

“Lethbridge?! Can Anything GOOD Come from Lethbridge?!” (John 1:43-51)

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We know Jesus loves us. From childhood many of us are singing, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” We memorize verses that tell us, “For God so love the world that he gave his one and only Son.” We are told repeatedly that Jesus loves us.

Over and over and over again we sing about and hear about and read about this great love that God has for us.

So we believe that Jesus loves us . . . and we also believe we’re miserable, hideous, sinful, obnoxious people.

We believe that Jesus loves us, but he does so because he has to. His character requires it of him.

We develop this idea that God loves us, but in a tolerant sort of way. Jesus loves us, but is perpetually annoyed at our failings, our foolishness, our lack of faith.

Jesus loves me – and he is very disappointed.

I rewatched a video on YouTube that highlights this misunderstanding that Jesus loves us through anger and clenched teeth. In Spring of 2003, Vintage21 Church in Raleigh, NC had a four week series on Jesus Christ, taking a deeper look at what He said and did. They took an old movie about Jesus and (poorly) overdubbed the way that people think Jesus speaks to us and sees us. Jesus comes over a hillside to his gathered disciples, and in judgmental tone walks amongst the disciples and speaks to them one at a time:

Well, alright. Now it’s time for me to tell you all what you’ve done wrong since I last saw you. And don’t try and hide because I’m Jesus. I will find you.

Let’s start with you, Peter. You lied to your mother the other day.

Andrew, you said a naughty word when you hit your finger with a hammer.

James, you laughed at him when he hit his finger.

Moving right along, John, you drank too much wine the other night. Not way too much, just enough to make me angry.

Matthew, we fell asleep during church, didn’t we? Yes we did.

And Thomas, you were slow dancing a little too close with that girlfriend of yours.

To another disciple he walks over and says, *Let's see, and you, I forgot your name so you're off the hook for now.*

Frank, you know what you did, but I just can't repeat it because I'm Jesus.

Alright, all you sinners come with me. It's time to pay the piper.

We think Jesus foundationally sees us a sinful and loathsome people to be pitied and tolerated. Sure he loves us. But it's despite of who we are.

John 1, as Jesus is calling his disciples, undermines this very bad theology. When Jesus first meets Nathanael, Jesus does **not** speak condescendingly to Nathanael. He speaks to Nathanael in a way that is not just positive, but it's high praise!

Jesus sees Nathanael coming towards him with Phillip, and Jesus declares about Nathanael:

"Here is truly a person of Israel. There is nothing false in him." (John 1:47)

Jesus doesn't say, "Hello, you loathsome sinner, in desperate need of me." He says (in another translation) "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." This is not generic praise. This isn't just, "Hey you! You're great! I love you." Jesus knows and sees specific things in the goodness of Nathanael's character that he acknowledges.

How do we know this isn't just generic? Look at Nathanael's response: "How do you know me?" These words about Nathanael's love for country and depth of honesty makes Nathanael take notice. He is hooked in by Jesus because Jesus says something specific about Nathanael worth addressing.

If we think that Nathanael is somehow unique and special above all others, the earlier verses show this to be untrue. Nathanael's first thoughts about Jesus are completely cynical.

Phillip excitedly shares with Nathanael all about Jesus: "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

One detail immediately catches Nathanael's attention: **"Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46)** It's not that Nazareth was necessarily bad. It just wasn't great either. It was a "meh" kind of town. "Nazareth did not have a bad reputation in Jesus' day, but neither did it have a famous reputation." (Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John*, 77) Nazareth sounds little like Lethbridge.

When American standup comedian Jim Gaffigan was in Lethbridge, he asked the locals, "What can you tell me about Lethbridge?" People would give him a blank stare and then say,

“Calgary’s a couple hours north of here.” We’re a great place to live, we have interesting history, but we’re also fantastically unremarkable. We’re very Nazareth-esque. Or maybe Nazareth is very Lethbridge-esque. Regardless, neither of us are exactly Messiah material, like any community I’ve live in, be it Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, Three Hills Alberta, Nashwaaksis in New Brunswick, or Orangeville, Ontario. Nazareth is neither epically fantastic nor rotten, it’s very gloriously meh.

