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Face Value Judgments

John 7:24

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What child is this? This is a picture of my brand new niece Elana. She was born two weeks ago, July 29, to my sister Lydia and brother-in-law Tom.

Elana has a hole in her heart that the doctors will soon fix. And Elana has extra genetic material at the twenty-first chromosome. She has a common condition first identified by John Langdon Down in 1866.

Elana is absolutely adorable . . . but the odds are that she'll probably never hit a golf ball as far as Tiger Woods; her face probably won't appear on the cover of Vogue magazine; she probably won't graduate Phi Beta Kappa. She has certain handicaps and liabilities, and her face will give them away.

I worked at Bel Air Presbyterian Church in the mid-1980's, and I was surrounded by beautiful and famous faces. It was Ronald Reagan's church, and it wasn't at all unusual to see the likes of Kenny Rogers, Carol Lawrence, and Cheryl Ladd. It was awfully exciting for me . . . but not for Eloise.

Eloise was our youth secretary. She'd been divorced and didn't have much money. She was old: not much to look at in that sea of high profile, well-kept, Hollywood elite. She wore jeans to hide a leg that had withered from polio, until one of the new pastors forced her to wear a dress in order to project the right image.

Eloise projected all right, but not always the right image. She was unrefined and wouldn't use the intercom. She'd just yell, "Peter! Get the phone!"

I got to know Eloise. Eloise loved me, and I really loved Eloise. But most people treated her like a second-class citizen . . . nothing overt, but subtle signals we all learn to read: inflections in the voice, dilation of the pupils — signals that the sender cannot even consciously control, yet they powerfully communicate . . . judgment.

At face value Eloise didn't have much value.

At face value Jesus didn't have much value either.

Isaiah 53: "He had no form or comeliness that we should look at Him and no beauty that we should desire him. He was as one from whom men hide their faces, and we esteemed him not."

We judged Him as of little value.

We judge in order to gain control;
We get control through knowledge;
We want control so we can be God.

Long ago in a garden Adam stole fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He took knowledge but lost love . . . yet love is the meaning of knowledge. Adam hid from God, who is love.

We certainly use knowledge to hide from God and to gain control. So the lawyer said to Jesus, “Tell me who my neighbor is. If I had knowledge, I’d be safe from the demands of love, and control love.”

Jesus taught him, “Love, and then you’ll know your neighbor.”

Well, once upon a time Love was wrapped in flesh and walked among us, and He intimidated, infuriated, and scared the religious leaders, so they judged Him in order to gain control. They used law and their broken knowledge to crucify Him on a tree. They judged Him. They said:

“Show us a sign. Throw yourself down from the temple. Hit a golf ball as far as Tiger Woods.”

“He hasn’t studied. He has no Phi Beta Kappa key.”

“He’s not much to look at: a Nazarene. We read *nothing* in the sacred text of a redneck Messiah.”

In John 7:24 Jesus turns to the Jews and says, “Do not judge by appearances but with just judgment judge.” Literally: “Judge not according to face, but with righteous judgment judge.” That is, “Judge not at face value, but according to righteous judgment judge.”

How do you judge people?

Some of you are thinking, “That’s a trick question. Matthew 7:1 says, ‘Judge not that you not be judged, for with the judgment you judge you shall be judged, and with what measure you measure you shall be measured.’ See, we’re to never judge.”

Yet in the next verse Jesus tells them how to see clearly in order to take specks out of each other’s eyes. Then He tells them not to give dogs what is holy or cast pearls before swine. And then He says to watch out for false prophets, and you’ll know them by their fruit.

How do we know specks, dogs, swine, and false prophets? — Judge the fruit.

John 7:24 is in the imperative tense: “Judge with righteous judgment.” Clearly we can never pronounce final judgment on persons, yet we must make judgments every day. Those judgments determine who we trust and how we love or don’t love. (*Don’t let Charles Manson baby-sit your children.*)

In John 7 Jesus also said to the Pharisees, “Why do you seek to kill me?” They said, “What? You’re nuts!” But Jesus knew they would kill Him, because they had already judged Him in order to control Him, because they wanted to be God.

