

**“And this Gospel ”
shall be preached...”
Matthew 24:14**

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

WHAT IS YOUR IMAGE OF GOD?

by Ellis LaRavia

In the beginning, God who became the Father said to God who became Jesus Christ, “Let us make man in our image” (Gen. 1:26). And it was so, that man was put in the process of becoming like God. And God intends that we become like Him spiritually, in character, so we may be born into His own eternal Family, His Kingdom. God plans for us to become like Him totally.

Now we have to accept it that while we look like God in our physical image, our physical entity, we are not spiritually like God. We are not eternal, and our thoughts and our ways are not naturally God’s thoughts and ways. They have to become like that.

Isaiah 55:7-9 says: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the [Eternal] and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the [Eternal]. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

If we are going to become like God, we have to forsake the way that is human, and the way of Satan, implemented through human nature, that is selfish, lustful, greedy.

Ephesians 4:15 tells us we are to become like Christ. Because He is like God the Father. We are

to become perfect as He is. But we first have to know what and who God is. We have to have that right fixed image in our minds or it can’t help us. But man’s image of God is very imperfect. Pagans pictured God via their dead idols as a bird, or fish, or snake, or ox, etc. And professing Christians have been given a mental image of a weak-appearing “Christ.” Satan has created false images in all of our minds in the past.

So we must have a correct and a proper and a fixed image of God or else we will never become like him.

True Image Unchangeable

Now what if you have a “blue Monday,” a bad day, and things aren’t going well? Do you think “God’s out to get me”? If so, your image of God is altered daily by the circumstances in your life and that is not the right image of God. That doesn’t mean that our image of God doesn’t continually grow. It should. If we are ever going to mature, spiritually, our image of God *has* to be growing and developing and maturing. But we can’t let the circumstances in our lives capriciously alter our image of what God is or is not. That’s not the *fixed image* of God. That isn’t the way God wants us to know Him. That isn’t what’s going to place in our minds that image that we ultimately are going to be like.

God is the most stable quantity and the most fixed quantity in the whole of the universe. That's something that we have to know. God just is. He says, "I change not" (Mal. 3:6). We don't change God by what we think God is. We change our minds, but that doesn't alter God.

Recently, I was talking to a laymember of another church, and he finally got bold enough to ask why we keep Saturday instead of Sunday. And I told him: "It's the day God created in the beginning to be kept. It's also the day that Christ kept, and we don't feel that we have the right to change that." And he says, "Yeah, but what's wrong with Sunday?" And I said, "Nothing's wrong with Sunday, except it's not the Sabbath, that's all."

His image of God was totally different. To him it didn't and couldn't make any difference which day one should keep. But it makes a difference to God. He commanded obedience to His instructions and has not changed!

We humans continually try to alter the true image of God to conform to our justification, our self, our own desires, what we think are our needs. It's what we want to believe is God, but *it's not God*.

And because we have not seen the right image of God, we don't know and have faith we can rely upon Him and what he will do for us. We cannot call upon a God whom we do not really know, whose true image is not solidly fixed in our minds, and then have assurance about His response.

That's Why Israel Failed

Ancient Israel, coming out of Egypt, had a tremendous elation, excitement and encouragement. For the first time, as far as that generation was concerned, there was freedom. But they came upon severe problems. Because their image of God was little more than their image of a man, Moses, they complained about the bitter water at Marah, and about not having flesh to eat with their manna. When they went to spy out the land, they didn't see that God would give them victory over the giants. Their image of God was very poor. They had not grown to know God.

Does that tell us anything about ourselves? I think it should. It must.

Even after they crossed the Jordan River with Joshua, into the Promised Land, and after God gave them Jericho, their successes didn't last very

long. Too often our right images of God never reach very far—only until the next problem. Then we draw a wrong conclusion, or we doubt again, or we wonder.

After Jericho the army of Israel went up against Ai. The men of Ai smote of them about 36 men. And Israel's heart sank: Where was God? What happened to God? And from the heights of elation to the depths of despair, the hearts of the people melted and became as water. Their defective image of God totally crumbled. They thought God had deserted them, when it was they who had deserted God (in the matter of the great sin of Achan).

Perfecting Our Image of Christ

We know that Christians are to become like Christ. But do we know what Christ is? Do we have a true image fixed in our minds? We know Christ had the right image of His Father because He knew what His Father expected. He knew why He was here upon this earth and He pursued that diligently to the depths of His being, and to the end of His life.

Starting in Colossians 1, Paul expressed his great wish "that ye might walk worthy of the [Eternal] unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work and *increasing in the knowledge of God* [that is, in the overall image and perspective of God]; strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; *giving thanks unto the Father* which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who has delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son [begotten us *into the Family of God*]: in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: who is the *image of the invisible God* [His Father], the firstborn of every creature.

"For by him were all things created, that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist" (verses 10-17).

