



The IMAGINE Series focuses on the hope of a different world as followers of Jesus make disciples who make disciples.

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*Our view of God often impedes our ability to love Him and other people.*



## I. Introduction: How Do You View God?

The year: AD 33

The setting: The Upper Room

In a few hours, Jesus will be dead. The disciples don't realize it, but they're having their last meeting with Jesus. The mood is reverent but filled with hope. (Read John 14:1–9)

Jesus speaks with a tone of certainty and promise: "If you really knew Me, you would know My Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him."

Philip responds, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

With a tinge of disappointment in His voice, Jesus asks Philip a penetrating question: "Don't you know Me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?"

Philip had been Jesus' disciple for three years, and yet he didn't truly know Christ. How many years have you claimed Jesus as your Savior? If you had a personal audience with the incarnate Christ, at some point in the conversation would He ask you the same question He asked Philip: **"Have I been with you such a long time and yet you do not know me?"**

## II. Our Calling to Love the "Real" God.

In one of the defining moments of his ministry, Jesus was asked by one of the religious leaders of His day which commandment was the greatest. Christ gave an unexpected reply: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:29–31). This Great Commandment to love God and love people defines the true identity of those who follow Jesus. Great

Commandment love must be at the heart of who we are and what we do. Yet every individual who seeks to live out this commandment will discover a significant challenge: Notice the expression “The Lord is one” is really a declaration that Israel’s God is the “Real” God; in a day of false Gods everywhere, there is only one true God and we’re called to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words, we will never be able to experience Great Commandment love for God unless we have a clear view of who He really is. If we were to examine ourselves, many of us would discover that our view of God often impedes our ability to love Him and other people.

### How Do You View God?

It is important for each of us to closely examine his or her own concept of God. How do you really see Him? The following reflections from Luke 19 will help you address this question.

For a moment, put yourself in one of the Bible stories we often tell our children. It is the story of Zacchaeus. The Gospel of Luke tells us that there was a wealthy tax collector named Zacchaeus who lived in the city of Jericho. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus as He passed through the town one day; but being a short man, he could not see over the crowd. So the tax collector climbed a sycamore tree in order to get a better view. When Jesus reached Zacchaeus, He immediately asked to go to the tax collector’s house. This invitation was especially significant because of the reputation of tax collectors in Christ’s day. They were considered traitors to the people of Israel because they collected taxes for the Roman government. Furthermore, Zacchaeus was a wealthy man; and because of the corrupt system of his day, he most certainly obtained this wealth by cheating, stealing, and embezzling money. Yet Christ chose to spend time with this man who was hated and despised by most of the Jews (Luke 19:1–10).

In many ways we are like Zacchaeus. We have done things we regret, hurt others by our choices, and lived lives that are far from perfect. We at times, have failed, sinned and made poor choices. Perhaps we have “blown it” again and again. Now imagine yourself sitting in the top of a tree, waiting for Jesus. He walks toward you, stops just below the tree, and looks up. How would He respond? Would He look up at you and shake His finger with words of condemnation? Would He look up at you and shake His head in disappointment? Or would He just pass you by, barely noticing you or your needs?

Take a moment to identify your response to the questions above. Then consider three of the most common hindered views of God and how they might impact our ability to love Him.

- **Some of us might see an inspecting god.** He seems to have a “heavenly tally sheet” and is just waiting to record what we do. An inspecting god examines our every motive and behavior. He then relates to us according to how many good or bad marks we have accumulated. This type of god waits to catch us doing something we shouldn’t. It is difficult to love a god like that. Imagine trying to love someone who only examined you and often pointed out what you did wrong.



L-8. Disciplined, bold and believing prayer

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

**“Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . .” (Col. 3:16).**

**Pastor/Teacher:** Vulnerably share your response to:

*I may sometimes see God as*

My view of God as \_\_\_\_\_  
could influence how I relate to Him  
by \_\_\_\_\_

My view of God as \_\_\_\_\_  
could influence how I relate to others  
by \_\_\_\_\_

- **Others may view God as a disappointed god.** This type of god notices our behavior and shakes his head in disappointment or even disgust. He keeps his arms crossed as he looks down at our feeble attempts to live a righteous life. This kind of god might shrug his shoulders and walk out of the room because, ultimately, he has given up on us. No matter how many positive things we try to do or how good we try to become, this kind of god tells us that it is never enough. We are never good enough. Imagine trying to love someone like that—someone you could never please. It would be extremely difficult to maintain a loving relationship with a god like that.
- **At other times, we might view God as a distant god,** or even a god who is completely uninvolved in our lives. This type of god is too busy to notice our concerns and seems to take little interest in us. He does not appear to have time for people like us because he only takes care of the important things. This kind of god listens with one ear as we pray, giving only half-hearted attention. He seems detached and perhaps a little too distracted to care. Imagine trying to love a god like that. Imagine trying to love someone who barely noticed you or was always too busy to talk with you. That kind of relationship would be difficult to sustain.

