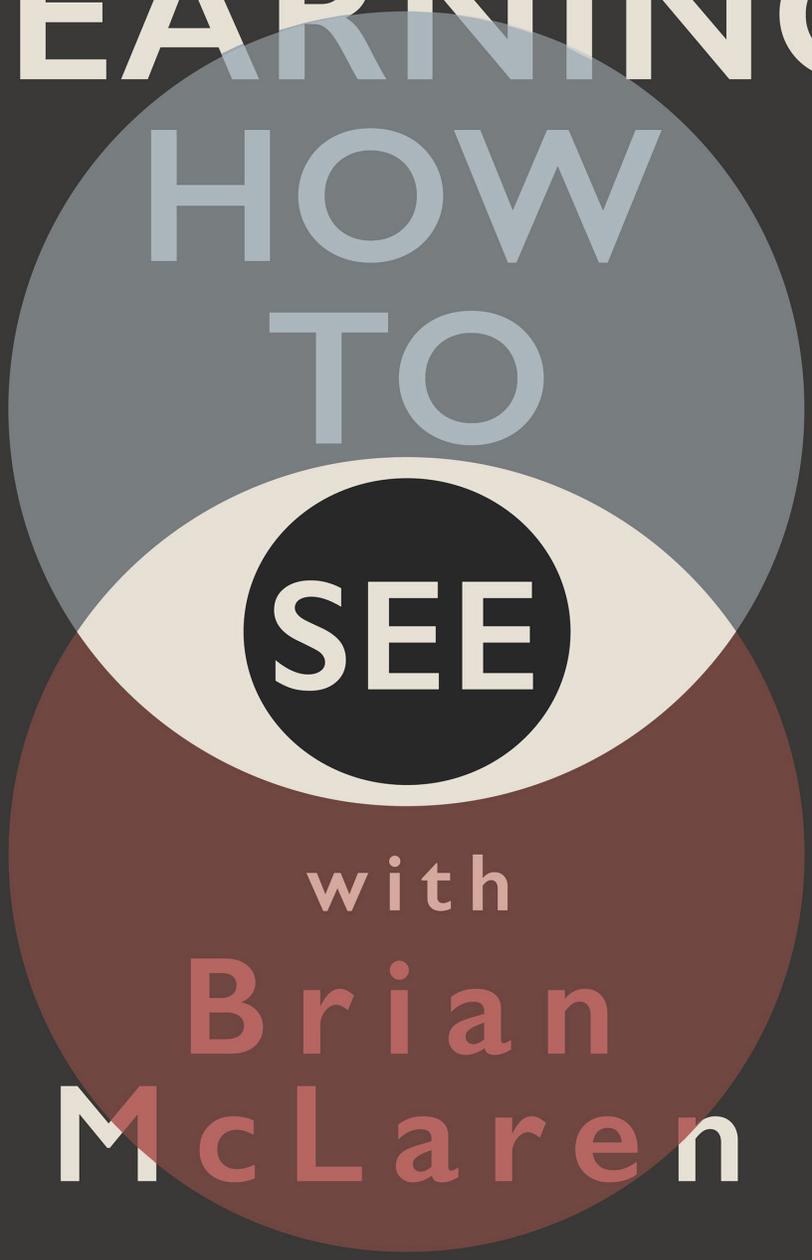


LEARNING

HOW
TO

A stylized graphic of an eye is centered on the page. The eye is composed of a dark brown outer shape, a white inner shape, and a black circular pupil. The word "SEE" is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters inside the black pupil. The eye graphic overlaps with the text "HOW TO" above it and "with" below it.

