



WESTMINSTER  
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# **The Way We See It**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Corinthians 5:16-19).*

To be a Christian is, among other things, to learn to see the world the way Christ sees it, and to want the things that Jesus wants. I'll stop right there for a moment and invite us all to ask ourselves, according to those criteria, how we think we're doing.

I can't answer for you, but for myself I would say that I still have a long way to go. That's more than a little embarrassing to admit, especially for me, since I'm a sort of professional Christian. I work for Jesus. I'm a minister. And it's even worse in another way because my family name is Gilchrist, which according to a Scottish etymology means "servant of Christ."

So I, of all people, should try to see what Jesus sees and want what Jesus wants. To be fair, in my better moments, which come and go almost as quickly as those virtual particles the physicists make in the Large Hadron Collider, I can do that. I really do have little bursts of insight when I look at this world, and all the people in it, and I see something like what I imagine Jesus sees. I see beauty, and tenderness, and so much potential—as if we really were made in the image of God, and the heavens really were telling the glory of God. I see the world's fallenness too, of course, the way we're all "standin' in the need of prayer," as the old song says. I see how much we need a good and gracious God to make things right.

I see all that sometimes, and I know from experience that what the Bible says about our situation is true. It really is possible to see the world through the eyes of grace, which is how Jesus sees it. And when you see the world that way, you naturally start to want what Jesus wants: to care for all of creation, and love the people in it—even the ones we’re inclined to think are not like us. You want to be on the side of healing and reconciliation and redemption.

We know that’s how Jesus sees the world because it’s what he tells John the Baptist’s disciples when they come to see whether Jesus is the real thing, or whether they ought to keep on looking to find the Messiah. “Go tell John what you see and hear,” Jesus says. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Jesus thinks John will recognize the signs. The Baptizer knows what to look for when the kingdom of God comes near: healing, hope, new life even in the face of death, outcasts welcomed into the community, justice for people who are poor. Go tell John. He’ll see the signs, and he’ll know what they mean.

St. Augustine said, “The soul is weighed in the balance by what delights her.” You can tell the kind of soul a person is by the kinds of things he or she seeks for satisfaction. I was browsing in a bookstore the other day and came across a series of new psychology texts from Oxford University Press. The one that stood out most to me was *The Oxford Handbook of Hoarding and Acquiring*. Apparently getting stuff and holding onto it has become a big enough epidemic to make the short list of scholarly volumes on psychological conditions in need of a cure.

You can tell a lot about a soul by paying attention to what it wants. “Psychology,” after all, is literally the logic of the *psyche*, the Greek word we translate as “soul.” And it’s also true that the way we see things in the world depends on what we value and what we want. So some people see strangers as potential friends because they value community and want to be welcoming; others

see them mainly as a threat. Some men see women as daughters of God, sisters who share the image of God; others see women mostly as objects for some sort of conquest because they value only their own desires. Some people see money as a means for making the world a better place; others see it as a measure of their own status and success and security, so that having and holding onto more and more turns out to be a principal goal of their lives.

Almost anything can become an addiction if we see it as something we need for security or satisfaction. Even fear can turn into a kind of craving. Marilyn Robinson, the author of *Gilead* and one of the most thoughtful human beings I've ever encountered, says that for some people, "Fear operates as an appetite or an addiction. You can never be safe enough."<sup>1</sup>

Marilyn Robinson is also a devout Christian, a self-professed Calvinist in fact, from our Presbyterian tradition. She says that contemporary America is full of fear and "fear is not a Christian habit of mind." In a recent book of essays she reminds us of many of our most familiar texts: the twenty-third psalm, for example—"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil"—and how Jesus says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." "Those who forget God, the single assurance of our safety," she says, "... can be recognized in the fact that they make irrational responses to irrational fears." Fearfulness obscures the distinction between real threats and "the terrors that beset those who see threat everywhere."<sup>2</sup>

We are in danger of becoming a fearful people in this country, and fear is not a Christian habit of the heart or mind.