As we consider these flawed views of God, it is important for us to realize that, as followers of Jesus, we are at risk of treating others in the same way that we perceive God treating us. If a Christ-follower views God as an inspecting god, he or she might tend to inspect others. If a disciple sees God as a disappointed god, who is difficult to please, he or she may find it hard to communicate that others are ever “good enough.” Likewise, if leaders see God as distant and uninvolved, they may tend to distance themselves from those they lead and may become fearful or controlling.

### Walk in the Light of God’s Son through Fresh Encounters with Jesus (John 12:35; 8:12)

Reflect on your own “hindered” concept of God. How do you sometimes see Him?

I may sometimes see God as \_\_\_\_\_ (inspecting, distant, detached, disappointed, disapproving, or other specific descriptors of your choice) because I often imagine Him . . .

My view of God as \_\_\_\_\_ could influence how I relate to Him by . . . (For example: My view of God as distant could undermine my trust of Him.)

My view of God as \_\_\_\_\_ could influence the way I relate to others by . . . (For example: My view of God as an inspecting god could influence the way I relate to others by causing me to sometimes be overly critical and harsh.)

Share your responses with a partner or small group and pray for one another in bold, courageous faith. Surely God’s will is that the Holy Spirit reveal to you Jesus as the true Light. “If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him” (1 John 5:14, 15).

- The real God wants a relationship with us. He is attentive and caring. He does not sit in heaven with a tally sheet or get preoccupied with more important things. He wants to be close. He wants to be your intimate friend (Proverbs 3:32). He is excited when you wake up in the morning because He cannot wait to talk with you and relate to you. He is delighted to know you and be with you (Psalm 147:11). He generously and graciously gave up His Son because He could not bear the thought of eternity without you (Romans 8:32). The real God is able to separate who you are as His beloved child from what you might do. He is pleased with you because He sees you with the eyes of a master Creator—One who admires His handiwork and values each of His treasures because they are unique and wonderful (Psalm 139:13, 14).
- We see confirmation of the real God’s character in the story of Zacchaeus. Scripture tells us that Zacchaeus responded to the Savior’s invitation by coming down at once and welcoming Jesus gladly. His heart was thrilled to have the opportunity to be with the Lord. Jesus knew what Zacchaeus had done, but his loving response focused on who he was and who he would become.
- The real Jesus is not inspecting, disappointed, or distant. He’s excited to be with you, be recognized by you, love you, and receive love from you! He’s excited to be your friend. He wants what’s best for you and doesn’t want you to miss the joy that comes from a relationship with him.

Could it be that when you woke up this morning, God was longing for you to love him? And do you think, perhaps, God knew all along that if someone loves him, they naturally end up following his commandments as they experience perfect love?

### III. Loving the “Real” God Empowers a Love of Others

*“No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12).*

One of the critical goals of following Jesus is that we would live and love in a way that helps those around us experience Christ as He really is. As we gather together in leadership teams, small groups, and close relationships, we need to challenge and encourage one another to see God for who He really is.

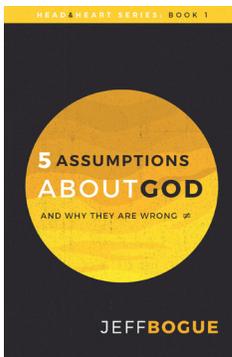
Are the people that make up our team, small group, or accountability partnership living and loving in a way that enables us to see God in one another? Are we living and loving so that the world is able to see God for who He really is?

Are we loving one another so well that all men will know that we are His disciples (John 13:35)? How can we encourage and challenge one another so that we gain the freedom and ability to see the real God?

- We can let others see God when someone fails and we accept them as in Romans 15:7.
- When someone shares a struggle and we encourage them as in Hebrews 10:25, we demonstrate the heart of the real God.
- When someone is lonely and we care for them as in I Corinthians 12:25, they will come to know and see God for who He really is.



