

# IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

---

## Why It Matters So Much What We Think of People

Text: Psalm 8

### All That Glitters

One of our church members recently recounted to me the story of a woman named, Lorena, who directs the Onessimu Brother's Home in Timisoara, Romania.<sup>1</sup> The home – which this church helps support -- was founded by our mission partner, Eugen Groza, to provide a place for homeless kids left deserted after the fall of communism in 1989. Trying to learn more about the background of an eleven year-old boy there, Lorena went to the child's original village and there found a run-down house in which there lived the boy's 85 year-old grandmother, her 40 year-old mentally-retarded son, and a five-year old girl.

The little girl cowered in a corner, curled up in a tight ball. She was unable to walk and wouldn't talk. For most of her short years, the child had been daily molested by her retarded Uncle. The year was 1998 and Romanian law provided no means by which the girl could be delivered from the house. Unless someone had personally witnessed the abusive acts, the government said they could do nothing. Lorena said, "I knew I would never forget [that girl's] gorgeous eyes. As empty and terrified as she was, there was a sparkle there – an unforgettable beauty."

It can be hard nowadays to see the spark inside of people. We live in a world where "image is everything" – and that image, it seems, is all about the externals. Every shiny cover, store, and television program proclaims the message that how you look, what you own, where you live, what you wear or drive, are the great determiners of worth. There's even a magazine called "Worth" that displays how beauty, youth, health, and wealth – the new iPod, the next fashion or star -- are now all the rage.

None of us want to be superficial, of course. But it is hard not to allow these externals to become the lens through which we assign value to ourselves. *"How am I looking these days? How do other people think I look?"* As much as might try to think otherwise, these appearances become the filter that forms our vision of the worth of other people too. *"Do I want to spend time with that person? He or she looks sort of poor or paunchy, sort of wild or weird, sort of gay, or gray, or frayed."* These outside things can even become the grid by which we determine not only our value and vision, but also our vocation in life. We get to asking *"Will this job, this investment of time or money, this school, church, club, or organizational involvement help or hurt my image?"* *On what basis would I ever choose to do anything about that little girl cowering in the corner?*

### The Message in the Stars & Scriptures

The Psalmist had to understand questions like those. If any body knew about chasing the external things, it was David the Psalmist. He had risen from impoverished beginnings as an obscure shepherd boy to become the powerful head of the state of Israel. He had gained glittering wealth. He had drawn beautiful women to his bed, surrounded himself with admirers, won himself a place in the history books.

And yet, as he stared up into the stars one night, David had a moment of supreme clarity. He found himself driven to his knees by the far greater glory of God's creation and the infinitely larger majesty of the King of the Universe himself. **"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?"** David asked.

It is a question that all of us must ask, because the answer to that question is the basis of everything. Somehow, we must look past the superficial stars and stuff of our time and recognize what stupidity there is in this preoccupation human beings have with the outside image. Eventually, gravity, rust, the winds of time alter the surface of everything. External beauty withers, youth passes, health goes, fame fades, wealth won't save us from dying. Only eternity remains. And what is man?

The Christian worldview answers that question. It does so by defining "image" in very different terms than it is used today. The Bible teaches that the most precious and potent truth about humanity is that human beings are made in God's image. Genesis 1:27 puts it like this: **"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."** This image has nothing to do with externals and everything to do with the internal. We do not look like God on the outside. Our likeness to God is on the inside. God made human beings *spiritual, relational, creative* beings like him. And this image has at least three implications – for you, for me, for that little girl in Romania, for everyone on earth.

### **Image Affects Value**

For one thing, being made in the image of God makes us calculate and cultivate our VALUE differently than the world will tell us to. We remember that our value doesn't come from the material realities of our lives; it comes from the *spiritual* reality. The Apostle Peter said it like this: **"Your beauty [does] not come from outward adornment... Instead, it [is] that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."**<sup>2</sup>

Why do we spend so much energy tending to our surfaces and so little tending to our souls? Why do we spend so much time building our resumes and so little on building our relationship with God? Why the passion for the external and not for the eternal? The great Russian writer, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, once rightly observed that: "The meaning of existence is to preserve unspoiled, undisturbed, and undistorted the image of eternity with which each person is born."

So how is that preservation project going with you? If you are not regularly involved in a Christian community or small group, if you are not practicing the spiritual disciplines during the week, or using the Spiritual Health Planner, what IS your preservation strategy? Your spirit is the most precious, the only eternal, the truly valuable thing about you. As the Psalmist said: “[God] made [you just] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned [you] with glory and honor.” So remember your royal identity. Refuse to just look like royalty.

