized that I had been the self-absorbed one. Instead of seeing the young person with recently separated parents, I saw misbehavior. Instead of someone with an underage drinking problem, I saw disrespect. Where I should have seen one struggling with a cutting problem, I saw anger. God reminded

me that Jesus “took the children in his arms” (Mark 10:16). He loved them, cared for them, and was deeply concerned about their lives. And we are called to show the same compassion. I prayed — for the kids, for their issues, and for my blurred vision. And I vowed that rather than showing them my disapproval, I would show them my love.

The way to change our images is to first and foremost be honest with ourselves.

To look at our images of God --- not simply what we proclaim to believe --- but what comes out of our mouth in a moment of stress or confrontation.

The hardest part of ever changing our behavior is to accept that we need to change.

We need to ask ourselves:

What are my worst fears about God?

How do I think God sees me?

What do I think God expects of me?

What pictures come to mind when I think about God?

This kind of exploration can be painful, but it is the kind of truth-telling which can lead to healing.

And while self-help and self-reflection are important.

The real healer of our distorted images is the Spirit.

Are we willing to take the time to examine ourselves and then allow the Spirit to enter into our lives and heal us?

Our distortions of God can be destructive.

Destructive to ourselves

And destructive to those around us.

May we have the courage to look at our images of God --- and begin the hard work of bringing our beliefs and our actions into harmony.