P-2. "Startling people" with loving initiatives to "give first"



The Heart and Mind series is a collection of written works directed toward the heart and mind of the millennial generation.

Who is God? Is He angry and aggressive? Maybe He's just interested in punishing people. Does He care for the weak, sick, and protect children from bad dreams? Or perhaps, He's a genie who gives us everything we want if we believe in Him enough. Does God really hate homosexuals and Muslims? What is God like? How does He view me? What does He want me to do?

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You have the chance to let others see God by communicating reassurance to them, to let the love of God be perfected in you (1 John 4:12), and to become living epistles of Christ's care.

### Walk in the Light of God's People through Faithful Engagement in Fellowship (John 12:35; Matthew 5:14)

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Consider together with a partner or small group what Scripture says about God's love for us:

- "God demonstrated his love for us by sending Jesus to die for us while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8).
- "Nothing can separate us from God's love" (Romans 8:38, 39).
- "He's poured out his love on us through the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:5).
- "The love of Jesus for us is infinitely great and surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18, 19).
- "Because of his great love for us, God made us alive with Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4, 5).
- Jesus left the disciples with exact instructions explaining how the world was to know about Him. Jesus' intent was that people would believe in God's love because of the example of Christ followers who truly loved one another. Think through some ways that you can "speak" love to people today:
- Say something encouraging.
- Say something comforting.
- Say something affirming.

Whether you say it, text it, or mail a hand-written note . . . Share Jesus' love with someone today! Even Now! "Startle" someone today with the "need-meeting" love of Jesus.

### IV. Loving the "Real" God Frees Us to See Ourselves as the Beloved of God

How we see God reflects on how we see ourselves.

- AM I the "inspected" one?
- AM I the one in whom God is "disappointed"?
- AM I the one who is so distant from God that He might not notice me?

The Father, through the gift of His Son at Calvary, has declared us worthy of His love, regardless of our performance. God knows that once we realize that we are accepted, loved, and valued, a desire to do things consistent with this acceptance, love, and worth will follow.

Christ lived out this principle most beautifully when He found Zacchaeus in the top of a sycamore tree. Jesus approached Zacchaeus and offered him friendship and unconditional acceptance. Zacchaeus' livelihood was

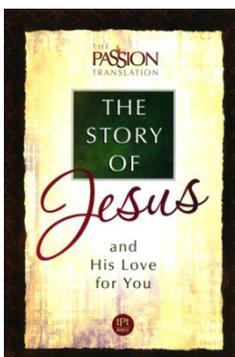
built on theft, embezzlement, and the betrayal of his people, but Christ showed him that his worth was far greater than his behavior warranted. This revelation impacted his life in a positive way (Luke 19:1–10).

God is able to give an accurate estimate of our worth because we are created in His image. The coins of Jesus' day bore a picture of Caesar, and only Caesar could declare the money's worth. Only the one whose image was on the coin could determine the value of the coin itself. Likewise, we have been created in the image of God. Each of us was formed according to His great plan and fashioned into a unique individual. Therefore, the divine Creator has the right to determine our value.

He has declared you to be worth the death of His Son—a gift of incomparable value. The One who knew no sin became sin and cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). Why did God do it? More importantly, for whom did He do it? He did it for you! You are the beloved of God. If no one else had needed the gift of Calvary, He would have done it for you.



L-3. Experiencing God as He really is through deepened intimacy with Him



*The Story of Jesus is the biographical account of Jesus' supernatural birth, controversial life, unjust death, confirmed resurrection, and promised return to earth as told by John, the beloved disciple. This book is a resource to introduce Jesus' life and the work of his Spirit to invite seekers, encourage saints, and challenge skeptics.*

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### Walking in the light of God's Word through Frequent Experiences of Scripture (John 12:35; Psalms 119:105)

"Loving me empowers you to obey my commands" (John 14:15).

- **Some of us view God as an inspecting God.** As you read the verse, you may have imagined a tone of expectation and demand. The words might carry a questioning tone, conveying the sense that there is a test to be passed or a measurement to be taken. You may have even imagined your inspecting god shaking his finger at you as he speaks these words. His stern tone and gestures warn of his constant inspection.
- **Some of us may view God as disappointed in us.** As you read the verse above, you may have heard a voice that seemed full of dissatisfaction. This kind of god might look down at you with arms crossed, shaking his head as he says, "If you really loved me, then you would be able to keep my commandments. In fact, I have known all along that you did not really love me, and what you just did proves it!"
- **Some of us may see God as distant god.** As you read the verse above, the voice you heard may have seemed cold or disinterested. A distant god would speak the verse with halfhearted enthusiasm or great indifference. This kind of god might seem preoccupied with other things or other, more important people. You might picture him looking up absentmindedly and saying, "Oh, if you love me, then you will probably keep my commandments. Thanks for stopping by."

