

# Selfie

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Do you take a good picture?

That is, I propose, a more and more important question these days. Do you take a good picture? It's an important question because the chances of you taking a picture are dramatically greater these days than they were a decade or so ago. These days just about everybody has upon their person a camera – a phone that is as well a camera. And these days just about everybody is a photographer. If you have a cell phone you are a photographer. Walk through a public place, or more so a tourist place, and you will inevitably see someone taking a picture of something or someone. And inevitably you will be asked if you could take a picture. And a phone is put into your hands and so the question is – do you take a good picture? Do you know what you're doing when asked to capture the moment? That's one way of thinking about that question.

A more specific way of thinking about that question is – do you take a good selfie? A selfie, as most of you know, is a picture you take of yourself. Taking a good selfie takes a bit of practice and I am a bit embarrassed to say that I'm not very good at it – especially if I am trying to take a selfie of me and someone else. Invariably I cut off half of the other person's face or get too close or too far or the wrong angle. But do you take a good selfie?

Now another way of asking that question is – do you like what you see when the picture is you? Do you like what you see when the picture is you? What happens when you look into the reflective screen of digital photography? What do you see

when the picture is you? Do you take a good selfie?

Beauty, I guess, is in the eyes of the beholder. You can be the judge on some of these selfies. Folks you and I don't know. Maybe some take better selfies than others. Especially this guy. Yikes. But how about her – that's my dog. I think she's take a great selfie. How about this guy? Don't know who he is. But what a pleasant face and smile? I'd say he takes a good selfie. And how about her? This is not a selfie – this is the iconic National Geographic picture taken by Steve McCurry – titled *Afghan Girl*. Sharbat Gula, a 13 year old Afghan refugee whose green eyes and haunting expression capture a deep mystery. There is something behind that face. And then there's Ed Clark's picture of Chief Petty Officer Graham Jackson playing his accordion as the flag draped casket of FDR leaves Warm Springs, Georgia on its way north. The deep mystery of grief. And then there is the iconic Great Depression picture taken by Dorthea Lange of the Woman with Seven Children. The mysterious face of poverty. A face can tell a thousand stories. And then there is the face of our sixteenth President. 2 1/2 years into the Civil War. What lies behind those eyes? The mystery of a President at war, a President trying to preserve the Union. Do you think Abraham Lincoln would say he takes a good selfie? I suspect he wouldn't care. He was too busy trying to hold a country together. How about you? Do you take a good picture?

Truth is, I'm not sure anyone thinks they take a good selfie. Whenever the image of ourselves is reflected back to us there can be all sorts of things of which we can be critical. Our hair isn't just right, our expression is funny, our makeup is not perfect, our eyes are looking the wrong way, we wonder if we are aging gracefully. It can be hard

to look at ourselves and cope with what we see. Because, of course, what we see on the outside is just a glimpse of what is in the inside. All of what lies behind the eyes and the smile and the lines and the expression. The mystery of the soul, the mystery of the self. What do you think of yourself?

The apostle Paul didn't have the advantage of an iPhone, or a polaroid for that matter. No pictures of the apostle. No selfies while visiting Corinth or Galatia or Ephesus. But from time to time when he writes his letters he gives us a picture of himself – he paints us a picture not of the outside, but of the inside. And for Paul it wasn't always a pretty picture. At one point he talks about his thorn in the flesh that the good Lord does not see fit to remove. At another point he confesses to doing the very thing he doesn't want to do, and not doing the very thing he wants to do. At another point he expresses quite honestly his feeling of betrayal, of people letting him down. Little by little the apostle takes a selfie and shows a part of who he is.

So this morning the apostle begins by talking about appearances. The appearances of the risen Jesus. The appearance first to Peter, then to the disciples, then to 500 assembled in one place, then to James and then to rest of the apostles – and then Paul says, Last of all, as to

one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am, he continues, the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. Paul looks into the mirror, looks into the iPhone, looks into the camera – and he is not happy with what he sees. Because while all the early apostles were at work building the church - Paul is tearing down the church, rounding the early apostles up and throwing them into jail or worse. I am the least of the apostles. In fact, I shouldn't even be called an apostle. And yet this is the same man whose life and ministry and teaching and writing laid the groundwork, the theological framework, for the church we know today. The least of the apostles! Not worthy to be called an apostle! How does one go forward with this dichotomy? Least of the apostles - great missionary and theologian? Where did Paul go to gain a right view of himself? Where did Paul go to see his reflection? Where do any of us go to see the right reflection - the right selfie? Maybe we go as close as to right over there. Maybe we go to perhaps where we started. To the reflecting pool of our baptism.

