

The Transforming Power of Beauty

I came across a concept recently that has helped me in the ongoing journey of change between the “Dan” I used to be and the “Dan” I am now in Christ. It’s a truth that, in some way, I’ve known for some time. But what I needed was someone to crystalize the thought. In effect, the concept is how beauty changes us.

It was brought to light in Timothy Keller’s amazing little book titled, “Generous Justice.” In it he was quoting another author (a Harvard English professor), named Elaine Scarry (not exactly a stellar name for an English professor). These were Scarry’s thoughts about beauty (paraphrased by Keller).

Statement 1: “the observer of beauty always receives a passion to share the beauty with others.”

Statement 2: “beauty radically ‘decenters’ the self and moves you to distribute attention away from yourself.”

Human experience will almost unanimously affirm these two statements as true. When we find something strikingly beautiful we almost instantly draw others to experience the beauty – the beauty of a great recipe, the beauty of a great restaurant, the beauty of a crimson sunset sky or a newborn baby (statement two). In addition, beauty calls one out of the self-centered, self-absorbed state in which most humans live, and toward itself. To this day, I can still remember what my wife wore when I first saw her – the blue dress. She drew me out of myself to behold beauty. And did it change me? Yes. My will was almost irresistibly drawn toward the beauty.

The next step was to think about these statements in light of Scripture. Why were men like king David and the apostle Paul so passionate in their pursuit of God (and Christ)? The simple answer was, *beauty*. “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and gaze upon the *beauty* of the Lord...” (Psalm 27:4). It was the beauty of all that God was to David (steadfast in love, grace, power, goodness, purity etc) that drew David’s heart out of brokenness and up toward God. Paul writes that, “we all, with unveiled face, *beholding* the *glory* of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree o glory to another...” (1 Cor. 3:18). Beauty and glory are different words for the same thing. What is glorious is by definition beautiful. Paul’s own approach of change was to behold beauty. And as we do, we are transformed from one degree to the next.

Why is the transforming power of God’s beauty important? Because most of us seek change by first looking inward – disgusted by our failures, strangled by our doubts, tired of trying to muster up the energy to be “better.” That is, our gaze is often upon what is *broken* rather than on what is *beautiful*. The way forward in our amazing journey is not to gaze inward, but to gaze upward “at the beauty of the Lord” – in creation, in the Scripture, and ultimately the unsearchable riches of Christ. May God grant us grace to fix our eyes on Jesus, not on fixing ourselves. Only then will we find the will to run hard after him and draw others to do the same.