How we judge people determines how we treat people, no matter how much we tell ourselves otherwise, and no matter how hard we try to act all “Christian” and stuff.

At Bel Air everyone was very civil to Eloise. After all, it was a church with Christian standards. You said “please” and “thank you” and “good to see you,” but the focus of the eyes, the short attention span, the change of subject said, “I judge you as having little value.”

Well, one day Eloise brought her old scrapbook to work. I begged her to let me see it. She finally relented. I opened it up, and there was the young face of our youth secretary Eloise on the cover of Vogue magazine! I turned the page, and there she was again, on the cover of True Romance. Magazine after magazine . . . Eloise had been a big-time cover girl back in the 1950’s. Her name was Eloise Sahlen. Her roommate in New York was Grace Kelly!

Once she told me that she used to date John F. Kennedy. I said, “Eloise, you dated John F. Kennedy?! What happened?” She said, “Oh, I dumped him.” I said, “Why’d you dump him?” She said, “Oh, he was boring . . . all politics and stuff.”

One of my favorite things to do at Bel Air was to tell snobby people who looked down on Eloise about her history. They’d be telling her to do something, and I’d say, “Hey, did you know Eloise was on the cover of Vogue magazine? And did you know she roomed with Grace Kelly? And did you know she dated John F. Kennedy. She not only *dated* him; she *dumped* him!”

And all at once their demeanor would change. “Oh, Eloise, we must do lunch some time.” But it was really more subtle than that. They still might ask her to do things . . . call the youth committee, send out a letter . . . but they’d do it in a very different way. And get this: Eloise had not become a better secretary. It had nothing to do with judging administrative skills and whether she was right for the job. It was that now her *person* had been judged as valuable.

Well, I embarrassed Eloise when I did that, and now I see I probably only made her more insecure. For I was still praising her face; encouraging transient flesh. And the truth of the matter was, Eloise’s flesh had gotten old and tired and would no longer be on the cover of Vogue magazine.

So I've kicked myself, for instead of encouraging the flesh, I could have encouraged the spirit. Instead of judging at face value, I could have judged with righteous judgment. I could have said something eternal:

“Hey, did you know Eloise not only dated John F. Kennedy, she is actually betrothed to Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who washes her in His own blood to present her spotless on the day of judgment?!”

“Hey, did you know Eloise not only roomed with Grace Kelly, but the Spirit of God rooms in her soul *right now*?!”

“Hey, did you know Eloise's face was not only on the cover of Vogue magazine, but God is her Daddy, and if He has a wallet, the face of Eloise is there on top of the credit cards?! God is her Daddy, and I'm beginning to see a striking resemblance. And if you judged her with righteous judgment, maybe you could see it too.”

“Not face value, but according to righteous judgment judge.”

In Scripture (and especially in John's gospel, letters, and the Revelation) it's clear the righteous judgment is the cross: the bleeding heart of God nailed to a tree for the love of you. That is the judgment. And what that cross does to you is your judgment. That cross is the revelation of righteousness. “In this is love,” and love fulfills the whole law—all righteousness. “According to righteous judgment judge.”

Last week we served each other communion. So if you were here, you took the Logos of God—the body and blood of Christ—and placed Him on a tongue of flesh in a body of flesh subject to futility, sin, and death, standing behind you in line. The measure you gave was Christ. And I watched you.

Some of you diverted your eyes; some of you looked in wonder . . . because for a moment you saw past their face into their gut, and just kind of sort of believed the truth: God has taken up residence in His temple—His manger of flesh. And so He has washed them in His blood. He has made them His body. He is transforming them from the inside out.

It didn't change their golf game, it didn't raise their IQ, and it was not a denial of their faults, sins, failure, and flesh. But with righteous judgment you began to judge and you began to sense their value, and it changed the movement of your eyes and the dilation of your pupils.

How could Jesus say such harsh things about sin and be such a friend to sinners? My guess is, He saw them through His cross, and they could read His eyes. They knew: “No one loves me more than He.”

Your eyes are now Christ's eyes, "the lamp of His body."

