

SEEING GOD'S FACE

Matthew 5:8

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Les Miserable is French Victor Hugo's novel published the first time in 1862. It's been remade over and over throughout decades, both on stage and on screen, packed with beautiful and powerful songs over the theme of forgiveness, repentance, justice, and love. I watched the movie in 2012 and some lines from a song that they sang lingered in my mind for days. It went like this, "To love another person is to see the face of God." Apparently, it was a very powerful line to me. I subtly remembered that I had come across similar lines in the Bible. Later, I found the lines shared resemblance with Jacob's remarks to his brother Esau when they reconciled, "If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably." (Gen. 33:10)

We were made in God's image. We Christians should have known that well. Created in the image of the triune God, we are meant to be in loving, self-giving relationships with one another. God created humans, earth, animals to live in harmony in the garden of Eden. Each kind operated in an interdependent-harmony fashion. There were rules that sustained this beautiful balance. Human were endowed with a servanthood privilege to rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all creatures that move along the ground (Gen 1:26). Within the human race itself, they were called to be partners in helping one another (2:20). But we know the rest of the story in Eden. Because of the fall, all kind of relationships that humans had were broken. Humans were against other humans (they blamed each other), human against nature, and of course human against God. Those interdependent harmony relationships shattered as human turned their backs on God.

The problem with a fallen, broken world

In the fallen world, we find that self-centeredness dominates human interactions. We value others as long as they benefit us. Everything now is measured according to our own interests. This self-centered ego is the ultimate manifestation of sins that creates chaos, injustice, and disharmony in every level of life. Les Miserable portrays the broken world from individual, social, to national levels. Abusive power, vulnerability exploited, social problems, injustice, poverty, and fear of the past. Fantine, one character in the movie tragically embedded the fallen world. Fantine is a young orphaned working-class woman in Paris who becomes pregnant by a rich student. After he abandons her, she is forced to look after their child, Cosette, on her own. Originally a pretty and naïve girl, Fantine is eventually forced by circumstances to become a prostitute, selling her hair and front teeth, losing her beauty and health (wikipedia.com). In a song that she sings poignantly, she tells a story about her dreams of a never-ending love; about her young life with a man who later left her alone asking forgiveness from God. Her life is a misery. She sings that someday she has a life that is so different from the hell she's living. But poor Fantine, life itself has killed the dreams she dreamed.

#video clip-Fantine's song "I Dreamed A Dream" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJ7ODztohVg>

Our world today might be different than life in Les Miserables that was set in 1800. But today we are still struggling with despair, hopelessness, evil, injustice, brokenness, anxiety, and fear. In every level of life. In eternal perspective, we see that there are powers and principalities relentlessly trying to snatch us from the hands of God. Trying to rob us of peace, joy, and hope.

God's answer

But here is the good news! We have never been abandoned neither forsaken by God in our misery and despair. The Gospel says that "God so loved the world that He gave one and only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "Jesus offers Himself as God's doorway into the life that is truly life. Confidence in Him leads us today, as in other times, to become apprentices to eternal living" (Dallas Willard). As we stride forward on this eternal journey as pilgrims on earth, we who have been redeemed by the power of Jesus' blood are called to be people to live out our life with eternal perspective. We are to see this fallen world in its original purposes, the way it should affect the way we relate to others. How are we supposed to relate with others in this fallen world?

Seeing God in Different Cultures

I love the idea of being connected with people with different culture. It is always my passion. That is my primary reasons why I joined New Hope Bible Fellowship when I came as a grad student in 2015. Having a good vision of the global church and multi-cultural environment, New Hope has been giving me a foretaste of heaven where people from different tongue, language, culture, race, including age come together to unite and worship the true God.

Culture reflects how creative and rich our heavenly Father is. The directness of North Americans, the collectivist tendency of Asians, the large power distance of Africans, the external locus of Latinos are manifestations of the diverse culture that God allows under heaven. Nevertheless, as a fallen creature we human could not comprehend the beauty of this diversity. Very often our differences are division instruments among us. Race, skin color, language, appetite are potential sources for disunity. In New Hope, instead of being contradicted those differences are being celebrated.

A Pure Heart to See God's Face in Others

Matthew 5: 8, "Blessed are pure in heart, for they will see God." Nevertheless, the Bible informs us that no one has seen God, except Jesus (John 6:46). In 1 John 4:12 states, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us". We are not able to see God's face because we cannot stand His holiness. Even Moses only saw the back of God when God showed him His glory (Exodus22:23). His holiness is like consuming fire. But only in Jesus, we get a glimpse to see God's face in others since no matter what, we human are created in His image reflecting His beauty, goodness, and love. The late Henry Nouwen once said, "Ministry is first of all, receiving God's blessings from those to whom we minister. What is this blessing? It is a glimpse of the face of God."

