

Discipleship Enablers Session 4:

Who is God and how does God see us? (VIDEO transcript)

Discipleship Story

The spiritual writer Heather Ward writes about a long period in her life struggling with depression. She had long experienced feelings of low self-worth. Somehow, many of the answers she had heard in church and in the wider world didn't seem to help. On one hand, she heard that she must simply deny herself: the 'self' was evil and its desires had to be suppressed at all costs. On the other hand, others told her that the key to escaping her low self-worth was simply to 'be herself', to believe that everything about her was right and good; talk of sin only caused problems. But neither option really seemed to answer her questions. And yet, with God's help, at her lowest point, she discovered a third, more life-giving way:

'...During my sickness I had come to believe... that I had to earn salvation by virtue of my personality, by virtue of the qualities I possessed as a person. I had to be able to justify my existence in terms of talents, abilities and capacity for love and spontaneity, before God would have anything to do with me. Gradually I came to feel that I must surrender the fantasy, that I must express to God a faith that he was greater than my conviction... a faith in the possibility of the impossible. I spent an evening saying simply "Yes", yes to whatever was the truth about God and about myself.... There came no sudden revelation, no lightning flash of inspiration, but quietly for some days after this I was aware of what I can only call light... [...] The most important effect of this experience was the sense of urgency it left behind about the need to live with my light turned towards "The Light". [This light was] the core of my existence yet it brought no sense of possession, of belonging to me by right; it was a gift of light, from light [...] The second major consequence was an awakened capacity to celebrate the existence of other people and the natural world... this knowledge of life as a gift produced great joy in the sheer being of whatever surrounded me'.¹

Heather realised that the core of her being was not her physical body, nor even her personality, gifts or talents. Instead, it was God, and God's love. Beforehand, she had felt she had to choose between building her identity on self-hatred, or building it on self-centredness. Now, she realised that both of these options were a kind of idolatry, because in different ways, they both put her ego at the centre. Instead, she found that saying 'yes' to God placed God at the centre. And the most important thing about her 'self' was her capacity to turn outwards towards receiving God's love and God's spirit, and to accept life as a gift. As Paul says, 'I live, and yet not I, but Christ living in me'. This, she found, helped her relax, accept herself more and grow in love for others too.

¹ Heather Ward, *The Gift of Self* (1990), 5-7.

Main Session Content - part 1

How do we picture God? How do we think God sees us? And how do we see ourselves as a result? How we answer these three questions can play such an important role in shaping our identity - for good or ill. In turn, it can also influence how we enable others as Jesus' disciples too.

This is a central question for us as Christians. The Christian writer A.W. Tozer said: 'We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church'.²

At heart, Christianity isn't a philosophy, a programme or a set of rules. The heart and focus of Christian discipleship is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's why this session is called *The 'Who' of Discipleship*: our discipleship will only be authentic and fruitful so long as we have a faithful picture of God, and this God remains our desire, our focus and our ultimate goal. Recent research on what has helped young adult Christians grow in faith suggests that one factor is "when we have a clear vision of God, ourselves, and everyday faith that has spiritual growth as an obvious and desirable consequence".³ If true, it's important that our vision of God and ourselves is a faithful one.

As a result, in this session we'll spend some time reflecting on what we think God is like, and how that shapes our view of ourselves. We'll spend some time thinking about the pictures of God and humanity given to us in the Bible, and how that helps us develop a healthy and faithful sense of security in who we are in God. This is a vital anchor for discipleship in the ups and downs of life. The young adult discipleship research mentioned above also found that 'Christians grow [partly] through committed relationships of safety, encouragement and challenge'. Our relationship with God is central to that.

Enabling Tips: This session owes a huge debt to the Renovaré Movement's understanding of the importance of our God-image and self-image in spiritual formation, particularly their free, six week small group course [From the Inside Out](https://renovare.org/courses/io).⁴ I'd highly recommend this for anyone wanting to go deeper into this topic.

Our Mental Pictures of God... and Ourselves

How do you picture God? And where do you think that picture comes from? For most of us who are Christians, our 'gut' picture of God probably comes from a combination of four sources:

- The way God is described in the **Bible**.
- The images of God which tend to be emphasised within the Christian **traditions** which have shaped us - our denomination, worship style, teaching, etc.

² A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Eldric Editions, 2025), 1.

³ <https://ccx.org.uk/resource/discipleship-research/>

⁴ <https://renovare.org/courses/io>

- Our own direct **experience** of God – but also our early formative experiences of family, friends or society.
- These things in turn shape the ways we (and other people) think and **reason** about God and the big questions of life.⁵

If our picture of God is a faithful one, this will give us a firm foundation for our Christian life. If our picture of God is off-target in some way, our discipleship will be also.

The same is true of our picture of ourselves. Contemporary western society places so much emphasis on who we really are: we're encouraged to 'find our true selves', 'be true to ourselves' or go on a journey of 'self-discovery'. Discovering our identity and purpose in life isn't wrong in itself. But building and maintaining brand 'me' can also become a relentless ongoing project – often an exhausting and dispiriting one. It can also lead us down some unhelpful dead-ends: we might end up with a hugely inflated ego. We might alternatively end up in disappointment and self-loathing on the other. Or we can feel trapped between the image we present to the world, and what we really feel about ourselves inside. Without help, many of us veer between each of these...

Our picture of God and our picture of ourselves can also be closely linked: if we imagine God as an angry or disappointed parent, we may instinctively come to think of ourselves as the failing or guilty child. If we think of God as basically distant and ineffective, it wouldn't be surprising if we find it difficult to trust God in the ups and downs of life.

