

RESTORING OUR VISION OF GOD

Jesus enables us to see God not as a stern taskmaster but as our loving Father.

Evangelicals are good at explaining how our sin separates us from a holy God. “I was raised to understand that sin’s gravest consequence is the way it forces God to perceive me: *God is holy, I’m not, and there’s no way he can even look at me until I have the covering of Christ’s blood,*” Carolyn Arends writes in her column, “Our Divine Distortion.” Arends continues: “In my teens, I clipped a poem out of a youth magazine in which the poet asks—and answers—a pressing question: ‘How can a righteous God look at me, a sinner, and see a precious child? Simple: The Son gets in his eyes.’” This is good theology, but incomplete. We need to also get a good dose of biblical anthropology so that we may grasp how sin warps our perceptions, not just of ourselves, but of God himself.



Scripture: Genesis 3; Psalm 5; John 1:1–18; 2 Corinthians 3:12–18

Based on: “Our Divine Distortion,” by Carolyn Arends, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, December 2009



Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

Note to leader: Provide each person with the "Our Divine Distortion" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

Carolyn Arends, noting how sin distorts relationships on the human level, failed to fully grasp the way sin subtly but powerfully alters the way we see God. "I've often been oblivious to one of the most insidious byproducts of the Fall: Sin affects my perception of God. Or, to turn a phrase from that poem, *the sin gets in my eyes*." She says the guilt and shame of our sinfulness lead us to see God not as our Father but as our Godfather—someone we would do well to avoid. Of course the Bible presents a much different picture, but our spiritual myopia can prevent us from seeing it.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] How do you respond when someone points out your mistakes or sins? Why do you think you respond that way?
- [Q] What are some of the common stereotypes about God in our culture?
- [Q] What are some of the common stereotypes about Jesus?
- [Q] How close are these stereotypes to reality?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: God unalterably opposes sinners but rescues the righteous.

Carolyn Arends tells how she saw sin as a kind of spiritual tripwire that causes God to turn away from us. While there are dangers in this perception, there is truth in it too. Unfortunately, many Christians today downplay the seriousness of sin and see it more as a mistake or blunder than as a moral trespass. Read Psalm 5.

King David seeks the Lord's help (vv. 1–3). Employing the parallelism characteristic of Hebrew poetry, he implores God to "give ear," to "listen," to "hear." David speaks, sighs, cries, lays his requests before God, and waits for an answer. In David's relationship with the Lord we see passion and expectancy. This is the context for what is to follow.



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[Q] In verses 4–5, the Lord's hatred of sin (and sinners) is clear. God takes no pleasure in evil and abhors those who are bloodthirsty and evil. If God is love (1 John 4:16), how is this attitude toward sinners possible?

- Do you have the same hatred for sin in yourself? Others?
- How do we integrate this attitude with the love and humility God calls us to?

[Q] David clearly feels unworthy to come before God (v. 7) but does not pull away. Why not?

David describes his enemies and calls for God's judgment on them (vv. 9–10). The apostle Paul universalized this section to show the utter wickedness of humanity (Rom. 3:13). We sometimes airbrush sin, but David and Paul present it in the starkest of terms. We human rebels are guilty before God and deserve to be banished before the righteous Judge.

[Q] Does knowledge of our true spiritual condition make you more or less likely to come to God?

[Q] How do verses 11–12 give perspective on this whole issue?

Teaching Point Two: Sin separates us from all that is good, but no gulf is too wide for God.

Sin, which always promises to add to our lives, only subtracts. Based on the lie that God is keeping something good from us because he really doesn't have our best interests at heart (Gen. 3:5), sin separates us from our loving Creator, from other people, and from Creation. Arends feels keenly a relational separation when she sins, saying we need to pay attention to the misperceptions of God that it produces in us. Yet whatever we think of God, he remains inclined to save us.

Read Genesis 3.

[Q] What three things did the serpent do to persuade Adam and Eve to fall into sin (see verses 1, 4, and 5)?

Leader's Note: *Questioned God's word (v. 1), contradicted God's word (v. 4), and attacked God's motives (v. 5).*

[Q] How do verses 8–10 support Arends's claim that due to our sin, we view God not as our loving Maker but as an ogre, bookkeeper, or monarch?

[Q] How do people today express that separation from and fear of God?



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[Q] How does God treat sin in verses 11–19?

- Why doesn't God simply write off the sin?
- Do you wish that he would? Why or why not?

[Q] What hope do we see in the midst of judgment (vv. 15, 21–22).