Phillip invites Nathanael anyway with a familiar phrase and invitation used all throughout the book of John – “Come and see”.

Nathanael goes and sees. Jesus sees Nathanael. And Jesus is not just hospitable and friendly. Jesus greets Nathanael in an “I see you and know you” sort of way.

When Nathanael asks, “How do you know me?” Jesus responds: **“I saw you when you were under the fig tree. That was before Philip told you about me.” (John 1:48)**

Jesus could have supernaturally seen or known where Nathanael was before encountering Jesus. But sitting under a fig tree may have been an image that describes who Nathanael is. The image of sitting under a fig tree is to sit under the wisdom of God. It’s to study, to be passionate about knowledge, about having a deep understanding of God’s Law. “While he may have been at home under a fig tree, the reference also reflects an Old Testament figure of the ideal setting for the study of the law.” (James E. Carter, *Layman’s Bible Commentary: John*, p. 27) Jesus knows and see Nathanael’s love, his heart, his intentions. He sees Nathanael to be someone who loves his country, but far, far beyond that loves the law and wisdom and Word of the Lord.

Jesus sees the very best of who Nathanael is. Jesus sees Nathanael’s identity to his core. Jesus does not praise Nathanael’s skills or function or usefulness – Jesus acknowledges who Nathanael is at the deepest part of himself. That is what Jesus sees first and acknowledges first in Nathanael.

Now I’m sure, for many of us, this is starting to sound very floofy and fuzzy. It sounds like self-esteem on steroids, like flowery and thin theology.

But this idea of Jesus seeing what is best about us is not weak theology. Here’s how we can tell. We can tell in Nathanael’s response. When Jesus talks about Nathanael, Nathanael doesn’t say, “Well I am pretty great.” No. Nathanael’s response is one of humility. Nathanael is humbled to the point that his only response is worship.

Nathanael, being fully seen by Jesus, responds: “Teacher, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.” (John 1:49) He fully believes everything that Phillip had said about Jesus. In

saying these things, he doesn't acknowledge that Jesus is pretty swell or really neat. He's acknowledging big things about Jesus

By calling Jesus teacher or Rabbi, he is willing to learn from Jesus. Wise and scholarly Nathanael is willing to be Jesus' student.

By calling Jesus Son of God, he's acknowledging Jesus as directly from God and exclusively the Messiah, the one that God was going to send to deliver people.

By calling Jesus the King of Israel. He is acknowledging there is absolutely no other person above Jesus. There's no one greater, there is no one higher.

These are statements of, "Jesus, what you teach I will hear. What you ask for, I will give to you. Where you lead I will follow."

Jesus sees you. God sees you. God sees the deepest and most essential parts of you. He sees your character. He sees the foundational person that God has made equipped you to be.

What are the implications of all of this?

More often than not, we see ourselves in a negative way. And we assume God sees us in that same negative way. If you constantly hear a voice of condemnation, anger, judgement directed at you, that's probably not the voice of God. Certainly, the Holy Spirit lets us know when there are things that are not right, whether it's priorities that need to change or sin that needs addressing. But a persistent, angry, judgmental voice in your inner thinking? That's not Jesus. In Scripture it is Satan who is "the accuser", not God. God's voice is the one that declares, "There is not condemnation (or judgment) for those who are in Christ Jesus." Ask God, "What do you see in me?" Jesus is the one who sees the best in you, and Jesus is the one that asks you to follow based on a love for you and knowing who you are.

Today, for me, this affects how I see others. Too often I see others in a judgmental, condemning way. I write people off based on their foibles, perspectives and annoying habits. And that is not how Jesus sees them. Just like Jesus sees the best of cynical Nathanael, just like Jesus sees the best of me, Jesus sees the best of others as well. He really sees them. When I see people and think, "what good can possibly come of them", Jesus already sees what is good within them. Jesus, help me to see others as you do. Help me extend the same grace to others that you generously and accurately extend to me.

We need Jesus. We need Jesus to help us see ourselves correctly, as loved and genuinely valued. We need Jesus to help us see others correctly. Lord, help us hear what you see in us. And let's worship our Lord together, seeing him accurately as well.