That gives us quite an image of Christ—of what He was and what He is now, right there at the right hand of His Father. The One whom we too are to become like.

Continuing (verses 18-23): “And he is the head of the body, the church [is that our image of Christ?]: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father, that in him should all fullness dwell [just like the Father]; and having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things to himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

“And you, that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your mind [because you had a wrong image of Christ, as we had, as the whole world has] by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled [not only to have our sins forgiven, but now to have a right image of Christ, but we have to build that slowly as we mature spiritually] in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight: if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel. . . .”

Unfortunately it's a very human tendency, whether knowingly or unknowingly, to create God in our image than to become even more like that image. That's not what God wants. Remember it is absolutely impossible to become like anyone—and particularly God—if we don't know what He is, who He is, what He stands for, what He believes.

How to Achieve It

This should give us a purpose for prayer, because that's the way to develop a right relationship with God; and a purpose for studying His Word which gives the facts about God. The Holy Spirit then increases our understanding, wisdom, and ability to do what God expects.

Faith and good works are impossible otherwise. I think a lot of times we get the idea that prayer, Bible study, fasting—all those things—are theoretically great, but we don't really see the need for them. I tell you, they are an absolute need or we'll never have the right image of God! It takes God's mind and God's Spirit. There's just no way otherwise.

God in the Image of Man

It's very hard to accept the true image of God. Through John 6:57-58, Christ tells us, “As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father:

so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that catcheth of this bread shall live forever.”

Then in verse 60, “Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear [understand] it?”

We run across things like that. It isn't that we don't perceive the word, it's just that in our own human minds, *because we have a wrong image of God*, we think, Oh no, that can't be, or, I just don't get that, or, I don't believe that.

Continuing (verse 61): “When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you?” (Are you offended because of what Christ is or God is? Well, you bet we are, because it's contrary to the way we naturally, normally, humanly are. And it does offend us.)

“What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? [Would you believe then? Would the image of God or Christ you hold then correspond to the reality?] It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (verses 62-63). If you are trying to discern God just humanly, with your own human reasoning, you'll never get it.

Daniel's friends had the right image of God. Nebuchadnezzar built a gigantic image, probably of himself, and he expected everyone to bow down to that image. When it was reported to Nebuchadnezzar that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not doing so, they were brought before the king.

Daniel 3:16: “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful [we don't have to spend a lot of time thinking about how] to answer thee in this matter.” They had already determined that God is God, and Him only would they worship. And neither Nebuchadnezzar, nor a huge idol, nor any man, nor any other being was going to alter their thinking on that matter.

Verse 17-18: “If it so be, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. (They didn't say, ‘Well, we don't know, but we think He can do it.’ No, they said, ‘He *is able*.’)

“But if [He does] not [choose to save our lives], be it known unto you, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”

It's very easy, perhaps, to see this kind of an image, and while none of us would bow down to that kind, we do it in effect, in other ways. We are bowing down to other idols or wrong images in false worship of God that is not so apparent, e.g. the cares of this world, riches, pride, prestige, power, position, status, etc.

Seriousness of Wrong-Image Christianity

Do your prayers sometimes seem to fall on deaf ears? God says, “Behold, the [Eternal’s] hand is not shortened, that it cannot save [that it cannot provide a way of escape from every temptation, that it cannot save us from death, that it cannot give us eternal life]; neither is his ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isa. 59:1-2). That’s what had happened to the Israelites when they tried to take Ai. The only reason God wouldn’t hear us is if we have an erroneous image and we are worshipping that false image rather than the true God, and are living in sin.

“*There is nothing wrong with me,*” God says. Let’s not let our image of God be warped by our own weaknesses, our own infirmities, our own inability fully to serve Him and to conform to the

image that God has established, the image of Christ. Let’s recognize our weaknesses and say, “Yes, we have a problem there.”

Job was a man with such a problem. In Job 31, he rehearses what an excellent employer he was, always considerate of his employees. He never oppressed anyone. He never lusted after his neighbor’s wife. If he saw someone poor and needy, he provided for them. An incredible man, always generous, giving, helping. But God provided his example, that none of us remotely comes close to, as an example of, one could say, a perfect man, but who unfortunately didn’t have the right image of God. He tried to keep the law --and all on his own -- but with the wrong kind of an image of God one is bound to make some slips. And if you break the law, you pay the penalty. That’s the lesson of Job.

When Job had had his image corrected, he said: “I have heard of thee [God] by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee” (Job 42:5).

God created us—in His likeness-- with the very express purpose of becoming like Him. We are to develop the character attributes of God, and that takes a great deal of time, effort, prayer, Bible study, fasting, meditation, and doing it all with God’s Spirit. Then we are to be saved and finally be born into the Family of God.

We can’t alter God. He doesn’t change. We have to have in mind and conform to His image, not the image in which we make Him.