SEE

with

Brian

McLaren

- Brian: I remember the moment back in the 1990s, when I first learned about global warming, I'd heard about the danger of nuclear winter, but never of global warming. One Sunday at church, I preached about environmental stewardship and I lived in a college town and we had a lot of students and a student came up to me and she said, "I noticed you didn't mention global warming." I said, "I never heard of it." She sent me a link and that link took me online to a little video of the Arctic ice sheet shrinking. And I couldn't unsee what I saw. I became more and more knowledgeable about global warming, climate change and eventually became something of an environmental activists doing all I can to help people understand and respond. But I know that whenever I talk about global warming or global climate change, I'm working against two things.
- Brian: First catastrophe bias. Our brains are wired to set a baseline of normalcy and assume what feels normal has always been and will always remain. As a result we minimize threats and are vulnerable to disasters if they develop slowly. Global warming and climate change is perfectly designed for our catastrophe bias to dismiss, but that's not all. We also face cash bias. Our brains are wired to see within the framework of our economy. And we see what helps us make money. It's very hard to see anything that interferes with our way of making money. I can't help, but think of one of Jesus' most confrontational sayings from Luke 16, he said, "No slave can serve two masters. For a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."
- Brian: Basically Jesus is saying living in an economy where slavery was the norm in the Roman empire. Something that everybody would understand. If you have two different people ordering you around, you're going to figure out which one you love and which one you love less or hate. And then Jesus says, "Listen, if you love money, you will hate God. And if you love God, you will hate money." Now, when I think of the power of money through cash bias, it actually makes me hate money for how it blinds us to so much of reality. And suddenly Jesus' words don't seem extreme. They make perfect sense. We do not see everything. So we do not know everything. We do not even know how much we do not know. Nor do we know how much of what we know is actually impartial, distorted, or false. That is why we seek to open our eyes, to encounter the world afresh, in humility and in silent wonder, to learn to see.
- Mike: Thanks, Brian. Wow. Well, we have our work cut out for us in this episode because these two biases are really, really powerful. And they hit really close to home, especially in 2021. So let's start with that catastrophe bias. Our brains are wired to set a baseline of normalcy and assume what feels normal has always been and will always remain. As a result, we minimize threats and become vulnerable to disasters, especially ones that develop slowly. Brian, you also call this normalcy or baseline bias. Could you explain a little bit more about that?
- Brian: Sure. So our brains are wired for efficiency and we like to assume that what seems normal will always be. So in the last couple of years we had a lot of political turmoil and we thought, "Well, this could never lead to violence. This could never lead to an attempt to overthrow an election." And then on January 6th it did. Or we say, "Oh, listen, summer, fall, winter, spring seasons always come. And they're always consistent." But guess what? Climates can change. And you can find out that what you assumed was normal wouldn't be normal.
- Brian: I can give a great example from my own childhood. And you guys might be able to

remember this too, even though you're a good bit younger than me, but when I was a boy, anytime you took a drive in the summer, your car windshield would be covered with squashed bugs. Your headlights would be covered. The whole front grill of your car would be covered. And for a lot of people today, they have never ever seen that. Because over in my lifetime, there's been this thing called the great global insect die off. And somewhere estimates between 30 and 60% and more of insects just have disappeared. But for somebody who grows up today, this level of insects is normal. And if they decline even more, the next generation will assume that's normal.

Brian: And so, things that change over a certain span of time, we miss. And that leads us vulnerable to catastrophe bias. You may have heard the saying, "A cat that sits on a hot stove will never sit on a hot stove again, but they will never sit on a cold stove either." And the idea is, the sudden catastrophe makes such an impression. Our brains are wired to remember... We're traumatized by sudden catastrophes, but the slow going ones we very easily miss. So can you all think of other examples of catastrophe normalcy baseline bias?

Mike: Right off the bat. It makes me think of the psychological principle of homeostasis, which is that whatever we consciously think unconsciously, we really just want things to be stable and stay the same. And that contemporary bit of wisdom that we usually don't change until it hurts too much to stay the same.

Brian: Yeah.