- May they hope all things, believe all things, endure all things;
- May they never speak condemnation;
- May they never imprison a person in shame or say, "You'll never change";
- May they always be searching the dark mysteries of another's soul for the indwelling light of Christ—heart of God returning home.

Paul wrote in II Corinthians, "They pride themselves on man's position and not on his heart. . . . But the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. . . . From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view, even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard Him thus no longer."

A few months ago doctors came to my sister Lydia and my brother-in-law Tom. They said, "We've taken some tests, and we think your baby may be handicapped. We advise you to consider abortion." Why? — quality of life. That is:

She'll never hit a golf ball as far as Tiger Woods;
She'll never grace the cover of a fashion magazine;
She'll never graduate Phi Beta Kappa;
And right now she's just a little, dark mystery of flesh.

Jesus never hit a golf ball, never graced the cover of a fashion magazine, never graduated Phi Beta Kappa . . . and while the angels descended and Mary sang her magnificat, Jesus was just a little, dark mystery of flesh in the uterus of a teen-aged, unwed mother, who would have been counseled by the modern lords of knowledge to abort.

But this is our gospel: God inhabits "little, dark mysteries of flesh" . . . and this includes moms.

Women, you're one of those mysteries. So if you've had an abortion, Jesus will cleanse you with His blood. Ask Him. He holds your baby in eternity, and He weeps with you *now*, for He knows your pain, He bore your sin, and He lives to set you free and fill you with Himself.

"We no longer view anyone [mothers, babies, doctors, ourselves] from a human point of view, for we are convinced one has died for all."

So with our judgments we must never limit another to anything less than Christ. And with our judgments we must go looking for His light in others.

But how will we know Him?

What does He look like?

Paul wrote, “We once viewed Christ from a human point of view, and we regard Him thus no longer.” We judged Him at face value. And who was Christ (from the bosom of the Father)? I think He was like the *heart* of God without the *face* of God. “No one has seen God,” but maybe we’ve seen His heart.

Paul put it this way: “Christ Jesus was in the form of God but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave.” Jesus was God *emptied* . . .

Emptied of power: It appears He only did what the Father was doing, empowered by the Spirit.

Emptied of beauty: the glory He had before the foundation of the world.

Emptied of knowledge: There were things He did not know.

So Jesus never hit a golf ball as far as Tiger Woods, Jesus did not look like Harrison Ford, and Jesus never graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Emptied of power, beauty, knowledge . . . but not love. God *is* love. And in Jesus the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

This week I was talking to Carol Carlon about Downs and my sermon, not wanting to speak out of turn. She said, “Oh, Peter, Carolyn would *love* to have her name mentioned in a sermon.” Then she said, “Carolynn is convinced that God is Downs.” I said, “I think she’s right.”

I mean, Jesus “emptied Himself of all but love and bled for Adam’s helpless race.” I wonder how Jesus appeared to the angels in glory: powerless, marred beyond human semblance, and ignorant as He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Powerless,
 marred,
 ignorant, yet . . .
Perfect Love,
 Heart of God,
 the Meaning of all things.

And we missed Him. For we judged according to the face.

What is the measure with which you measure? Power? Beauty? Knowledge? Our power, beauty, and knowledge will pass away. And love will remain. “Love is of God, and He who loves is born of God.” “Faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest of these is love.”

God is love. Everything else is superfluous. Power, beauty, and knowledge only have meaning (logos) insofar as they serve love. Think with me . . .

1. At the tree in the garden we took knowledge to capture love. So we nailed Him to the tree.
2. At the tree on the hill we surrender to love crucified. And He reveals all true knowledge, true beauty, true power. He gives meaning (logos) to all things.

. . . or . . .

1. The children of the first Adam tried to make love subservient to knowledge and so crucified Love and the Meaning (Logos) of all knowledge.
2. The children of the second Adam surrender their knowledge to love, and I think we call that faith. We stand before that tree with fruit in our hands and see Love Himself nailed to the tree, and we confess, “I don’t understand . . . but I’m giving the fruit back, because I trust you.” And lo and behold, by grace Love returns the fruit and reveals the meaning (logos) of all things. He says, “I make all things new.”

