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**CELEBRATING  
HOW GOD MADE YOU  
AND EVERYONE YOU KNOW**

**DISCOVER  
YOUR  
Gifts**

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# Everyone Is a Gift

**THE POWER OF SEEING PEOPLE  
AS GOD SEES THEM**

**K**ing David was writing psalms of prayer and praise three millennia before Lewis began writing his thoughtful Christian prose. And the poet William Langland was writing his influential masterpiece in the Middle Ages. But all three were profoundly struck when God allowed them to see people as he sees them.

David was offered a soul-altering vision of how God saw him as “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Langland’s protagonist wandered a medieval landscape looking for wonders, and his eyes were struck by humanity, a “fair field full of folk.” And Lewis’s awe-filled contemplation of humanity’s immortal nature led him to the overwhelming conclusion that none of us will ever meet an “ordinary” human.



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All three authors give testament to the fact that God sees every human he creates as a gift—a precious wonder imbued at their creation with dignity and worth. All three are reckoning with “the sacredness and dignity of the human person.”<sup>1</sup> And all three point to the inevitable and beautiful implications of seeing ourselves and the people around us as God sees us.

How can you and I tap into the power that comes from seeing people as God sees them? And what are the practical implications that we will notice in our everyday lives if we do?

### MY SOUL KNOWS IT VERY WELL

In Psalm 139 we get a sort of play-by-play of a conversation between David and God (we call this prayer) and, in a way, between David and himself (we call this thinking). David is wrestling with how God sees him, how God pursues him, and how God made him. David’s words in the psalm reveal that he is not simply checking off a list of doctrines but is, instead, honestly reckoning with those truths. This includes the truth that God made David fearfully and wonderfully, knitting him together in his mother’s womb.

These verses read not only like insightful anthropology but also like soulful autobiography. David is letting the reality that God sees him as a gift sink into his heart and his very soul.

“Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well” (Psalm 139:14).

The proclamation that his soul knows “very well” that he’s a gift implies that there are different levels of knowing such a truth. Is it possible for our souls to know the truth of how “wonderful” God’s works are not very well or meagerly or incompletely? If my soul is any indication, the answer is yes.

Before Buzz moved in with us, if you had asked me whether God loved and valued every human he’d ever created, I probably would have said yes. I may have even been tempted to back up that knowledge with Scripture (“For God so loved the world”). I knew that God loved his creation. I knew that he had formed every human who had ever lived. I had even read and treasured David’s words in Psalm 139. But I’m not sure my soul knew that *very well* until Buzz moved in.

Living with Buzz caused this clear biblical anthropology to sink deeper into my heart. It confronted how meagerly and sporadically I believed this biblical view of humans, which David expressed so beautifully and which his heart “knew very well.” I *knew* God loved people. But there was something about living with Buzz that helped me experience this truth at a deeper level. Michael Downey describes a similar lesson learned by those who work with adults with developmental or intellectual disabilities: “All

theories of personality development and all philosophical explanations of human nature fade into an embarrassed silence when confronted with the stunning truth about the person that is learned from experience.”<sup>2</sup>

My view of Buzz faded into embarrassed silence when confronted with God’s view of him. And I’ve never forgotten, or quite recovered from, that lesson.

Just as David marveled that his frame was not hidden from God when he was being woven together in the womb, so I have learned to marvel that Buzz was not hidden from God either. God saw him as a gift, imbued with dignity and worth. And this, it turns out, is an important part of the anthropology the Bible reveals: every single human ever created is a gift.

## **EVERYONE IS A GIFT**

We see this right from the beginning, where the opening chapters of the Bible are unambiguous: all humans are created by God. Genesis is clear that God was and still is the source of all life on earth, including every single human who has ever been created. There is only one Creator, and therefore all humans are fellow creations of God. As Luther put it, “I believe God has made me and all creatures.” But humans, we’re told, are special creations because, unlike everything else, humans are created in the image of God:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

(Genesis 1:26-27)

The repetition underscores the point: humans are not like other creatures. Human beings are special, marked out as different among all of creation. God created all life on earth, but only into humans does God breathe his own breath of life. As it’s put a few verses later, “Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7).

God’s personal involvement in the creation of each human stops David in his tracks in Psalm 139. It changes David when he sees that God knit him together in his mother’s womb. It is incredible to consider the personal care God has taken in his creation of every human who has ever lived. Every single person we will ever run into during our life has been formed and knitted by the Creator, intricately woven with great care by our God, whether or

not they acknowledge him. There are no ordinary people, as C. S. Lewis put it.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, it is exciting (and a bit sobering) to consider that *Jesus himself* had a hand in crafting each one of us. The apostle John clarified this significant point about the work of Jesus, the Word, when he wrote, “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:2-3; see also Hebrews 1:1-2; Colossians 1:16).