Mike: And it is extraordinary to me the lengths will go to, to ignore pain and frustration as long as it's not too loud. And it's so hard to not think about that in context of the quarantine, right? We've all just lived through this experience where I remember joking with a friend... And I adopted my cat three days before we went into lockdown. And I remember joking with a friend, "Oh, this is great, he'll keep me company during the long cold months of the lockdown," as a joke. And literally three days later it started and three weeks later and three months later I was actually living it. And it made me aware how completely I was tuned out to the reality that was happening around me and the impending situation, right? We were hearing the news stories and everything. It just wasn't real to me.

Brian: Yes. This couldn't happen. Yeah.

Gigi: That makes me think of the other... I can't say that it started last year but flared up again, at least came into people's consciousness is just the killing of so many black bodies by police. And that in itself is a legacy of a much longer, centuries long catastrophe of the enslavement of black bodies in many ways, not just the bringing them over from Africa, but also in prisons. And it's a catastrophe that is felt by those who are involved, but for those who aren't, there is a lot of normalcy to that. And that's what in so many ways, I think makes it very hard to address and very hard to change.

Brian: Well, you really can see that if we mix this bias, which by the way, one dimension of what people call optimism bias like, oh, everything will work out, right? It can't be that bad. But you mix that with the comfort and complacency bias we talked about it in the last episode. And you can imagine for a whole lot of people who aren't touched by police brutality, they just say, "Oh, this is just the normal baseline." And then it becomes part of just the way

things are for them. Not so easy for people who are suffering from it.

Paul: Just makes me think too about how catastrophe is so much bigger than just one person's experience, right? And how that desire for what my own... Sorry, I mean, it tips into the comfort bias too, but my own sense of stability, let me not think about systems where white supremacy rules the roost, because this is just too big for me to think about. And I'm just one person. And whether it's systems of injustice, climate change, they all feel so big and my [inaudible 00:09:28] feels so minute to actually shift the course of these huge avalanches of some going back centuries and some going back longer than that. I think I'm at the limits of my own ability to even express, just I can feel it in my body, just the catastrophe bias, just the overwhelm that can take place and how to hold that without tipping over into...

Paul: Going back to comfort or trying to minimize catastrophe like, it'll end eventually. So, that's other people's work. I don't know if that's making any sense, but I can feel the overwhelm even in just trying to express and articulate how it makes me feel to have this discussion.

Brian: Paul, when you talk about how you can't even express it, I think that's a sign we're tapping into a bias because our brains work to take catastrophes seriously, they don't work. They're just not set up for these long-term, maybe parts of our brains are set up, but our bodies aren't set up, right? And then when our brains start to take seriously how terrible climate change could be, or the fact that I'm eating 400 calories more per day than I really need. Where is that going to lead? Or the fact that I'm smoking cigarettes and I'm young and that'll never be a problem, right? The timeframe... Everything just makes it easy for us to be numbed, and to consider what we're doing, okay, normal, a baseline and there won't be any bad consequences.

Brian: This to me is one of the great values of contemplative practice, because to the degree that we do slow down, and we do in a sense, open our minds to the things that aren't obvious. And especially if we know that a bias like this exists, it can become a place that part of our examine is what are the little things that are happening that could become big things. And, and yeah, that's one of the great values of having a spiritual practice.

Mike: I appreciate you saying that, Brian, because it leads me to think about how contemplative practice can also create more space in us to hold sadness and grief. And I feel like we can't... I would love to hear everyone else's thoughts on this. I feel like we can't open our eyes to the magnitude of what's going on if we don't have a space to hold the, just the profound sense of loss and sadness that comes with it.

Gigi: Yeah. I would add it's related that contemplative practice also helps us know that we're not alone. And I think one of the reasons why it's so difficult to even try to begin to think of how I, as an individual, might address a catastrophe is because it isn't I, as an individual, who can address the catastrophe. And in contemplation, we learned that the oneness that we are is a oneness of wholeness of a whole body of the earth and God, and that's where we rely on and we allow God to work through us. And then if we can do that, then we can take whatever our next step is and what is ours to

do. But when we just come at it as if it's, I have to take care of this all by myself, so I'm just going to shut down, then that's I think, when we really, really fall prey to the catastrophe bias.