Nevertheless, it is not by default we're able to see God the moment we see others. Hatred, prejudice, judgment, insecurity are the manifestations of the powers and principalities getting in the way of us seeing love, goodness, and beauty in others. We need a purified heart, so we can see God in them.

In the Bible the heart is deemed the source of life, the quintessence of someone. When Samuel was assigned by God to look for a new king replacing Saul, it was not a stunning outward appearance that God looked for. Among his brothers, David won God's favor because of his pure heart (1 Sam 16:12). On the other side, because it's the source of life, Satan will never stop to win over our heart. He will tell pretentious truth to slant our heart in many different ways: intellectually, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Take a look at what senior devil Screwtape has advised to young inexperienced demon Wormwood whom he mentors, "The horror of the Same Old Thing is

one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart—an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship.” (C.S.Lewis’ book *The Screwtape Letters*). Proverb 4:23 says, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

A pure heart is needed to see God. Now we want to ask: how can we have a pure heart and guard it from evil?

Having a pure heart

First of all, only in Jesus can a heart be purified. No one can come to the Father without Jesus. In Jesus, we have a new identity to pursue truth, love, goodness, beauty, and wisdom. Without Jesus, there will not be a pure heart. Scripture, from beginning to end, stresses the vital need for conversion, for it is the means of knowing life, eternal life. The need for conversion is essential because of the nature of sin that is messing around with the humans’ heart. The only hope for transformation, for life with God as a child of God, is a complete and radical conversion as our heart purified by the blood of Christ.

Secondly, train our heart to seek the Lord in every occasion. Brother Lawrence is a good example for this. For Brother Lawrence, “common business,” no matter how mundane or routine, was the medium of God’s love. The issue was not the sacredness or worldly status of the task but the motivation behind it. “Nor is it needful that we should have great things to do. . . We can do little things for God; I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for love of him... It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God” (Brother Lawrence). In our routine – be it in our studies, works, hang outs with friends--, we fiercely align our heart with God’s so evil has no a slight chance to detour us.

Thirdly, a disengagement practice. In the Bible, we see good examples of disengagement from Jesus.

- When Jesus is about to start his ministry, he leaves the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Luke records for us he ate nothing for forty days and was being tempted by the devil three times. Jesus took the act of disengagement to prepare himself to engage the ministry that will lead him to Calvary.
- When the news about him spread all the more so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses, Jesus withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

In being alone with Father, just like Jesus did, we find strength. Our hectic, frenzied world seems to demand that we are the most productive person by keeping us busy. To the world, disengagement was a failure. Time is money, and no one can literally save time. But to Christians, our disengagement with the world is an opportunity to hear God’s voice more clearly. We hear his voice as we meditate on his words and ponder about our relationships with others. Sometimes, we can even hear God’s whisper as the wind blows and see his presence by staring at the blue sky. This is a practice that we need to learn every day, so we don’t get tangled by worldliness.

Fourthly, engage our world in a servanthood posture. We ask God in what ways we please him every day and in what simple ways we stimulate others to see God through our lives. Most of the time, faithfulness to little things are actually effective ways to serve the world. You don’t have to stand behind a pulpit and preach sermons; you don’t have to be an extravaganza worship leader, a skillful musician or other flashy- up-center positions to engage the world. Start from simple things you have and do it faithfully, then your Heavenly faithful Father will bless your works. And at the end of the day as we go to bed, we will be so much more thankful as we whisper gratitude to God.

Lastly, by being present to surroundings because God's Kingdom is about relationship and happening at the moment. It is very easy for us to overlook this beautiful truth when we connect with others as we are hassled with our business. Sometimes we reduce people into technical relationships. We take every relationship we have for granted because for us they are only names in a certain time and space. But it will make a huge difference if we see start to listen to their stories and seek where God is working in their lives. Every moment we have with them, our laughter, our tears, our jokes, even our misunderstanding for one another are the part of the beauty of reflecting God's image. We become more authentic to our emotion and feeling. John Chrysostom, an archbishop of Constantinople said, "Find the door of your heart, you will discover it is the door of the kingdom of God."

Living in this fallen world, we are constantly tempted to see others and the world from a self-centered posture. But as people redeemed by the blood of Christ who has seen the Face of our Heavenly Father, we are enabled to see what He created just like He does. He purifies our hearts, so we are able to see a glimpse of God's face in others. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Prayer: Lord, purify our hearts to become an effective communicator of Your love and grace to others. So, in our life together we see a glimpse of your face and also others can see You in and through our lives. Amen.