But what if our picture of God was shaped by who Jesus was, and what Jesus says about the Father? What if our picture of ourselves was firmly rooted in how what the Bible says about what God made us to be, and how he still regards us despite all we do? What if we allowed Jesus' teaching about who God is, and who we are, to become the foundation of our identity, and our relationship with him?

This is one of the most important building blocks of our journey of discipleship.

Who is God?

Whatever we say about God in ten short minutes is going to be very partial and limited. But here are a few really key biblical messages to frame our picture:

- God is **creator** - and what a creator! This is where the Bible starts: God loves to create, and God's creation is very good. 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...', 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good' (Genesis 1.1, 31).
- God is **over all** - the Bible often uses the language of ruler (Lord, King, etc) and also of shepherd and guide; the one who leads us. The whole world is in God's hands.
- God is **love** - love is central to God's character and purposes, rather than just something God sometimes feels. 'God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God' (1 John 4.16b).

⁵ These four things are sometimes called the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral'.

- **Jesus** shows us what God is like. Sometimes we can fall into the trap of imagining that the Father and Son have quite different characters (for example, that Jesus is loving and the Father is a bit fierce). But if we trust Jesus, we can be assured that whoever has seen Jesus has seen the Father, since 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14.8-10). So if imagining God is difficult, looking at Jesus is a very good place to start.
- God is **bigger and better than our human attempts at describing Him**. If we are struggling with our image of God (and most of us do at times), it can help to know that when God is described as a Father, Lord or King (for example) this means something bigger and better than our human understandings of Fatherhood Lordship or Kingship. Perhaps that's why God has so many names in the Bible: each shines a spotlight on a different aspect of God's character. (One of the reflective activities in this session invites you to spend some time reflecting on these many names for God).
- Even though God is bigger than our understanding, many people in the Bible and since have found God to be **knowable and faithful, desiring a relationship with us, in spite of anything we do**. The parable of the Prodigal Son (or Lost Son) is one of Jesus' most famous and beautiful illustrations of this (Luke 11.15-32).

Note to enablers: At this point you may wish to pause and work through the 'pictures of God' part of the **tool/practice**, and use the **discipleship questions** about our image of God. This will help break up the content/input into more shorter, more accessible chunks.

Main Session Content - part 2

Who are we?

We've explored something of God's character. But now, who are we? There's also so much more we can say on this topic. But here are five thoughts which may help – all of these will be familiar to most Christians. But even though they're very familiar, it's valuable for all of us to be reminded of them regularly:

- We are **made in God's image** (Genesis 1.27). Though God loves ALL creation, human beings seem to stand in special relationship with God. We are 'mirrors' of God, partners in the ongoing work of creation. We remain 'created in the image of God', whatever we do. If we thought about ourselves and other people as 'bearers of God's image', how would that change our relationship with others... and with ourselves?
- We are **loved**. Lamentations 3.22-23 says: 'Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness'. John writes: 'See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!' (1 John 3.1).
- **We have 'missed the mark'**. Rather than trust God and live God's ways, human beings thought we knew better, and preferred to follow our own way. Although some have tried to

downplay the existence of sin and evil, most of us can see very clearly their damaging effects on the world around us - on individual hearts, on relationships, on creation. Jesus knew that all of us are in this condition. Facing down the crowd about to kill a woman for adultery, Jesus challenged them: 'let him [or her] who is without sin cast the first stone'. At that point, the woman's accusers walked away, knowing they'd been found out (John 8.1-11).

- **We can all be rescued.** The essence of the Gospel is not that we reached out and found God, but that God found us, and in Jesus reached down to us in his love. John puts it like this: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3.16). In Romans, Paul writes: 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5.8).
- **As Christians, we have new life, new community and new purpose.** 'To those who believed in his name', John's Gospel says, Jesus 'gave the right to become children of God' (John 1.12), part of the Body of Christ. Ephesians says that we were 'included' in Christ, marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1.13) and 'created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do' (Eph. 2.9). Jesus promises this new life continues beyond death - but it starts right now.

What do you make of this (admittedly rather brief) sketch of who God is, and who we are? What gets you excited? Where does it feel more challenging?

If you can joyfully and whole-heartedly say 'amen!' to this picture of God and us, that's wonderful! It's a good practice to keep checking in on your God-picture and self-picture every now and then, because the human heart is so capable of twisting things out of shape, even when we don't want it to. If you are completely confident in God's love and your identity in Christ, as a 'discipleship enabler' it's also worth being aware that there are many sincere followers of Jesus who nevertheless struggle with this whole area.

Indeed, if you're sensing some area of tension between Jesus's picture of God and us, and your own gut feelings and assumptions, be comforted. Most of us are in that position at times in our lives. Don't beat yourself up about it. Just take this as an invitation deeper into God's character and the love God has for us. Give time to letting this soak into you - don't rush for the quick fix; this might take a while, and that's OK. If some of this is very painful for you or someone else you're journeying with, some professional support or counselling may be an important first step. We'll often also need the support and insight of other wise Christians. That's why this Discipleship Enablers journey places so much emphasis on *group* discipleship.

Many Christians throughout history and today have found grasping that true picture of God and God's love for us to be a vital ingredient in their discipleship. It helps us to appreciate and receive Jesus's offer of 'life in all its fullness' (John 10.10). It is genuinely good news, if we choose to embrace it. So, what would it look like to go deeper and deeper into this picture of God and us? How would it transform our lives if we were really to grasp it and let it transform us?