Martha Beck wrote the book Expecting Adam. It’s about her handicapped son Adam and how he learned word and meaning. Adam had no interest in any knowledge unless it had to do with someone he loved. So “E” wasn’t for egg; “E” was for Elizabeth, his sister. Knowledge was only important so far as it pertained to someone he loved. They found Adam learned as fast as anyone, as long as knowledge served love. Adam’s mother wrote that in Adam she “tapped into an intelligence powered exclusively by love.”

Jesus is the last Adam,
The love of God poured out,
Love emptied from power, beauty, and knowledge;
He is the Logos—the Meaning.

Once we see Him, by Him we see everything else.

I’ve been wondering if the poison from the tree of knowledge did not sink as deeply into those we call “handicapped”—“handicapped” by the lack of what we call “knowledge.” Yet seeing something or someone, we can only see as through a glass darkly.

Carol said, “Peter, the problem with kids like Carolynn is they just love everyone. They love unconditionally, and in this world, that’s scary.” I said, “Yes . . . unconditional love can get you crucified . . .”

Well, whatever . . . what I was saying is, our judgments change the way we treat people, and the way we treat people helps shape people.

Somewhere I once read about a study of babies like Elana. Doctors took one group and altered their faces to make them look more like other children. At two years, this group

tested 40% higher in things like IQ and achievement. How people had judged them at face value shaped their abilities and IQ.

Well, abilities and IQ are superfluous without love, and I doubt they tested for love. They can't even *define* it. But perhaps if we looked past the face (past the surface) and looked for love and looked for the Christ, maybe with righteous judgment we could help shape a person in His image, because they wouldn't be limited by our judgments. They would be as large as Christ. Even more, Christ might be called out—encouraged—birthed—by our judgments.

“Come, Lord Jesus.”

“Eloise, you are a new creation. I see Jesus in you.”

At Bel Air we didn't judge Eloise with righteous judgment as we should have. Eventually Eloise quit. The judgment and perceptions got to her. I went to visit her before I left L.A. She lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment. She was completely paranoid. She was terrorized by the phone; she wouldn't go outside. She kept saying, “What will people think? What will people think?”

A few years ago Eloise died, alone in her apartment in L.A. They didn't find her body for a few days. Eloise Turner, bride of Christ, temple of the Spirit, daughter of God . . . She just had such a hard time seeing past her cover girl face, because everyone else had a hard time as well.

I do not want to make that same mistake again, especially with my new niece Elana.

At the end of the service last week, I was talking to Mike Carlon about Elana, when his daughter Carolynn ran running up the aisle. (I think Carolynn could easily be the most loved person in our church, because she could easily have done the most loving.) She helps out with the children downstairs and loves everyone she meets, turning strangers into neighbors with unconditional love.

Carolynn ran up the aisle holding a picture of Elana that my mom had given her. She was jumping up and down and yelling, “Daddy! Daddy! Guess what!” She said, “Daddy, this is a picture of Lydia's baby. She's *Downs*! Do you know what that means? That means she's just like me!” She gave us both high-fives, turned, and yelled, “Congratulations!” and ran off.

As I've thought about it and tried to judge with righteous judgment, I must say I can't think of anyone I know in this world better to be just like than Carolynn Carlon.

Congratulations, Elana!

“Judge not according to the face, but with righteous judgment judge.”

Amen.

Song: "What Child Is This?"

What child is this, who, laid to rest,
On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
Haste, haste to bring Him laud,
The babe, the son of Mary.

Why lies He in such mean estate,
Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear; for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear, shall pierce him through;
The cross be borne for me, for you:
Hail, hail the Word made flesh,
The babe, the son of Mary.

So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh;
Come, peasant, king, to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.
Raise, raise the song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby:
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The babe, the son of Mary.

For the benediction I want to end with a touching and true story:

Jesus and Moses were playing golf. They came to a long par — crossing over water.
Jesus was up first. He was addressing the ball when Moses asked, "What are you using?"

