

Religion Versus Relationship

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Religion cannot nurture a dynamic relationship with God because such a relationship has to transcend the rigid structure inherent to religion. By its very nature, a dynamic relationship with God is fluid and growing and ever-fresh, whereas religion is a fixed blueprint for belief and behavior that confines us within its predetermined boundaries. You can have both religion and relationship, but religion alone doesn't provide the impetus to propel you toward intimacy with God. That is a journey that requires you to break free from convention and to take risks that challenge your understanding of self and God. To do so, you must leave the safe realm of religion.

A Dynamic Relationship with God

Intimacy is a primary characteristic of any meaningful relationship. It is demonstrated by mutual transparency and vulnerability where we allow our real selves to be seen by the other. As we lower our guard before God and allow him to see us as we truly are, we allow his unconditional love to touch and heal our hidden selves. Eventually, we learn that God is a safe place for us to be completely honest and vulnerable, where we can courageously tell him our deepest fears and hurts. Intimacy works both ways. As we become real with God, God becomes real to us. James 4:8 says, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you." God wants to show himself to us, but we must take the first step to show him our real selves, flaws and all. Psalm 145:18 says, "The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." If we hope to experience God's nearness, God expects us to approach him with full honesty and no pretenses.

In my book, *Four in the Garden*, Creator says to Cherished, "We can only touch the outermost layer of your being that you allow us to touch. When you set aside those defensive layers, we can reach into your soul and inhabit the deepest part of your being. When deep touches deep, we can share in each other fully. Mutual disclosure is the basis for intimacy." As is true for any relationship, self-disclosure promotes intimacy with God. My most profound interactions with God were times when I was desperate enough to be

completely honest about my deep need for his help and healing, but also times when I made myself bare before him and relished the absolute joy of being fully seen and fully loved by him.

A Personal History with God

Another aspect of relationship is shared history. This is the sequence of shared events that describe the course of a relationship over time; the memories and markers that add meaning and value to the relationship. A dynamic relationship with God includes these markers. I'm referring to answered prayers, gut-honest conversations, moments of spiritual insight and discovery, sorrow over one's failings, wrestling with God over things we don't understand or don't want to do, times of heartfelt prayer, experiences of awe and wonder, or any experience where we connect to God in a memorable or meaningful way. I call this a "personal history with God." It's important to build a personal history with God as that anchors us during times of turbulence, giving us something real to fall back on when doubt sets in. If we walk through life with God at our side, then we will encounter him regularly along the way, especially if we are open and expectant. These interactions not only help create a history with God but also promote growth as we learn more about ourselves and God through such events.

If we want God at our side, then we must invite him. Jesus says in Revelation 3:20, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." The picture described here is that of having a meal, a common activity where relationship occurs and is developed; an intimate setting where conversation and closeness happen. When we do invite Jesus into our lives, then he expects a place at the head of the table and we become the host that serves. He becomes the center of our lives and we step aside to let him run things as we trust him. It sounds scary to give our lives over to him. It took me weeks to gather the courage before I took that step, but I have learned, since that day, that he does a much better job of directing my life than I could ever do.

The Joy of Relationship

God is an expert at relationship. He created it. The members of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, have been in constant communion from the beginning. This model relationship is characterized by intimacy and joy. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on him and a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” This intimate moment demonstrated the love and affirmation shown within the Trinity. Within this holy relationship, each gives and receives from the other, respects the other, and loves the other. Through Jesus, we are invited to participate in this communion where we can interact with all three and experience a taste of the intimacy and joy of holy relationship. In its most profound expression, the deep sharing and communion of relationship results in joyful delight experienced in the union of spirit, the embrace of unconditional and rapturous love, and the absolute trust in and surrender to that love. This joy is the hallmark of God’s triune relationship and is something that he invites us into.

Religion: Ritual, Repetition, and Requirements

We must beware the trappings of religion as they can suffocate our relationship with God. Ritual provides us with meaningful touchstones for our faith, but they can become hollow if they devolve into outward practices where we just go through the motions. Even friends and family have rituals, like opening presents on Christmas morning, but if the meaning is lost, then they no longer serve to enhance relationship. In our relationship with God, we must guard against going through the motions. When that happens, we need to find new rituals that instill new meaning for us and that foster deeper connection to God.

Regarding repetition, Matthew 6:7-9 says, “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition like the Gentiles do, for they suppose they will

be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven....” In these verses, Jesus warns against the impotence of repetition. In the following verses, he then goes on to teach us how we should pray. The first two words set the stage for relationship when he starts with “Our Father.” Unfortunately, people have turned this example into a static prayer instead of a guide for meaningful, conversational prayer. Notice that Jesus is teaching us *how* to pray, not *what* to pray. Repetition can make any relationship stale. Relationships require new input and fresh activities in order to grow. Look for ways to move beyond repetition in your relationship with God in order to keep things fresh.

Religion establishes requirements that direct us toward behaviors that please God. The danger here is that rules and regulations can breed either resentment or fear. We may become resentful from having to follow strict rules. Or we may become fearful of punishment should we fail to follow them. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus says, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” When love is missing, then religion becomes a taskmaster and requirements become a heavy burden that brings no joy. The key here is relationship, where love can be fostered. We must focus on relationship over regulations. Focusing on regulations will smother love. When we focus on relationship, then love can bloom. When we cultivate a loving relationship with God, then we will *want* to do what pleases him. We would be like the psalmist in Psalm 40:8 who says, “I delight to do your will, O my God.”

An Eternal Relationship

Jesus says in John 17:3, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Jesus doesn’t define eternal life as living forever, as we would normally define it. Instead, he uses

the relationship language of knowing God. He isn't specifying knowing *about* God, but knowing God personally and experientially. In its truest sense, eternal life is being in relationship with God. This relationship is eternal because God is eternal and this relationship is life because God is life. By being in relationship with God, we are assured to live forever, because he lives forever. Those whom Jesus will reject will be those to whom he says, "I never knew you."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Since God knows everything about you, why is it so hard to be honest with God?
 2. Can you identify three important milestones in your personal history with God?
 3. Which area in your relationship with God is the most stale? How might you correct that?
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