It is sublime to reflect on these passages as they reveal “the uniqueness and sacredness of each person.”<sup>4</sup> As our souls begin to understand that everyone is a gift, two beautiful implications flower within us: our low self-esteem is confronted, and our habit of showing partiality is undercut.

## **BEAUTIFUL IMPLICATION 1: CONFRONTING OUR LOW SELF-ESTEEM**

The good news that God sees everyone as a gift naturally delights many of us. But for some of us, this news flies in the face of a heavy assumption we have been lugging along with us every day of our lives: namely, that we are no gift. We are no wonder.<sup>5</sup>

I know this heavy assumption intimately. I lived the first twenty years of my life with the hard and fast knowledge (or so it seemed to me at the time) that I was different from everyone around me. I could see the wonder in others;



I could sense the dignity and worth imbued within them at their creation. But me? I felt different. I felt worthless. I felt unimportant.

I did not feel like a gift.

For anyone who struggles with low self-esteem, or even self-hatred, the news that everyone is a gift might seem laughable. Perhaps it's true that *everyone else* is a gift. But not me.

This broken and cracked self-perception is common in our fallen world. This is why it is so good that the Bible's clear anthropology confronts the heavy lie of self-hatred straight on. It's a kind of beautifully painful invasion for someone struggling with low self-esteem to be confronted, as David was, with the reality that we are each "fearfully and wonderfully" made.

How does God confront the self-downtrodden among us with this important truth? For David it was reflecting on God's goodness and power as a Creator. For me it was encountering God's affection and love for me in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. At least that was the start. Healing is not always quick or immediate. It takes time for our souls to know this good news very well.

In my case, God confronted my self-hatred again and again, blow after blow. Each time, God's truth took deeper root and the twisted lie of my worthlessness lost ground. That lie lost ground as I read God's Word. It lost

ground as I prayed to God. It lost ground as I began journaling and confronted head-on the unexamined lies I had been carrying within me. I remember how it lost ground in significant ways as I mentored a younger Christian who also struggled with low self-esteem. That person's wonder and dignity and worth were so clear to me, it was so obvious that God saw them as a gift . . . and as I confronted them with this truth, I couldn't help but know it at a deeper level for myself. Over time I became able to genuinely cry out in prayer as David did: "Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well" (Psalm 139:14).

In our broken and cracked world, it's understandable that this confrontation takes time. You can't just snap your fingers and have your soul know it very well. Think of Gideon, patron saint of all those who struggle to see their own wonder. When we first meet Gideon in the sixth chapter of Judges, he has been brought low, with all his fellow Israelites, by the ruthless Midianites. In modern parlance, the Midianites are the high school bullies and Gideon is the social outcast trying not to get noticed in the halls of his high school. Gideon does not feel like a gift as he awkwardly tries to beat out wheat in a cramped wine press—anything to keep from being noticed by the Midianites, who will surely swoop in and steal his wheat and lunch money if they notice him.

It's at that inglorious moment when an angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and confronts him with a glorious biblical anthropology: "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor" (Judges 6:12).

Oh, to have an angel look you in the eyes and call you a mighty person of valor! But Gideon's response? Well, sometimes it takes time for our twisted vision of ourselves to be displaced by God's vision of us. Gideon replies (to an angel of the Lord!), "Yeah, right," or something very close to that. But the angel, as God is always gracious to do, keeps confronting Gideon with the truth of his might and valor, inviting him to go and deliver his downtrodden fellow citizens. Gideon defends his low self-esteem, saying, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house" (Judges 6:15).

Ah, Gideon. Low self-esteem can be stubborn in our fallen world, I know. But the Bible's clear anthropology is not going away, and God uses his Word (and whispers and times of prayer and journaling and mentoring relationships and angels and the extraordinary witness of Jesus' love for us on the cross) to confront the heavy lie of self-hatred straight on. And God patiently invades our lies and false assumptions with this simple but powerful truth: everyone is a gift.