### Image Affects Vision

If you know that human beings have been made in the image of God, it also has a *relational* impact. It won't just affect your own sense of value; it will give you a VISION of the value of other people. As the Apostle James said, it can be appalling how we run down other people. **“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse [people], who have been made in God's likeness.”**<sup>3</sup> If you understand the image of God, then you are going to treat every person you meet as an eternal being. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, you'll view every individual as “the holiest object presented to your senses.”

This means that you'll not only be one of those rare people who curse people less, you'll be one of those remarkable people who choose others whom many people overlook. When the prophet Samuel was looking for the next King of Israel, God led him to the house of Jesse. Jesse had a whole quiver full of impressive sons. So Samuel picked the oldest, obviously strongest and best-looking kid as the prime candidate. **“But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have [picked the youngest son, David.] The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.’”**<sup>4</sup>

Once upon a time, a man walked through this Shallow Hal world of ours and showed a remarkable interest in those who society deemed to be throwaways: the physically-unfit leper, lame or blind man; the socially-unfit: prostitute, Samaritan, tax-collector, woman, or child; the economically-unfit: widow, orphan, or poor person. Was Jesus just an unusually soft-hearted man? It's hard to think that when you see him turning over tables in the temple, or staring down Pilate and Herod without blinking, or directing traffic from the Cross. No, Jesus just had VISION.

What about you and me? When we encounter the cowering girl in the corner, the old lady with the hair on her chin, the guy out of work, the person waiting on us, the fat person, the man with the beat-up car, the unwanted baby, the awkward kid, the prisoner in the cell, will we think – how can involvement with this person help my image? Or will we think, how can I honor theirs? How can I look for and encourage their heart?

### Image Affects Vocation

In James Patterson's bestselling novel, *Lifeguard*, a down-on-his-luck man named Ned Kelly goes in search of a rather unremarkable but stolen painting by a lesser known artist named Henri Gaume. Kelly pays dearly in the course of his search for the stolen work. He loses loved ones, suffers injury and isolation, and even goes to prison. Only in the end, however, does Kelly come to see how worthwhile the search has been. For beneath the surface of the ordinary painting lies a spectacular image – a masterpiece of priceless value.

Which brings me to the final idea I want to share with you today. Being made in the image and likeness of God also means that we are beings of creative VOCATION. The Psalmist put it this way: **“You [God] made [human beings] ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet.”** In other words, God, you called us to be creative stewards of the masterpieces you have you made. And sometimes, someone takes that call very, very seriously.

For three years, Lorena and a group of lawyers worked to get the Romanian law changed that prevented the rescue of abused children. Finally, in November of 2001, they succeeded. A law was passed allowing the State to remove children from situations in which there was reasonable likelihood of abuse. Shortly after that, Lorena visited a State run facility for mentally-retarded children. As she walked through the dormitory, Lorena caught the eye of a girl about 9 years-old. There was something about the *sparkle* in those eyes that triggered a memory. Gently, she asked the child her name. *“I am Dunda,”* the girl said. Did she have a brother? What village did she come from? The girl answered meekly -- and Lorena knew for sure.

*“Please let me have this child,”* Lorena asked the staff there. *“We can teach and nurture her.”* The authorities said, and I quote: *“Forget her. She is garbage. Nothing will come of her.”* But Lorena would not forget her. Eugen Groza had recently opened Deborah's House, a home for young girls which many of you have helped fund through our Spirit Village ministry. Lorena now also directed this venture and kept begging the State orphanage to release the child to her. At long last, they did.

Today, Dunda is almost 12 years-old. She finished the third grade last June. The girl who once could not walk or talk, the forgotten girl given up as hopeless garbage, finished first in her class. **This is what she looks like today** -- a masterpiece slowly being redeemed through the love of Christ and his family. Can you see the light in her eyes?



God can. He can see the sparkle in every eye: The unborn child, the man in prison, the old woman sitting alone in the rest home, the young person who has almost given up on life, the discouraged or despairing person hearing my voice now. God sees into your eyes and mine. As the Psalmist observed, this light He finds there is more luminous than the moon and the stars. It is the sparkle of those He has made just a little bit lower than the heavenly beings. It is the light of those whom the eternal King himself has crowned with glory and honor. However faded or distorted it may be, this sparkle is our spiritual value, it is our relational vision, it is our creative vocation. It is what makes us most like Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God.

Let us pray...

*Lord God, "What would you have Christ Church be known for?" I pray that we will be known as the people who understand their value in your eyes and keep on cultivating it. I pray that we'll be known as the people who have a vision for the worth of all persons – no matter what their appearance. I pray that we'll be known as the ones who grasp our vocation – to be witnesses of the life-changing love of Jesus that transforms even those the world deems garbage into the glorious children of God. For, O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth, and in that name WE pray. Amen.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Carol Dill for recounting this story to me. Much of the rich detail and color of this story was supplied by Carol following her recent visit to Timisoara.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 3:3-4

<sup>3</sup> James 3:9

<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7