Paul: That's beautiful. And I think that speaks right to the heart of me. I think I have that as a complex, in some ways, where I feel like it's up to me, I can get it to that savior complex. And this is part of why a contemplative rhythm is so helpful for me to have know that there's space that I'm, I'm coming from a space that I'm going to, where it is tapping into the body of Christ, which is an image that wasn't really used much for me growing up, but has become one of those central pieces that house me know, and how quickly I forget, helps me know that it is not just up to me, but I am a part of this incredible fabric, this cosmic web of those also on this journey. So let's take a moment to center ourselves and explore the prayer that we will use for the catastrophe bias.

Gigi: Holy light, who illumines, what is real.

Brian: Help me to see danger that is all the more threatening

Mike: Because it unfolds gradually.

Paul: And likewise, helped me to see possibility that is easily missed because

Gigi: It emerges slowly and suddenly

Mike: Grant me, I pray the long view.

Mike: So cash bias is next. Our brains are wired to see within the framework of our economy. And we see what helps us make money. It's very hard to see anything that interferes with our way of making a living. So question for everyone, where do you see this bias at work? And do you see it overlapping with catastrophe bias?

Brian: Well, climate change is an easy example. I mean, the biggest industry in the history of humanity is the fossil fuel industry. There has never been an industry that big. And so we just can't even imagine the world going on without it. And I guess, so that just feeds in then with catastrophe bias. Our economic system won't let us see what is an inevitability and it just keeps us trapped. Yeah.

Mike: It's interesting for me, a little bit of self-disclosure here. I grew up in what's commonly known as the prosperity gospel. So health and wealth, met a lot of big famous celebrity pastors who lived in mansions and my own pastor lived in a mansion, raised Arabian horses, and we knew people that had private jets and whatnot. And that was a big part of our normal. It was the sign of God's blessing was that you were super duper rich.

Mike: And what was really interesting was in this particular environment, how cashed bias and catastrophe bias worked together. Because another thing that was a part of that environment as I grew up in it was a lot of apocalypticism. So we were always convinced that the world was ending. And so that was all the more justification to

accumulate wealth so that you could survive the coming catastrophe. And unfortunately, it created this mentality where it's like, well, just make sure you and your family are taken care of, because everyone else is going to be eating each other and you need to defend your stash to survive. And it's interesting to think about how that ripples out ethically and how it teaches you to treat other people and the world around you.

Brian: Yeah, my goodness. Now I'm thinking just what a miracle is you survived and you're still here with us.

Mike: There might be an alternate universe where I'm a billionaire preacher, so.

Paul: Gold plated Bible is a giveaway too. Those are your roots.

Mike: I didn't realize you could see that, sorry.

Gigi: I have a personal example, both personal catastrophe and personal cash bias. In 2008, I lost my job. And in 2009, I ran out of money and I ended up being homeless six years. So that's the personal catastrophe. And there are ways in which I jumped into it. I think of Joseph Campbell saying, "If you're falling, dive." So, I knew it was coming so I welcomed it as a way of practicing trust. And so I was lucky. I never ended up on the street. I was able to find places to stay with friends, or they were friends of friends, et cetera. And it was a long struggle with God about where am I meant to go? What is this all about? But I also, even as I had learned to become more simple and to be less attached to money, I was still attached to money.

Gigi: And the story that I think is most exemplifies that is, I was still working as a spiritual director. And before then, I didn't get paid, but I needed money so I got paid. And I had one directee who had an autoimmune disease. And we were scheduled to meet that day and I could tell I was coming down with a cold. And so I had to try to make a decision of, I really need this money. And I couldn't make the decision. And so I knew I wasn't supposed to see her, but I couldn't make myself do that. So what I did was I called her and told her I had a cold. So just let me know if we don't want to meet. So I put it on her to do the decision that I couldn't make because I knew I needed the money.