## RESEARCH INSIGHT: SOME PEOPLE CAN'T SEE THEIR GIFTS

In our nationwide research, we wanted to know whether people are aware of and understand their specific gifts. To get a baseline, we asked people how many “giftings, skills, or abilities” they believed they had to share on a scale of 1–10, from not having any gifts to feeling they have a lot of talents to offer. We used multiple words (giftings, skills, abilities, talents) to purposefully invoke a wide range of gifts within people’s minds—from those they were born with to those they’ve developed over time through practice. There was not a huge difference between practicing Christians and all US adults in their answers: on average, people responded around 6.4 on a scale of 1 to 10.<sup>6</sup>

When the data is analyzed based on education level and overall socioeconomic status, a difference is evident: on average, a higher education and higher socioeconomic status correspond with a slightly higher self-assessment of gifts.<sup>7</sup>

### Time to Reflect

On a scale of 1 to 10, from not having any gifts to feeling you have a lot of talents to share, how would you rate your own giftedness?

A more illuminating finding came from analyzing the group of respondents who marked that they don't have any gifts, skills, or abilities to share. Consider this group of people that made up 3.5 percent of all respondents. What exactly is going on with this "no gift" group of people? As the researchers put it: "While the sample size of this group is too small to do an in-depth analysis . . . an overview of their answers provides some clues as to who these individuals are and why they might believe they are giftless."<sup>8</sup>

What are these clues that can help us understand this group? The first is demographic: those in this group are more likely to be older, unemployed, or at a lower socioeconomic level. It's not hard to imagine how such circumstances might conspire to make someone think they have no gifts, skills, or abilities.

But the most striking clue relates to how *disconnected* this "no gift" group of people appears to be:

- A large portion of them has not been to church in the last six months.
- About half of this group says they don't know any of their neighbors.
- They are less likely to have ever worked on a community project.
- They don't feel like they have a sense of community in their life.<sup>9</sup>

This evidence of disconnectedness stands in stark contrast, statistically, to those who identify at least one or more giftings in themselves.

What exactly do these findings tell us? Well, we can't say definitively that their lack of spiritual or community connections have *caused* them to see themselves as lacking any gifts, skills, or abilities. But being disconnected from church, community, and relationships may allow the heavy lie of low self-esteem to go unchallenged. I can personally attest to how God often used a passage of Scripture, a sermon on Jesus, or the people around me to confront and chip away at my own low self-esteem.

God patiently invades our lies and false assumptions with the simple but powerful good news that we are gifts. And he often accomplishes this patient invasion *through other people*. Giftedness lives most vibrantly in community. We need heralds in our lives who remind us of our own worth.

The plight of this disconnected “no gift” group underscores just how important it is for us to continue to champion this good news in our lives and in the lives of others. It seems unlikely that any person could see or appreciate their different gifts unless they first recognize, at a core level, their basic dignity and worth.

## Time to Reflect

Who do you know that could use a friendly reminder that they are loved and valuable and, at their core, a wonder? How could you remind them?

### BEAUTIFUL IMPLICATION 2: UNDERCUTTING OUR HABIT OF SHOWING PARTIALITY

The good news that God sees everyone as a gift may seem uncontroversial and life affirming. But for some of us this news undercuts a nasty (if unconscious) habit of seeing other people as worth less than we are, if not seeing some people as downright *worthless*. We may not be proud of this habit. We may not even be willing to admit out loud what we feel inside, but for some of us in this broken world, the idea that everyone is a gift flies in the face of our fallen habit of (as the Bible puts it) “showing partiality.”

One of my mentors, Gene, experienced this confrontation in a profound way. Gene was one of my first spiritual heroes—I grew up in the faith listening and relistening to Gene’s unforgettable sermons. But I was most impacted by observing the way he treated the people around him. Gene was so unhurried, so gracious, so attentive. It was as if whomever he was talking to was the most important person in the world. Gene’s communication gifts were something to behold.



What a huge surprise, then, when Gene casually shared with me one day that he had grown up “elitist,” as he put it. I was shocked, so I pressed for details. Gene explained that he was raised in rural Colorado and excelled early in life. He claimed he had read every book in the library of his small town before graduating from high school, and the more educated Gene became, the more elevated his tastes became. By the time Gene entered college, he was an elitist: he attributed worth to people based on their wealth, education, clothing, and standing in society. And he treated people accordingly.

How could a self-avowed elitist become someone who had such genuine grace and kindness toward people from all walks of life? The answer, in short: Gene’s longstanding elitism was powerfully undercut by the Bible’s clear anthropology. While exploring the Christian faith in college, Gene was confronted with the good news that God sees everyone as a gift.

It was while reading the Gospels, Gene told me, that he understood that to follow Jesus meant seeing people as Jesus did and treating them accordingly. Over time, God’s truth about people displaced Gene’s elitist assumptions—so much so that Gene’s gracious, loving way with people



became one of the most striking and memorable features of his life.