The way we see things depends on what we value, and what we want, and where we look to find security. It also depends

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 130.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 125f.

on our interests—our individual interests and the interests of whatever tribe we identify with, because for all our talk of individuality we humans are a deeply social species. When people are afraid, as so many are today, and when their fears are not calmed by the presence and promises of God, they often turn to their tribes in search of safety. But as Marilyn Robinson says again, “History has shown us a thousand variations on the temptations that come with tribalism.... This is old humankind going about its mad business as if it simply cannot remember the harm it did itself yesterday.”<sup>3</sup>

John O’Donohue is an Irish Christian poet and philosopher. He says that when our restless souls find their way to a quiet place in church to pray, that’s when “You remember who you are. For a while you come to sense the providence that secretly shapes and guides your life.”<sup>4</sup> In church, in this Christian community that can take the place of our narrow tribalism, we’re reminded that we belong to God, and God is love, and “Love changes the way we see ourselves and others.”

O’Donohue says: “Providence is another name for the kindness of God. If we could realize how wise the providence around us is, it would give us immense confidence on our journey. The irony is that we don’t need to worry. We can take a lot more risks than we realize.”<sup>5</sup> Those who see the world in a Christian way remind us that we don’t have to be afraid. The fear of God, that awe-struck devotion to the majesty and power and goodness of God, drives out other fears, and frees us to live in faith, hope, and love.

From time to time I try to keep up with my limited foreign language skills by reading a chapter or two of the Bible in Spanish. I use the Bible because I know the plot and I’m familiar

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>4</sup> John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (New York: Harper, 2004), 159.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 233.

with the characters, so it's easier to pick up the language than trying to read *Don Quixote* or some contemporary novel of magical realism. The other night I started reading Job in Spanish, and I was struck by what that Bible calls Satan, who appears early in the story to challenge God about Job's faithfulness. My Spanish Bible calls him *el ángel acusador*, the accusing angel.

I remembered that *ha-satan* in Hebrew means the Accuser. In English we just call him Satan, as if that was his name, like Bill or Ralph or George. When we do that, though, we miss the essential thing about who this character is. He's the one who points the finger, the one who always wants to condemn by casting blame and finding fault. His whole way of seeing things is the opposite of Jesus' way. The accusing angel sees through the eyes of judgment and hate; Jesus sees through the eyes of grace and love. The Accuser wants to tear down and destroy; Jesus wants to build up and redeem.

I know the voice of the Accuser very well. I suspect we all know that voice. It's the one that tempts us to despair, the voice that says, "You're no good. Nothing you do really matters. There's no hope. Things are going to hell in a handbasket, and there's nothing you can do about it." I know that voice very well, and it frames the world in a way that's tempting because it's so much easier to accuse than to transform. Clucking the tongue is so much easier than working to make things better, which is why we see much more clucking than changing going on around us, or maybe even within us.

But that's not a Christian way of seeing things. Paul reminds us that if we are in Christ we no longer see anything or anyone from a human point of view. We start to see what Jesus sees: people in need of redemption, not condemnation; opportunities for salvation rather than destruction; occasions for hope instead of despair.

We look not only at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, Paul says. That doesn't mean we just look beyond this



world to heaven, as if this life did not matter. No, it means we start to see right here and now what is not yet, but could be. Where for the moment there is only guilt, we see grace and the possibility of forgiveness. Where for the time being there is only conflict, we see the potential for reconciliation and peace. Where so much of the world acquiesces in other people's poverty and sickness and oppression, we remember what Jesus told the disciples of John to expect: the blind see, the lame walk, the outcastes are brought in, the poor hear good news because the people of God pay attention to them up and set them on their feet again.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. That means people start to see things the way Jesus sees them, and begin to want what Jesus wants. It's hard for us to do that because we tend to see things according to our own interests and the old habits of our fallen nature. But God gives the Spirit of Christ to anyone who truly wants to follow Christ, and then, as Jesus tells us, what is impossible for human beings turns out to be entirely possible for God.

So we have this ministry of reconciliation. Christ gives it to us, not as some unbearable burden to weigh us down, but as an opportunity to become more like Christ himself. We have this opportunity to experience grace, not only by receiving grace but by becoming gracious ourselves. We get to learn what love is by practicing love, and we start to delight in the things that make God glad.

That's a large part of what salvation means, after all. It's not just a ticket to heaven. It's that balm in Gilead, the salve that heals a sin-sick soul. The more this healing works within us, the more we come to see things differently: ourselves, our neighbors, and the world around us. We learn to see what Jesus sees, and want what Jesus wants. And along the way we discover who we were meant to be, and there we find a whole new level of joy and peace and courage and strength.



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