

## God Wants Relationship – Not Religion!

John 17:20-26

This morning I am speaking briefly on the difference between mere religion, which is man-made and ultimately disappointing and disillusioning, and a relationship with Jesus Christ, which is initiated by God and which results in love, joy, peace, freedom, and life in all its fullness. This is the difference I hold up for your consideration this morning: religion, on the one hand, with its subservience to rules and regulations, and relationship, on the other hand, with its reward of deep meaning and full satisfaction. Let's begin with a true story.

Thomas Carlyle, the noted Scottish historian and essayist, was raised in a strict and very religious home. In 1826 he married his secretary, Jane Baillie Welsh, whom he no doubt loved in his own way. Unfortunately, Carlyle could be rather thoughtless and self-absorbed, at times lost in his own interests and activities. As scholar Greg Herrick puts it, he "treated his wife as if she were still his employee." Clarence Macartney tells the following story concerning her death:

"Stricken with cancer she was confined to bed for a long time before she died. After the funeral, Carlyle went back to his empty house. Disconsolate and grieving deeply, he wandered around aimlessly downstairs, engrossed in thinking about the woman he had loved. After a while, he went upstairs to her room and sat down in the chair beside the bed on which she had been lying for months. He realized with painful regret that he had not sat there very often during her long illness.

He noticed her diary ... and thumbed through its pages. One entry caught his eye: 'Yesterday he spent an hour with me. And it was like being in heaven. I love him so much.' He turned a few more pages and read, 'I listened all day to hear his steps in the hallway. And now it's late. I guess he won't come to see me.'

Carlyle read a few more entries and then threw the book on the floor and ran out into the rain back to the cemetery. He fell on his wife's grave in the mud, sobbing, 'If only I had known ... if only I had known.'"

I am afraid there are far too many people who will stand before the Lord at the end of their earthly life and have to lament, "O Lord, If only I'd known, if only I'd known how much you loved me and how often you listened for my footsteps." It's so easy to go through life preoccupied with our own agendas and schedules, our work, perhaps even our Christian service, but with very little awareness of our heavenly Father's presence, and with even less enjoyment of Him.

Reflecting back on the Thomas Carlyle story, we might well ask the question, "Why do people marry in the first place?" One would think that marriage is the culmination of a quest for relationship, a quest for oneness, a desire to know and be known. Surely, within the context of marriage, there is the promise of being able to come out of myself and experience another person at a deep level leading to mutual sharing and fulfillment. That's what it's all about.

Well, in the Bible, God presents Himself as desiring to enter into such a relationship with us. The opening pages of Scripture tell the story of Adam and Eve. They are in Eden, enjoying love and intimacy with each other and with God. But they rebel and immediately feel shame and "nakedness." They have become alienated from God, stripped as it were of their relationship with their Creator. They cover themselves with fig leaves. Later God gives them animal skins and banishes them from the Garden. Paradise lost!

This opening story in the Bible tells us that the most basic human predicament is the rupture of our relationship with God and with other human beings. As Steven M. Studebaker has so eloquently written:

“Humans today often persist in living with fig leaves and animal skins – that is, we live lives of lonely desperation and travel between partitions of alienation. But the Gospel promises that God stepped into the desolate space outside of the garden to redeem creation. God came “walking” to the daughters and sons of Adam and Eve in the humanity of Jesus Christ. He offers us the opportunity again to experience the exhilaration of unmitigated relationships with God and with each other.”

Our Lord’s Prayer in John 17:20-26 paints a glorious picture of the deeply personal and relational nature of the salvation he offers us. Jesus is praying that we will actually enter into and experience the relational unity that He enjoys with the heavenly Father. You see, whatever else the Trinity means, it surely means that at the heart of God’s existence there is relationship. The Father loves the Son and the Son reciprocates that love back to the Father. In fact, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indwell each other so fully that they are one. That is what our Lord desires for us. He wants us to be one with Him and then to experience unity with each other.

I think it is sad that there are so many today who spend their time pursuing religion. They endlessly theologize, constructing a doctrinal and theological house filled with rules and regulations. But the house is empty – because God is not there! He wants to be there. In the Book of Revelation, at the end of chapter three, we see the Lord Jesus Christ standing at the threshold of the Church. He is knocking on the door, promising that if we will hear His voice and open the door He will come in and dine with us and will fellowship with us. It is one of the most gracious and moving invitations given in the Bible. Our God does not want to be on the outside, looking in at our religious ceremonies, like some far-off cosmic spectator. He wants to dwell with us so that He can enrich our lives as we fellowship with Him and enjoy Him.

How does the Bible end? It ends with Paradise restored; that is, the ultimate social framework for redeemed humanity. In Revelation 21 and 22 there is the stunning picture of a “new heaven and a new earth.” A loud voice comes from the throne of God saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3).

This is what our God has planned for those who enter into relationship of love, faith, and trust with Him. Let us not settle for mere religiosity, for forms of worship, rites, rules and regulations, without the relationship for which we were designed. Our God wants us to experience:

- *Mutual recognition* - we know Him and He knows us!
- *Mutual openness* - we approach Him, He approaches us!
- *Mutual interests* - we share our heart with Him as He shares His heart with us.
- *Mutual respect* - we honor Him as Lord of lords and King of kings, even as He honors us as those unique creatures made in His image.

Such a relationship means more than knowing about someone. We might say that we know the mayor of Victoria. But if the mayor cannot pick us out of a crowd, if we cannot get access to him, if he has never shared our thoughts, feelings, and decisions, then we are claiming a friendship we don't really have.

Our God can pick us out of a crowd. He created us, He knows us, and He loves us. He is a real Father! He wants to be our Friend. It is our greatest privilege and blessing to welcome Him into our lives, to walk with Him and talk with Him, to experience Him and enjoy Him. How does one do this? By reading the Word of God daily and asking the Lord to present Himself to us. As we read the *written* Word of God, we ask that we will experience the presence and fellowship of the *living* Word of God.