This same sort of transformation is something we all need. Since the fall of humanity and the entrance of sin into our world, we're all somewhat predisposed to elitism, though few of us would use that word to describe our views. We are tempted to treat certain people (or types of people) with dignity and respect, and to treat other people in lesser ways. We tend to look down our noses at some people—though who exactly those people are may change over time.

None of us are immune to this. I remember distinctly how easy it was, as someone who grew up poor, to look down my nose at rich people. We're all elitists of some sort. Paul points out this unfortunate habit even within the church where, at times, certain parts of the body look down on other parts of the body (1 Corinthians 12).

The Bible's language referring to this nasty elitist posture is "showing partiality." In the Bible we read that God doesn't show partiality (Job 34:19) and neither should we (Job 13:10; Proverbs 24:23; Proverbs 28:21). As it's put simply in Deuteronomy, "You shall not show partiality" (Deuteronomy 16:19). In the New Testament we hear the same call (1 Timothy 5:21; Ephesians 6:9) and are reminded that such a way of seeing people is a violation of God's law and constitutes having "evil thoughts" (James 2:1-13).

Consider Jesus' rationale when calling his disciples not just to love friends but also enemies:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:43-45)

Jesus' view is clear: because God the Father shows no partiality, neither should his people. How we treat the people around us is a central part of our faith. Just as Gene understood all those years ago, to follow Jesus, who sees every human as a gift, is to have your way of treating people transformed.

Because we are all tempted to be elitists in our fallen world, we all need God to transform how we see and treat the people around us. As I witnessed in Gene and experienced myself while living with Buzz, this is something God loves to do. He can replace our broken, twisted, and elitist ways of looking at the people around us with a clear, clean, biblical vision. God can wipe away our confusion and help us see that everyone—regardless of class or creed, race or nation—is a gift. The latest research reveals just how important this change in vision is for Christians.

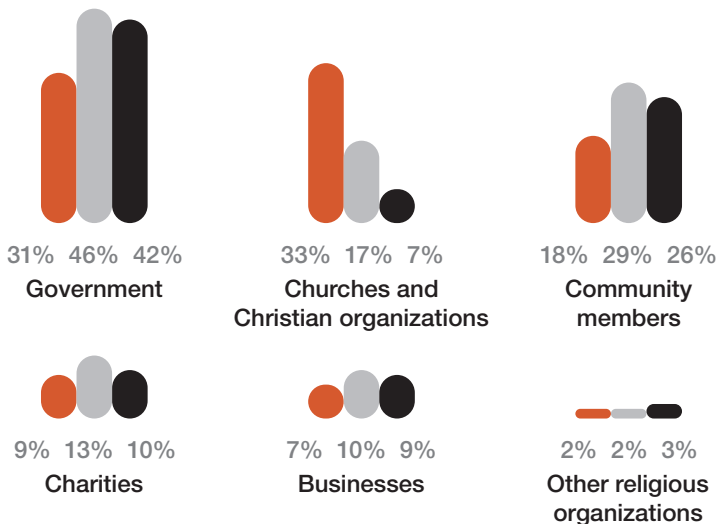
## RESEARCH INSIGHT: THE DANGERS OF CHRISTIAN JUDGMENTALISM

Nationwide research, conducted over four years (see appendix one), demonstrates a prominent gap in trust between Christians and non-Christians. For example, while studying how Christians relate with their neighbors, we

### WHO IS BEST SUITED TO SOLVE COMMUNITY PROBLEMS?

% RANKED THIS OPTION FIRST

● Practicing Christians ● Non-Practicing Christians ● Non-Christians



n=2,500 US adults, July 25–August 15, 2019.

asked community members across the United States who they think is best suited to solve problems in the community. As you can see in figure 1.1, non-Christians are more likely to trust the government, community members, charities, and businesses to help in the community than they are to trust churches and Christian organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Why do non-Christians have such a difficult time trusting Christians? While this is a complex issue, a big part of the answer is that Christians are perceived to be judgmental. Christians are seen as people who “show partiality,” looking down their noses at others.

This posture is off-putting. While studying how people engage in spiritual conversations, we asked when people believe it is unacceptable to share views on religion. As figure 1.2 shows, the top answer given by the general population was, “If it’s disrespectful or judgmental.”<sup>11</sup>

In the same study, we noticed that people are more likely to feel they were disrespected in a spiritual conversation than to feel they showed disrespect, as you can see in figure 1.3.<sup>12</sup> People in our times are very sensitive to feeling disrespected or judged. Judgmentalism powerfully erodes trust between Christians and non-Christians.

Other studies have reported similar results. For example, when millennials who don’t go to church were asked how they saw Christians, a strong majority replied “judgmental” (87%) and “insensitive to others” (70%).<sup>13</sup>

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