Mike: Wow.

Brian: I just think the power of money and the power of all the assumptions that go underneath it, that time is money. Or that the amount of money you have or make determines how much value you have. Or the idea that work that you don't get paid for, or the work that you get paid for little is either easier or less important than work that gets paid a lot. I mean, when you think about how hard work is, it has nothing to do with how much money people get from it. Yet, it affects our value so much. And to try to imagine ourselves being liberated from the assumptions that come with our culture and it's centuries of accumulated value system, oh my goodness, it really does feel like something that we have to be saved from, liberated from. We need... I'm thinking about the prosperity gospel, Mike, and we need a liberation from greed and liberation...

Brian: But it's not just even greed. It's the way that the money economy affects the poorest people too, because of the way it makes us see ourselves, the way it makes us see the earth. Because

I love the outdoors, I remember several years ago, being in the mountains of Pennsylvania, looking at this beautiful mountain, and then it just hit me, there are people who look at this mountain and they think, “How many board feet of lumber are on this mountain that we could cut down all these trees. And then if we scraped off the mountain, how many tons of coal are in this mountain that we could extract?” And for a second, I could imagine seeing the world in that way. And then, that’s when it got scary, because I thought, “How many other things am I seeing that way?”

Paul: Gosh, that’s so helpful. The story of money and the story of God seems so different, right? The abuse and use of money, of things not being valuable just for their own sense of being but what can you extract or what can you use or sell for, versus what I think of the story of God of community of the beauty of presence and being and sharing that these elements... I think there’s moments where they can weave together, but there’s also times that they’re so far apart. Where if you are only looking for ways to extract a value, it’s a story that has very clear winners and losers. And I feel like so much of our, whether it’s pay inequality or the gap between the wealthiest and those living in poverty, it’s a story of money. And those of us who are participating in what we hope to be the story of God, how do we speak to that? And I feel like this bias helps us gives language to do so with confidence.

Mike: I appreciate that Paul. I think something that I’ve longed for my entire life possibly because of my prosperity gospel upbringing, is someone who could give a good spirituality of money and just introduce a healthy way to interact with it. Because I know for me, I went from one extreme to the other. At a certain point in my life, I deconstructed the prosperity gospel early. And then since then, have had a lot of years where there was as sort of resentment and reluctance and fear around money for me. Whereas I never wanted it around because I was so much reacting against what I had experienced this excesses and abuses. And I don’t know that I’ve ever gotten there and found that real healthy relationship with it and a real healthy teaching in interacting with it.

Gigi: I’m thinking about those words from Jesus about hating money and loving God. Obviously money was necessary, even for Jesus. I remember the story by about the taxes, paying taxes. The gospels say that there was a group of wealthy women who funded his ministry. Why do you think Jesus used such strong language of hate and love?

Paul: That’s a juicy question.

Brian: I’ll just say there’s something growing older where it just takes decades to see how powerful money is. And also when I was a young man and newly married my wife and I had four kids right away. So my primary focus was how can I get enough money to keep my kids fed and with shoes and all the rest, right? So there’s a sense, at least in my life when I was young, I just was always in need of money. I didn’t have time much to philosophize about it. But you get older and you’re not in that mode anymore. And you start seeing the power of money in politics. I’ve heard different numbers from eight to 23 families own as much wealth as half the people in the world. And when you let that sink in and you don’t just think of the money, but you think of the power, how many politicians can those powerful families buy?

Brian: How many hours of commercial time can they buy for the politicians that they want to support, who will help them make even more money and not care about the poor, right?

Suddenly you realize that accumulation of money and politics, and then you think, and in religion, any of us who've ever been pastors know, your five wealthiest donors in your congregation, if you preach the sermon that maybe is the one they really need to hear you're the next day having to lay off some of your staff, or maybe having to look for another job for yourself. So you get older, you live long enough and you just realize, yeah, money is power, goes so, so far. And yet you realize why people don't want to talk about it. It's because it's so powerful.