Consider the wonder that this verse may be a promise in a long line of promises! (See John 14:2, 3, 12, 13, and 14). Could it be when you woke up this morning God was looking down longing for you to love Him, knowing that as you do, you'll then keep his commandments? The real Jesus is not inspecting, disappointed, or distant. He's excited to share in your love!

*Pause to first reflect with thanksgiving and praise that Jesus is "excited to love you"*

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

**“Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . .” (Col. 3:16).**

**Pastor/Teacher:** Share your response and then lead others in vulnerability and celebration.

*As I embrace Jesus as excited to love me, my heart is filled with*

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- As I embrace Jesus as excited to love me, my heart is filled with \_\_\_\_\_.
- Now, share this with a partner or small group. My heart is filled with \_\_\_\_\_. Pray with one another as the Holy Spirit brings freedom and joy to embrace Christ as He really is excited to love you!
- Celebrate together that as you awaken each morning, He is longing to share with you His love and caring involvement.

## V. Loving the “Real” God Invites Us into Friendship

*“I call you my most intimate friends, for I reveal to you everything that I’ve heard from my Father” (John 15:15).*

How deeply intimate and far-reaching is his love! How enduring and inclusive it is! Endless love beyond measurement, beyond academic knowledge—this extravagant love pours into you until you are filled to overflowing with the fullness of God! (Ephesians 3:17–10)

It’s hard to be friends with a god who inspects you or is disappointed in you or who is so distant that He doesn’t even notice you.

What do best friends share? Everything!

The final evening before the passion would begin, Jesus bared His sinless soul to those whom He knew would betray Him, doubt Him, and run away in fear. John 13 begins with, “Jesus knowing . . .” (v. 1). He, who knew no sin, knew the heart of every man. He released Judas to “go and do what you will do quickly” (v. 27). He told the truth to Peter. “You will deny me three times” (v38). He washed the feet of every disciple—the same feet that would run away to protect themselves.

“No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15).

No doubt, it will seem strange, but friendship with God is foundational to our being a good friend to others. The startling possibility that you and I (the created) can relate closely, even intimately, with the Creator is hard to grasp, but it’s true. The Bible says that Moses spoke with God as with a friend, and Abraham is referred to as a “friend of God” (Exodus 33:11, James 2:23). In the New Testament, as we encounter the God-Man Jesus, this possibility of friendship seems closer and more possible.

The apostle James reminds us that our “friendship with the world” will hinder our friendship with the Lord (James 4:4). In fact, God is a “jealous” friend, knowing that our friendship with the world will bring pain, while our intimacy with Him brings blessings.

True friendship, which is learned in our relationship with the Lord, brings blessings:

- Friends deeply know one another—He knows you, and you make a priority of knowing Him (Jeremiah 1:5, Philippians 3:8)
- Friends initiate care for one another—He meets your needs, speaks with you, stays committed to you (Psalm 37:25; 85:8; 139:3; Philippians 4:19). You listen to what He says, try not to grieve Him, and celebrate His goodness toward you (1 Samuel 3:9; Psalms 100:2; Ephesians 4:30)



THE EXPERIENTIAL GOSPEL OF JOHN is designed to engage followers of Jesus as they impart both the Gospel and live out a relevant, daily faith (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

This resource is unlike any of the resources you’ve likely read before because the exercises in each chapter were written with the specific goal of engaging you in a Spirit-empowered faith.

**Download four sample chapters from the Experiential Gospel of John, suitable for Easter meditations.**

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- Friends vulnerably trust one another—In Scripture, Christ shares His joys, hurts, and hopes (John 15:11, 18; 17:5). You share with Him your joys, hurts, and hopes (Jeremiah 33:3; Romans 8:26).

On and on, the Master served His friends. He shared everything with those He chose to love. He chose to love you as well. Will you choose to receive everything from Him? Take a moment and pray like this: “Lord, You have chosen to love me completely! I am so grateful for your great love and now receive it gratefully. Jesus, I want the kind of relationship with You that You spoke of in Your word. I want You, Jesus, as my closest friend.”