We don't know much about Paul's baptism. Baptized by Ananias, in Damascus. Can you imagine what Paul saw when he looked into the waters of his baptism. Most likely a look of shock

**“Baptism reflects an image different than what we can even see. Seen only by the One who accepts us just as we are. Just as we are.”**

and surprise. Just days before he was on a hunting trip for apostate Jews who followed Jesus – and now he was looking into the waters of baptism and seeing a man who was at the very least a very complex soul. A circuitous journey. A long and winding road. A past of which he was not proud. And a future of which he was quite uncertain. And maybe above all what he saw in the still waters was something he wasn't used to seeing – he saw grace. He saw amazing grace. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.

We all know the story of the composer of those words – John Newton. Slave trader turned believer turned cleric in the Church of England. At the end of the day he wrote his own epitaph to be placed upon his burial stone. You can read it today:

**JOHN NEWTON, CLERK,**

*Once an Infidel and Libertine, A servant of slaves in Africa, Was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Preserved, restored, pardoned, And appointed to preach the Faith He had long laboured to destroy.*

Lord knows what John Newton saw in the baptismal waters of wherever he was baptized. A very complex soul. A circuitous journey. A long and winding road. A past of which he was not proud. And a future of which he was quite uncertain. But above all an amazing grace that saved a wretch like him. The least of the apostles. Not even fit to be called an apostle.

And one can imagine as the cleric in the church for 44 years Mr. Newton had the chance Sunday after Sunday, year after year – to stare back into those waters and see another selfie. And every time the reflection a little different, the story a little different, the face a little different, the soul

a little different – the years having chiseled the stone a little more. The spirit buoyed by all the moments of joy and love. The shoulder bowed by all the burdens bourn. And every time he looks into the water he says, “But by the grace of God, I am what I am – and may his grace toward me be not in vain”.

What a great prayer the apostle gives us – But by the grace of God, I am what I am – that when I look into the water or into the phone or into the mirror – when I look behind the eyes and the lines – I see one like no other. And I see an intricately woven tapestry of good thread and bad thread – I see things of which I am justly proud and other things of which I am somewhat ashamed – I see this long and winding road -- but because I look into the water I see this God of grace who engulfs me with the waters of my baptism and sets me to live a life by grace and by no other. That even I might be called an apostle. As unworthy as it might see. But beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And the beholder's eye is the eye of mercy and that all I can hope is that his grace toward me will not be in vain.

A long time ago I saw in the newspaper one of these little almost castoff news items that caught my attention. It was about the Japanese city of Sapporo and how they had opened recently a new subway system. But over the first several years there had been over 60 people had used the subway to end their lives by jumping in front of the trains. But then someone got the idea to install mirrors in all the subway stations ... mirrors from floor to ceiling and wall to wall across from the platform. Put there, of course, so that people could have one last look at themselves before they jumped. One last look at the face, at the expression, at the good of it and the bad of it.

And at the article's printing – no one had jumped since.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.

Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher, sought to define Christianity this way: *Infinite humiliation and infinite grace and a striving born of gratitude.*

Infinite humiliation and infinite grace and a striving born of gratitude.

We are what we are. And the good Lord beckons us to the waters and says Look. What do you see? What do you really see? It's OK if what you see is what you love about you and what you hate about you. The good of it and the bad of it. But beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Baptism reflects an image different than what we can even see. Seen only by the One who accepts us just as we are. Just as we are.

And from there ... a striving born of gratitude. A striving born out of the water. A striving that says at the beginning of the day and the end of the day I am a cherished child of God. Who from my mother's arms has blessed me on my way. With countless gifts of love and still is mine today. No matter what the picture. No matter what the mirror says. No matter what I might see in the water. I am a cherished child of God just as I am. And because I am so grateful, because I am so amazed, because I am so engulfed – it is then my prayer that his grace toward me be not in vain.



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