Paul: And that attach... Go ahead Mike.

Gigi: Sorry, that was me. But go ahead. Paul

Paul: I was looking at the camera. (laughs) I just think about the attachment to money as the.. Being attached to money as the outcome or your sense of well-being or your blessedness or belovedness, how much that shapes your interactions. And if the love of money is what's driving those outcomes, you're to just miss out on those you're shoulder to shoulder with. And this may be an overly simplistic example, but I was saying before we started recording, I went on a run around my neighborhood today. And I go through a couple of different neighborhoods where there's more low income housing, and then there's the wealthier parts. And when I run through the low income housing area, there's a lot of waving and saying, hello to one another and everyone's outside. And then in the wealthier neighborhoods, there's more big walls you actually can't see over. And it's more self-protective.

Paul: And I just think about what goes into the accumulation, where one can actually be so self-protective that the outside world doesn't have as much effect in their reality versus having to build a sense of community and interaction with whoever comes into your local. It just made me think about how the pursuit of that outcome, that love of that outcome, becomes more isolating than it does generative. For a lot of folks. Not everyone. But I think to me that's part of that why that language is so strong, because it's much harder to have that generative approach as you have to protect more and more of what you've accumulated in your own store house.

Gigi: The example that comes to me, I'm going to use the word attachment to money is sort of love of money. I think of two things. One, I graduated from Columbia Law School in 1988. And this is right before one of those wall street crashes in 1989. And everyone was telling us in law school, go to a law firm, go make money. And it was like it was the beginning of people getting out of law school were making triple digits, over \$100,000 a year. And, they would spend their whole lives inside the law firm. And there was one law firm that had cots for their associates to sleep on.

Gigi: And I remember just talking to friends about, I'm going to do this now, make this money now. So that later I could pay off my loans and later I can do what I want. Some of them did, some of them didn't. I also think friends who they really love to do something, but don't feel they can afford it because they don't see how they can make a living at it. So they are in these jobs, they go through all their life that they hate. But they have to make the money to live. They don't see how they can do what they love and live. And to me, that is that dichotomy between money and God is when you have to choose. And you decide that doing what you hate is actually more important to your survival than doing what you love.

Brian: As you say that Gigi, I don't know if this will stand up to scrutiny, but the sentence that comes to my mind is the opposite of money isn't poverty, the opposite of money is God in this way. That money makes us say certain things have more value, less value, and certain things are worthless, but God loves everything. And God's love for everything gives it, its inherent value. And that's where money distorts our way of seeing value and to love God liberates our way of seeing value. But that, that as you, as you said, that it just sort of popped into my mind that maybe that's why Jesus uses that kind of strong language.

Gigi: You could say that to God everyone and everything is priceless.

Brian: That's great.

Paul: Well said.

Brian: That's great.

Mike: I appreciate the complexity that you introduced in those comments too Gigi because I'm thinking about this thing of hating money and, well maybe you need to let go of something so that you can then pick it up again later and have a better relationship with it. So I think about the Buddha or Francis who walked away from everything. But I also realized that they both walked away from wealth. So there were no debtors chasing them, right? They had the privilege to walk away and that's not the reality for everyone.

Paul: It's such a great point. And I'm wondering as we think... To put a practical twist on this, and I think some of the stories certainly speak to that. But for you all, what are some of the strategies for overcoming the cash bias that you could share?

Brian: Well, one of them is that we would all give some money to Mike for his new ministry because he needs a jet and-

Mike: A Bentley.

Brian: But seriously I do think that's one of the values of the old biblical practice of tithing, the sense that we give. We understand that giving is as much a part of life as earning and saving.

Mike: This is where we take an offering.

Brian: You've got the inborn instinct for.

