

Take hold of real life: Focus

Lesson: Romans 8:1-11, 28 (*The Message*)

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans%208:1-11,%2028;&version=65;>

The Italian Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo was known for his gift with marble. *Gift* may not be the right word. Michelangelo sculpted as though God's herself were holding the tools.

Marble is a treacherous medium. It is soft, so it is easily shaped, but it is crystalline, so it is prone to shattering. If you hit a vein, the feature you were refining shears away. If you make a mistake, you cannot glue it back together.

But, if your aim is true, as Michelangelo's was, and your touch accurate and steady, marble is the most perfect of materials. It is able to hold extremely fine detail. Light pours through it, enlightening the whole body, making it luminescent, almost holy.

Not only was Michelangelo a great carver, he had vision — focus. He saw what was inside each block of marble. Michelangelo said this, "In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it." When Michelangelo looked at a chunk of marble — a block of rock — he saw the beauty and the humanity that lived within it. As a sculptor, Michelangelo saw his task as simply removing everything that was not the statue. He focused on the potential he saw there — the being within the stone, and simply chiseled and smoothed away everything that was not the "lovely apparition". When he was done, even a casual passer-by could see the glowing figure within.

If you are a student of magazine covers, television advertisements, and casual conversations, as I am, you will have noticed that everyone is trying to be Michelangelo. I don't mean we're all picking up stone carving tools and having a whack at marble. I mean that we are all engaged in trying to sculpt ourselves. We want to have free, spacious, focused, healthy lives. So we read self-help books, we diet and exercise, we go to gurus and watch our language.

But most of us are not Michelangelo. Even if we are great at the mechanics of self-sculpting, we do not see the "lovely apparition" within ourselves. We do not begin with a clear image of who we are inside. We have trouble distinguishing the excess from the essential. We are often clumsy. We cut away too much, or the wrong thing, or we try to add it back. Or, rather than gently shaping what is there, we pile on more, as if more, by itself, created a masterpiece.

When we try to shape ourselves, to create a masterpiece of ourselves by ourselves, we are doomed to failure. When we try to be our own sculptor, we cannot help but be both Frankenstein and his monster. As human beings, we simply cannot see both our "lovely apparition" and release it. We do not have that kind of vision or focus. When we focus on ourselves, we become self-centered: nearsighted. We see only our flaws, or gain overinflated views of our strengths. As would-be sculptors of our selves and our lives, we are too close, and too frenzied to be of much use to ourselves.

When we try to shape ourselves, in our own image, it is as though we set up multiple blocks of stone, each one representing a different self. One is your self as father. One is your self as husband. One is your self as provider. One is your self as employee. One is your self as scout leader. One is your self as athlete. One is your self as daughter. One is your self as Jesus follower. And because you are trying to sculpt all of these yourself, you run from one to the next, taking off a little piece here, adding a little there, accidentally cutting off a nose here, and smashing a whole self there. You lack focus. You lack clarity. You lack vision. The "lovely apparition" is not merely hidden, but fractured — divided among selves and self-

created sculptures. Even if you managed to sculpt the perfect father, the perfect husband, the perfect provider and employee and scout leader and athlete and daughter and Jesus follower, you would still wind up with eight different sculptures, and eight different selves.

A little unfocused, wouldn't you say?

The apostle Paul put it this way (in the words of Eugene Peterson in *The Message*): We are a "disordered mess of struggling humanity". We live lives of "apparent contradiction." For most of us, that apparent contradiction doesn't come from the outside world. It's not that the world is messed up — though it is. Our disorder, our struggle, our divided selves come from our choosing (passively or actively) to live unfocused, divided lives. We focus on a little bit of ourselves — our physical health, for example — and begin by comparing ourselves to others. Then, we try to shape our health, still in comparison to others. Imagine if Michelangelo had been sculpting the statue *David* while looking at another statue! How could he have held both images in his head?

But we are blessed with a God who makes Michelangelo look like a hack. We are blessed with a God who is the ultimate creator and sculptor of our lives. We are blessed by a God who not only sees the lovely apparitions that we are, but also is willing to work on us and with us until we are released and living a free and spacious life. We are blessed by a God is, at every moment, completely focused on each one of us.

And we are blessed by a God who came to us in flesh, in the person of Jesus, to show us not only what a free and spacious life looks like, but also how we might have one. After a few thousand years, it became clear that we weren't going to figure it out on our own, not even with a few hundred rules and ancestors to guide us. So God got right down here with us. "[God] didn't deal with our [human struggling mess of contradictions] as something remote and unimportant. [God] personally took on the human condition, and entered it [through Jesus] in order to set it right once and for all. ..."

To be a fully realized, actuated, loving, free, spacious, focused human being, did Jesus focus on himself? Did he take on each role, each task separately? Did he focus on shaping himself? Who did Jesus focus on? God. And by focusing on God, he was shaped by God. By focusing on God, he was shaped by God — God was able to release the "lovely apparition" within him.

When we embrace what God is already doing in us, we are set free. We are set free from the stone that surrounds us, when, instead of doubling our own efforts, we simply embrace what the Spirit of God is already doing in us. The Spirit of God is already at work in each one of us who has claimed our inheritance in God. God is already at work in you. And God can complete that work when you embrace what God's Spirit is doing in you. When you set aside the 8 self-sculptures you're trying to make, and focus on God — when you stand in the holy presence of God, focusing on God — you let God release you, free you, into a spacious and meaningful life.