"A five iron," Jesus replied.

"A five iron?" Moses was incredulous. "You can't carry the water with a five iron. You need more club."

"Tiger Woods hits a five iron," Jesus replied.

Jesus swung and hit a long arching five that, alas, carried only 165 yards, splashing in the pond.

"I'll get it," Moses said.

Moses walked down to the water, which obediently parted before him. He strode out, like Charlton Heston, on dry ground to Jesus' ball, picked it up, and walked back to the tee — the water filling in neatly behind him.

Jesus took the ball from Moses, teed up, and was ready to hit.

"What club are you using?" Moses asked.

"A five iron," Jesus replied.

"A five iron?" Moses was incredulous a second time. "You can't carry the water with a five iron . . ."

"Tiger Woods hits a five iron," Jesus said.

Jesus hit a long arching five that carried about 180 yards before it splashed into the pond.

"Don't bother," said Jesus, preempting Moses' offer. "I'll get it."

Jesus strode down to the pond and calmly walked out on the water in search of his ball.

Just then the foursome behind Jesus and Moses arrived at the tee. They saw Jesus walking on the water. They said to Moses, "Who does that guy think he is — Jesus Christ?"

"He *is* Jesus Christ," Moses replied. "But he thinks he's Tiger Woods."

Why would Jesus Christ want to be Tiger Woods? It's absurd.

We are Jesus in that "it's no longer I who live but Christ in me," and we are His body, suffering, weak, and crucified. His love is in us, the new creation. But we don't care about that, and we want to be Tiger Woods.

Parents, nothing against Tiger Woods, but why on earth would you want your kids to be Tiger Woods? or Cindy Crawford? or Albert Einstein? when they could be, are called to be, are destined to be, so very much more?

"Judge not by appearances, but with righteous judgment judge."

Amen.

Further Reading

“You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he who sent me.”

-John 8:15-16

We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to be proud of us, so that you may be able to answer those who pride themselves on a man's position and not on his heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

-II Corinthians 5:12-17

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

-Isaiah 53:1-4

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

-Revelation 1:12-17a

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dulllest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you say it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

-C. S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory

And the LORD God commanded the man [Adam], saying, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

-Genesis 2:16-17

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus [the second Adam], who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

-Philippians 2:5-7

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

-I Corinthians 13:8

Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the

earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

-I Corinthians 15:45-49

Then one day John was holding up a plastic letter and making its sound, which happened to be “EEEEEEE,” when Adam suddenly perked up and said, “Wizbef!” This is the way he pronounces his sister Elizabeth's name. Naturally, John and I took this as ample cause to stay home from work and celebrate. During that day, we discovered that Adam's learning capacity went way beyond anything we expected—as long as everything he learned related directly to someone he cared about. He had absolutely no interest in, for example, “E is for egg.” But E for Elizabeth—now that was crucial information.

In the end we all learned the alphabet this way. The symbols we had been trying to link to abstract sounds ended up as a parade of personalities: Adam first, of course, and then Billy, Caleb, Diane, Elizabeth, Francine, Grandpa . . . As we figured out how he learned, the landscape of our son's mind began to reveal itself to us. Instead of a rationally constructed structure of empirical observations, logical conclusions, and arbitrary symbols, Adam's mental world seems to be more like a huge family reunion. It is a gathering of people, all linked by Adam's affection into a complex universe of relationships and characteristics. In this world, Adam learns as fast as anyone I know. Long before he could read or write even the most basic words (or so I thought), Adam came home to tell me, in his garbled tongue, about the new boy who had just moved into his class, and who had become Adam's friend. When I couldn't understand his pronunciation of the boy's name, Adam grabbed a pencil in his stubby, grubby little-boy fingers, and wrote “Miguel Fernando de la Hoya” on a piece of paper—a piece of paper, needless to say, which I intend to frame. If I ever need a dose of Adam and he isn't around, I'll be able to look at that clumsily written name and remember what it is like to tap into an intelligence powered exclusively by love.

-Martha Beck, Expecting Adam

God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

-I John 4:16b

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