- How is the promise in verse 15 ultimately fulfilled?

Leader's Note: *In Christ's victory over Satan (Rom. 16:20).*

[Q] Do you beat yourself up when you sin, or do you actively look to God's victorious hope?

- If the latter, how do we keep from turning our freedom into license?

Teaching Point Three: Jesus perfectly reveals both God's grace and his truth.

Carolyn Arends discusses both objective and subjective results of our sin. Objectively, sin separates us from God and makes us objects of his wrath (Rom. 2:5). Subjectively, it makes us flee his presence and fear him (Gen. 3:8–10). While there is much truth in this subjective understanding, this distance from God keeps us from seeing the grace God offers to sinners. Jesus Christ, however, cures our spiritual myopia by dealing with both the objective and subjective aspects of our sin. He does this by revealing both God's grace and his truth.

Read John 1:1–18.

[Q] Misunderstanding and fear are common responses to the goodness of God. Why do we struggle to relate to him?

[Q] John [the Baptist] was a witness that “all men might believe” in this light-giving Word (v. 7). How is our calling the same as John's? How is it different?

[Q] We see two main reactions to the Word (vv. 10–13). What are they? What are their characteristics?

- How does a person come to believe in him?

[Q] The Word took on flesh, became incarnated, and lived among us, allowing us to see his glory, “full of grace and truth” (v. 14). How do grace and truth balance one another in the life of God?

- In the life of the Christian?



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[Q] Instead of fear and punishment, we receive grace and blessing (vv. 15–17). Are you living in this reality? Why or why not?

[Q] Jesus the God-Man reveals the invisible God as a Father to us (v. 18). How does he do this? What does this say about our perceptions of God?

Teaching Point Four: Jesus produces in us a holy boldness with God and a growing inner transformation.

Now that Jesus gives us access to the Father, how do we live as God's children? What difference should any of this make? Do we misperceive and shun God's company because we feel unworthy? Or do we use our God-given freedom to draw near and become progressively transformed into Christ's likeness?

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12–18.

[Q] What state accompanies the Spirit of the Lord in this new life (v. 17)?

- How does this state apply when we sin?

[Q] The Christian life is to be a process of “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (v. 18). What role does our spiritual vision play in this?

- What can we do to sharpen it?

Optional Activity: *The apostle Paul contrasts life in Christ with the old life under the law (vv. 12–16). Using a white board or poster board, label one side “The Law” and the other side “Life in Christ.” Ask the group to look at verses 12–16 and call out the characteristics of each as you record their answers. Then discuss what differences you see.*

Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

Carolyn Arends points out, “Sin affects my perception of God.” We misperceive him as our enemy rather than as our friend. And while it is true that sin has dire consequences for our standing with God, it never changes the fact that he loves us and desires the salvation of sinners. This loving character is reflected most clearly in Jesus Christ, the perfect representation of God and man. By bringing the two together in the Incarnation, Jesus makes possible the bridging of the gulf, both objective and subjective, between God and humanity.



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Jesus also provides the pattern and the power for us to love and follow God and to experience ever-increasing inner transformation. This is a state of grace in which we live every day, gratefully receiving his gift of life and light and responding with a desire to reflect his glory in the world.

The question for us, his followers, is how to maintain our spiritual focus, how to ensure that Jesus makes a difference today and every day. How do we avoid maintaining an outward religiosity while experiencing a heart that grows ever colder to God and to those made in his image? Arends says we will not make true progress “until the Son gets in our eyes.” The key is not mere outward obedience, but an inner transformation that only the Savior can bring. May God help us to keep our spiritual vision clear

Action Point: *Brainstorm on the topic “Ways We Can See Jesus Today.” Have someone write all the ideas down, then discuss as a community how you will apply the most helpful ones both corporately and as individuals. Plan to have each member report back about how he or she has seen Jesus more clearly as a result*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century. A CT editor at large, he writes a column for BreakPoint.org and blogs at stanguthrie.com.*

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

☰ Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

☰ **Gospel of John: Knowing Jesus** This basic ten-session Bible study identifies the seven names and titles of Jesus that reveal him as the eternal God, who came to transform us.

☰ **Jesus As Your Mentor** We often want mentors to show us how to live. Who does that better than Christ himself? This four-session Bible study will show that Jesus lived the best life ever, and when we let him mentor us, he will show us how to be the best leader, friend, and lover, living the best way possible.

☰ **Matthew: Jesus the Messiah** This seven-session Bible study takes a close look at the first four chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and looks at the importance of obedience to God, the power of Jesus' name, living outside our comfort zone, gaining power over temptation, discovering what God expects of us, and staying on task with our mission.