Michelangelo also said this: "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." God sees the angel, the potential, the holy, the human in you, and God wants to set it free.

How do you allow the Spirit to release the angel within you? How do you let God be at work in you, making you the whole and focused being you are designed to be?

First, learn to receive. Learn the joy of receiving. We have all been told that it is far more joyous to give than to receive. But receiving is more basic, more fundamental. And until you learn the joy of receiving, you will not allow yourself to receive God's blessings. Babies receive long before they learn to give. And if they are not squelched, they find joy and sustenance in receiving love and care. Our scripture tells us

that we are able to love God and love others only because God first loved us. If you do not let yourself receive God's love, you cannot fully love God or anyone else. You must learn to receive God's love – to sit in the holy presence of God, and to let others love you too.

We see the difficulty of this in our own church. Plenty of people are willing to give food, money, help to those in need. But how many of us are willing to admit when we need food, money, or help? It takes great courage, and a willingness to be loved. You have to learn to find the joy in receiving. You have to let yourself feel loved, comforted, and valuable.

Second, prioritize worship and prayer. Worship is the act of opening ourselves to the glory of God; prayer is the act of allowing ourselves to be sculpted by God. Worship allows God's light into you; prayer lets that light shape you. Worship and prayer shape you by focusing your attention on God. Jesus went to the synagogue, and he prayed constantly. We focus on God through worship and prayer.

Let us be clear: worship is an activity, not an event. If you come here and write your grocery list, or sit back and critique everything that's said or sung, you're not worshipping. You're choosing to be self-focused instead of God-focused. Similarly, if prayer is nothing more than a recitation of your complaints, you're not letting God work in you and through you. To worship God in spirit and in truth, you have to focus on God. Throw yourself into it! Let God light you up, make you incandescent through your worship and prayer. Raise your hands during prayer, rock to the music. When you pray for a need, let yourself feel that need – don't minimize it like you're talking to a casual friend or a stranger. Let yourself feel and believe in the power of God to meet your needs. When you prioritize worship and prayer in your life, you will change.

Third, look through the God lens, in all you do. Remember those bracelets and bumper stickers that said, "WWJD?" or What Would Jesus Do? They were kitschy, but on the right track. Practice asking God what you should do and how you should be. How many times do you make decisions and check with magazines, web sites, and friends for their opinions, but never ask God? Practice with little things and big ones – don't just wait for the life-altering decisions to contact the old man: you're going to understand more and feel more confident in God's input if you're in more constant communication.

Looking through the God lens also means reframing what you see before you as God might see it. Where is God working in your life? How might God be using the events of your life to shape you and set free your "lovely apparition"?

Maybe you don't know how to look through the God lens. Here's an example for you – I'm borrowing this from Faith King. A friend was driving a long distance with Faith in the car. The car was behaving strangely, and the friend was concerned. Faith looked at the dashboard and noticed that the friend was driving at high speeds in a low gear. She told her friend, who changed what she was doing, and the car remain undamaged and they arrived safely.

If Faith had been self-focused that day, she might have said, "It's a good thing I looked at the dashboard." If Faith had been fate-focused that day, she might have said, "It's a good thing I happened to look at the dashboard." But that day, Faith was looking through her God lens, and she said this, "Thank God he had me look at the dashboard."

In our covenant groups, we are helping each other live more wholly God-centered lives. So during the checkin part, when we tell what's going on and where we need prayer, we practice looking through the God lens. We ask each other, "How is it with your soul?" (This is actually a 300-year-old practice, developed by John Wesley in his covenant groups in the 18th century.) When you're new to this and you're asked, "How is it with your soul?" you're likely to recite the events of the week. You talk about what's going on in your body and mind. But when you're focusing on God, when you're using the God

lens, when you're looking for where you need God's help and how God's Spirit is already at work within you, you start to see God's fingerprints on those events. You begin to see how your feelings reveal where God needs to carve away a bit, or tenderly smooth a cracked place. And, you notice more when God has already completed some small work within you, giving you peace or a breath or moment of freedom or joy.

By focusing on God, seeing through the God lens, and letting God's Spirit do her work within us, we become whole and free. The angel within us is released, and we are free to receive love and to give it, without fear, with luminescent beauty and joy.

Michelangelo said one other thing about sculpting that is helpful here: "The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark." Don't settle for being fractured and separate selves, wrought by your own scrambling hard work. If you focus just on what you can achieve by yourself, you'll get it, and never even come close to what God has in store for you.

You are created in God's image. God in Christ loves even you, and God's Spirit is already at work within you to release that angel that is inside the block of stone. "When God lives and breathes in you, you are delivered from that dead life. With God's Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's! And you can be so sure that every detail in your life of love for God [will be] worked [by the greatest sculptor of all] into something good."

Will you pray with me?

God, we want to be whole and free. We want you to release the angel that you see inside us. Open us to your shaping. Focus us on your vision – make us see through your lens. Let us feel your glory and accept your love, that by doing so we may let you finish the work that your Holy Spirit is already doing in each one of us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.