

MARCH 2, 2025 FATHER PETER JAE CHOI

Popular back in the 40's and 50's, there was a famous advice columnist who had her own section in the newspaper, where people wrote their questions and she offered very sound advice. It was called, "Ask Ann Landers." One day a lady who worked in a grocery store as a cashier wrote a letter with a complaint. She said "I saw people buying luxury food with their food stamps, birthday cakes and bags of shrimp. Those who are on a government assistance program should not be buying non-necessities." She went on accusing them of being lazy and wasteful.

A few weeks later Ann Landers dedicated an entire column responding to this grocery clerk. The lady who bought the bag of shrimp wrote, "My husband's plant where he worked for the last 15 years just got shut down and he was forced into retirement, and we were celebrating our wedding anniversary. I made a Shrimp casserole, which was my husband's favourite dish, and we ate it for 3 days." And the lady who bought the birthday cake wrote, "I am the lady who bought the \$17 birthday cake with the food stamp. The birthday cake was for my little girl. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone within 6 to 8 months. This birthday will be her last!"

We make assumptions and judge people all the time. It is a dangerous and harmful exercise known as "jumping to conclusions." But it is impossible for us to know what is really going on in someone's life by looking at a snapshot. The truth is only God knows the full story and yet God does not condemn us!

We have faults. We all do! None of us are perfect. We all sin. We all make mistakes. But what do we do when we make mistakes? Even in the

Bible, Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the devil. None of them owned up to their faults. Sound familiar?

Nothing blinds us more from our own faults than preoccupation with someone else's faults. It is much easier to ignore our own problems, by shifting our focus away from our own and pointing our fingers at someone else. Blaming others is a much easier way out, than to admit our own faults and commit to making changes. Working on ourselves can be quite difficult and even painful. Every now and then we encounter people who are completely unaware of their own shortcomings. How can anyone be blinded from seeing the truth about themselves?

Back in 2011, there was an interesting experiment conducted. There were three people in white T-shirts and three people in black t-shirts, and each team was given a basketball to pass among its own team members. In the test you were asked to pay attention to the white t-shirts team and see how many passes they made. They were walking, dribbling, passing the ball over people's heads and bouncing it on the floor, and criss crossing each other. It was difficult for me to follow the ball the entire time. At the end, how many passes? I wasn't sure what the correct answer was. Was it 14 or 15 passes? The correct answer was 15 passes. But that wasn't the real test. The real test was, whether or not I saw the man in a gorilla costume walking through them? Because I was so preoccupied with the basketball, I didn't even notice the man in the gorilla costume. So I had to go back and watch it again. And sure enough, there really was a man in the gorilla costume who was carefully walking through the people. How did I miss that?

The experiment was called "selective attention test," also known as the invisible gorilla phenomenon, which shows that we all suffer from

“Inattentive Blindness.” Basically if you are not looking for something in particular, you are not going to see it. The point of this exercise was to educate people that we cannot text and drive at the same time. What happens when we are texting? We are engaged in the conversation and thinking about how we are going to respond, instead of paying attention to the road. We can become distracted, and as a result, we can even become blind to the traffic surrounding us, like another car cutting us off, or a bicycle or a pedestrian running in front of us.

Let’s go back to the experiment. When we pay attention to the white t-shirts, we can miss the gorilla completely. In the same way, when we are focused on finding faults in others we become blinded to our own faults. And why do we shift our focus away from seeing the truth about our weaknesses and failures? That may be our defense mechanism. You see, if we admit to our own shortcomings and personal defects, we may come to the conclusion that we are undesirable and unlovable to God. So our own weaknesses and our sins become an invisible gorilla in our lives. But I can assure you, it is okay to admit our mistakes. It would be a mistake for us to try putting a band aid over them, rather than going to God and showing Him our brokenness and wounds. When we run to God and show Him our wounds, God will heal us. God’s love for us is everlasting, and God doesn't change. God’s love for us is not determined by what we do. God loves us unconditionally. And because we are His children, we have been grafted into Jesus to bear the good fruits of love and forgiveness, just as He does. Mother Teresa said, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.” It is true. We cannot judge people and love them at the same time. We cannot criticize and help to lift someone up at the same time. Let us remember that criticism and judgement do not transform the world. Love does.