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☞ Mark Galli, **Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God**, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerBooks, 2006). Seeing Jesus for who he is involves discarding some of our comfortable stereotypes.

☞ John Piper, **What Jesus Demands from the World** (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006). Following Jesus isn't easy, but it is satisfying.

☞ **Confessions**, Saint Augustine (Penguin Classics, 1979). To start seeing God rightly, we have to grapple with the reality of our own sinfulness.

☞ www.jesusfilm.org. Information about the classic Jesus Film, seen by millions around the world.





Our Divine Distortion

We can't see God clearly without Jesus. O come, Emmanuel.

WHEN I FOUND a brand new laptop for half price on eBay, I told my friend and musical colleague Spencer about my bargain of a find. He was worried: "Usually when something's too good to be true . . ."

"I know," I replied impatiently, "but the seller has a 100 percent approval rating."

"Be careful," warned Spencer.

"Of course," I assured him, annoyed. I wasn't born yesterday.

I sent the seller \$1,300 and discovered in very short, sickening order that I had fallen prey to a classic scam. A fraudster had hacked someone's eBay identity in order to relieve easy marks like me of our money.

I felt an absolute fool—and didn't want to tell Spencer. The next time I saw his number on my caller ID, I didn't answer. I could just imagine his "I told you so."

Soon, I was avoiding Spencer completely. And I started to resent him. Why did he have to be so judgmental? Why couldn't he be on my side? Why was I ever friends with that jerk?

Eventually, we had to fly together to perform at a concert. "Whatever happened with that computer thing?" he asked an hour into the flight. Cornered, I finally confessed my foolishness, dreading the inevitable response. But as soon as I told Spencer about my mistake, a strange thing happened. The enemy I had turned him into evaporated. Spencer turned into Spencer again, my teasing but deeply empathetic buddy.

As embarrassed as I was by my eBay error, I felt even dumber about the way I had allowed my shame to distort my perception of a best friend. If my hand had not been forced, I would have remained estranged from him indefinitely.

I've always considered myself perceptive, but the longer I live, the more I discover my susceptibility to misinterpretation. This is true of the way I view my friends, truer of the way I see my enemies, and perhaps truest

of the way I perceive God.

I was raised to understand that sin's gravest consequence is the way it forces God to perceive me: *God is holy, I'm not, and there's no way he can even look at me until I have the covering of Christ's blood.* In my teens, I clipped a poem out of a youth magazine in which the poet asks—and answers—a pressing question: "How can a righteous God look at me, a sinner, and see a precious child? Simple: The Son gets in his eyes."

But what about how I look at God? I've often been oblivious to one of the most insidious byproducts of the Fall: Sin affects my perception of God. Or, to turn a phrase from that poem, *the sin gets in my eyes.*

Before Adam and Eve had fallen for the first lie, they basked in God's company. But after a few bites of forbidden fruit, they no longer looked forward to seeing their Maker. When he came calling, they hid.

Had God changed? No. Adam and Eve's brokenness altered their perception of God, not his character. Ever since, we humans have been letting our shame poison our understanding of God. He becomes an ogre, or a bookkeeper, or maybe just a disinterested, detached monarch.

Many of us unconsciously relate to God our Father as a Godfather—there's a lot he can do for us when he likes us, but don't get on his bad side. So we avoid him. And the longer we refuse to take his calls, the worse the distortion becomes.

But here is some good news: Jesus is the

antidote to our misperceptions. When we speak of the Incarnation, we acknowledge that Jesus is "God con carne"—God with meat on. Our questions about God's character—*Is he really about mercy, justice, and a love that just won't quit?*—are answered in the person of Jesus.

In one sense, Adam and Eve were right to fear facing God. The consequences of their choices were painful. But even God's seemingly harshest judgment—banishment from the Garden and the Tree of Life—was rooted in love. If the first humans had accessed eternal life in Eden, they would have remained in their brokenness forever. God chose another way—a death and resurrection way that would cost him much—because he was and is and always will be with us and for us.

Christmas clarifies this resoundingly. That's why every time the angels announced Christ's birth they said, "Do not be afraid." Yes, we should fear sin's consequences. But we need not fear the perfect love of a God willing to come and shiver in our skin to save us.

We do not have the power to change God's character. Our Father is our Father. Always has been, always will be. But we will never see him for who he really is until the Son gets in our eyes. ✦

Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for "Restoring Our Vision of God," a Bible study based on this article.



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