Gigi: Yeah. So far, I've given all my stimulus checks away because I don't really need them. And I'm remembering I took a two year program where we looked at the five major religions and they sort of took a deep dive into Jewish practices. And this idea of we can take a 21st century idea of gleaning, where farmers would have their harvest. And if anything was left, it was those who needed the food could come and pick it up. And so I remember looking and thinking about what would be a way of doing that for myself. And this was pre-COVID when I would ride public transportation. Now it was just let a dollar just fall out of my pocket and leave it on the seat for someone to come and pick it up.

Brian: [crosstalk 00:32:36] That's beautiful.

Paul: I have a friend in town named Chuck who lives in voluntary poverty and part of what he does... Because I've got these questions from like, how did you live this... He rides this old bike everywhere. He dumpster for food. He works, but all the money he gets either gives away or he puts it into retirement. So that once he gets to retirement age, he can give it all away tax-free. His house is always unlocked and anyone can come stay there. He just lives a very beautiful, radical life. And he said, he learned from Dorothy Day, who talked about just making 1% changes in the right direction.

Paul: It's never these major things where it's like all of a sudden he went from a wealthy banker to living in this Christ-like way or Franciscan way, but that he would make these 1% changes in the right direction. And then over the course of his life, he became who he is. And that's something that our family has tried to do, I feel very far away from his example. But it's been such a helpful model of not trying to make a leap into perceived sainthood but to just own where I'm at right now and, and keep taking these steps in the right direction. And I love that [inaudible 00:33:59] Gigi. I'm going to have to tip my hat to you. As I try that practice.

Gigi: Here's our prayer for overcoming or asking for help to overcome this cash bias.

Gigi: Beloved one who loves me.

Mike: Help me to hate money in comparison with you.

Paul: And helped me see in the love of money.

Brian: The hidden root of all kinds of evil.

Gigi: So that I may see and cherish what has true value.

Mike: Freely giving what I cannot keep.

Paul: To gain what I cannot lose.

Gigi: Any final comments about today's biases, catastrophe, and cash? How do you feel in your hearts and bodies after this?

Brian: I have to say, just from having the chance to talk about these with the three of you, I feel like, wow, we just created a little space where we carved out some freedom from these biases. And yeah, I feel so protected almost by safe space to talk about these things.

Gigi: And to piggyback on. I think there's also a sense of permission in some ways. Permission to take a little step to go against one of these biases, even just an experiment to try it out.

Paul: Yeah. I think it's Richard Foster who has a line about, "To conform to a sick society, is to indeed make oneself sick." And this seemed like a healthy dose of stepping away from that and having a counter-cultural, against the grain conversation of what it could be to... What would that look like if we were to live in a different directions?

Mike: Yeah. I appreciate it so much. Catastrophe and cache shaped so much of my upbringing and to be able to hold this space with all of you and learn from all your insight is very helpful.

And also empowering because they're so big it can feel overwhelming. And, and I leave this conversation feeling a little bit less helpless. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Brian: You. Well, let's take a few deep breaths now. And through prayer, strengthen our desire to see what is true and real and there, but hidden to us by our own biases. Will speak a line of the prayer so that you can then repeat it. And then we'll have a few moments after the prayer for you to simply hold the desire to see.

Mike: Source of wonder, help us see with wonder.

Gigi: Depth of mystery, help us find delight and truth so profound that they surpass all knowing.

Paul: Fountain of compassion, help us see with compassion.

Mike: Bringer of justice, help us see with justice,

Gigi: Revealer of truth, help us see what is real.

Paul: Holy wisdom, whose presence fills our ever expanding universe, help horizons ever to expand.

Brian: Light of glory, help us to see with humility and awe. Amen.

Paul: Amen.

Mike: Amen.

Brian: Thanks so much for joining us in this important time of prayer. If you like to engage with these prayers or intentions even more, they're available on a sister podcast called Practices For Learning How To See. You'll find the link in the show notes.