Faith that Sees Through Culture

Lesson 4: What am I

Up to this point, our lessons have primarily focused on the world around us and helped us see the reality around us. Beginning with this lesson, we focus on the people around us.

# Getting going



1. I think a lot of us are tired of hearing the mantra that someone was a pretty good guy, or that people are mostly good, or that everyone has a little bit of good in them. Check out this story.

John Vasconcellos grew up an obedient Catholic, an altar boy, the smartest kid in his class, whose mother swore that he never misbehaved. But, being such a devout Catholic, he knew that no matter how good he was, he could only ever be a sinner. At primary school, he ran for class president. “I lost by one vote. Mine,” he later said. He didn’t vote for himself because “I’d been drilled never to use the word ‘I’, never to think or speak well of myself.”

After a spell as a lawyer, Vasco entered politics. In 1966, aged 33, he was elected to the California state assembly. But there was a problem: his professional success was at odds with how he thought of himself; he felt he didn’t deserve it. At 6ft 3in and over 200lb, he would stalk the Capitol building in Sacramento, glowering and anxious in his smart black suit, perfect white shirt and arrow-straight tie, his hair cropped with military precision. “I found my identity and my life coming utterly apart,” he later said. “I had to go and seek help.”

That help came from an unusual Catholic priest: Father Leo Rock was a psychologist who had trained under the pioneer of humanistic psychology, [Carl Rogers](https://bookshop.theguardian.com/carl-rogers-reader.html), a man who believed that the Catholics had it absolutely wrong. At their core, he thought, humans weren’t bad; they were *good*. And in order to thrive, people needed to be treated with “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers coined the phrase). Vasco began studying under Rogers himself, a man he later described as “almost my second father”. Through intense group therapy workshops at the [Esalen Institute in Big Sur](http://www.esalen.org/), Vasco became a devotee of the [human potential movement](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/debra-ollivier/the-esalen-institute-and-the-human-potential-movement-turn-50_b_1536989.html), based partly on the Rogerian idea that all you need to do to live well is discover your authentic inner self.

Around the state capitol, Vasco’s colleagues began to notice the buttoned-up Catholic was unbuttoning. He grew his hair and wore half-open Hawaiian shirts on the floor of the senate, a gold chain nestled in his chest hair. One reporter described him as looking like “a cross between a rock star and a drug smuggler”. He became a human potential evangelist, preaching the innate goodness of humans and handing long book lists to colleagues. His self-hating Catholic self had washed away, and in its place was a great, glowing letter “I”.

Vasco knew he was in a unique position. As a politician, he could take everything he’d learned about human potential and turn it into policy that would have a real effect on thousands, perhaps millions, of lives. He decided to campaign for a state-financed task force to promote self-esteem: this would give the movement official affirmation and allow politicians to fashion legislation around it. Best of all, they could recruit the world’s finest researchers to prove, scientifically, that it worked.

In the mid-80s, the notion that feeling good about yourself was the answer to all your problems sounded to many like a silly Californian fad. But it was also a period when [Thatcher](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/margaretthatcher) and [Reagan](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ronald-reagan) were busily redesigning western society around their project of neoliberalism. By breaking the unions, slashing protections for workers and deregulating banking and business, they wanted to turn as much of human life as possible into a competition of self versus self. To get along and get ahead in this new competitive age, you had to be ambitious, ruthless, relentless. You had to believe in yourself. What Vasco was offering was a simple hack that would make you a more winning contestant.

How does this story help you understand the world we’re living in?

# Getting into the Word

1. In lesson 2, we talked about the internal struggles we experience. We emphasized the need to put to death the desires that belong to our earthly nature and put on the desires of our new/spiritual nature.

God has more to say about that struggle and why it is so difficult. God tells us that we are actually trying to follow and keep 4 kinds of laws all at the same time. Read the passages below and explain those 4 laws.

“I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” …. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” (Romans 7:7, 12)

“So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. (Romans 7:21)

“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; 23 but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me” (Romans 7:22–23)

“because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2)



1. These laws explain the constant inner conflict God and the apostolic writers tell us about. Does the conflict of the following passages sound familiar to you and the people around? To Christians in general today?

“Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”” (Mark 9:24)

“22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:22-24)

“5 Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. 7 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. 8 Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.” (Romans 8:5-9)

1. This lesson is teaching us the idea *simul iustus et peccator,* at the same time justified and sinner. “The Christian is a sinner and one who has also been forgiven his or her sin. Christians are at the same time sinners and justified in Christ.” (Espinosa, pg 111) God says this about us all over the place, even if he doesn’t always put both ideas together in the same context. Have you seen this in God’s Word and life?
2. Some people have argued that true Christians will not experience a conflict internally or externally. They argue that real Christians will advance and their struggle against sin will diminish. For example, one popular teacher (Tim LaHaye, *Left Behind,*) suggested Christians will experience these five levels:

1) The humanized Christian, who may or may not actually be a Christian

2) the carnal/defeated Christian, who is a true Christian but still compromises by living sinfully

3) the spirit controlled/radiant Christian, who is not only forgiven but obediently follows Christ

4) the spiritually mature Christian, who has learned advanced self-control; and

5) the spiritual father, who leads others to conversion

What are some strengths and some concerns of this idea?

1. On the other hand, many Christians, including Martin Luther and Espinoso (our study’s author) argue that “Two things fundamentally mark the Christian life: a painful conflict (on account of the Christian’s confrontation with the power of sin) and the new life of the Spirit (on account of the Christian being joined to Jesus Christ, who conquered the power of sin). Conflict on the one hand, and new life on the other – this is the lens that describes what Christians experience.” (Espinosa, pg 122) They argue that the conflict is not an indication that a person is not really a Christian. Much to the contrary, they argue that the conflict is a crucial sign that a person is truly a Christian. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

# Going forward in faith

1. What are some areas of your life where, over time, you have become increasingly aware of sin? Areas where, perhaps, when you first thought about Jesus, you don’t think you were much of a sinner, but after years you realized that you were really quite sinful? (
2. What are some of the best tools that you have discovered for uncovering sin and rooting it out of your life?
3. What’s a passage from this Scripture that impacted you?
4. How are you going to respond to this message?
5. Who is one person you’d like to share this with?