

## Hindrances to Connecting with God

Brad Bailey – February 14, 2016

Big Idea: At this point in series on Prayer, look at some dynamics that can hinder our ability to relate openly with God. This will offer a fitting reflection by which to start the Lenten season.

### Intro:

Today is **Valentine's Day**... (possible Valentine's Day humor).

**The nature of designated days is that they create an opportunity to celebrate something...but also to consider that something. So in the case of Valentines Day, any relationship that deems itself romantic... will also have to consider... how that quality may or not be flourishing. Where is this relationship at? Where are our hearts?**

How fitting that today is **also the day we are preparing for our Lenten season**...marked traditionally by Ash Wednesday (last Wednesday) but we choose to do as the 40 days before Good Friday of Easter weekend...and **that begins tomorrow**.

**In terms of the opportunity to reflect on our relationship...**

**Lent is...Valentine's Day for the Soul**.....an opportunity to reflect on a far more fundamental relationship...our relationship with God.

**Jesus speaks pointedly that our relationship with God is "our first love."**

Jesus Christ praised the church in Ephesus for their works, labor, patience and perseverance (Revelation 2:1-3). But He warned,

### Revelation 2:4-5 (NIV)

*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.<sup>5</sup> Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.*

There was a **lot of qualities** that **marked faithfulness**...**but inwardly** they had grown **disconnected...distant**.

Many feel this in their marriages and other relationships... a sense that what should be first... has been lost by the demands and distractions...and we realize that we have neglected our spouse, children, our closest friends. We need to stop... and make what is first...first again. That dynamic that can **happen in any relationship between two people**...can happen with God....**our first and most fundamental of loves**.

As we continue our series...**Connecting with God in Prayer**... today we are both continuing in our focus...as well as preparing to enter the Lenten season...

Lent is a season in which we consider the **final days of Christ on earth**... **what he bore and why he bore it. We will celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ 40 days from tomorrow. It is the ultimate act of love for us. Lent provides a time of considering our hearts... and our intimacy with God.** It's a time of responding to such love.

It's only fitting that **we reflect upon** that which can hinder **our connection...intimacy with God**.

As we hear from the Biblical Book of Hebrews...

**Hebrews 12:1-2 (NLT)**

*“...let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.”*

Here we are reminded that our life with God is not stagnant...it's a race...always in motion.

Life with God is **not a thing**...it's a **living relationship**... **always alive**.

**It's not a noun...but a verb. Any marriage does well to realize that more than simply “being married” ...we are actually always building a marriage. It is not simply a state but a living relationship...being defined by the state of our hearts.**

This is the race...the ultimate race... a relationship is beyond any other... and we should seek to please God above all... to live in faith... which we can see in the heroes who lived faithfully.

**So** having looked at those who finished well... **consider the race before you.**

*“run with perseverance the race marked out for us”*

We are called to **consider the weight we may be carrying.**

Today is the LA Marathon...and my wife and daughter are running / ran...and there was thousands of runners determined to finish the race... so diverse... but all had one thing in common...not one was trying to run with any extra weight. Why? Because they planned on finishing and you won't finish or finish well if you try to run with weight that holds you in place... or anything that “entangles” you.

So it is with us.

I want to offer each of us an opportunity to consider some of the potential weights that could be weighing us down.

As we enter this Lenten season... as we continue with our focus on connecting with God...I want to invite each of us to stop and consider what might be weighing us down...not simply the practical challenges of prayer...such as busyness. Those are valuable...but every couple knows that while it can help to change practical patterns in order to connect... often the distance is really in the heart. So I want to present us with some of what can develop in our hearts... our souls... that can effect and hinder our connection with God.

**My challenge** to each of us is to consider one...perhaps two that really speaks into our personal lives...and to bring that to God as we begin this Lenten season.

The first is that of...

**1. Self-Resignation** (False humility that resigns ourselves from God's personal intentions)

Heathy humility is the ultimate virtue... but I believe that there is a false humility that we can simply hide behind.

**When we think we have no significance...perhaps that we are defective...we can unconsciously draw back** into a mode of just wanting to be **included in the group** by **proxy**...more than person. We just want to be on the sidelines. This can affect our way of relating to people...but also to God.

**We need to pierce the resignation** with that which declares that God has not made a mistake. We need to find heart of King David...found in Psalm 139...

*O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. Such knowledge is too wonderful from me, too lofty for me to attain. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; **your works are wonderful**, I know that full well. Psalm 139:1-2, 6, 13-14*

Each of us is made with a wonder...something sacred that is not for us to deny. If you don't think God wants to relate to you personally, you may need to pierce that resignation.

**2. Self-Centeredness** (Relating to God "on our terms"... only as a means to serve what we feel we need.)

We all have some challenge to overcome our self-centered nature. But some of us... may have been deprived of the attention that affirmed we matter...and we have sought some rescuer to discover our needs.

I hope we all can realize that **God is not only good...but He is the good we long for.** But when we come to Him on our terms...simply to serve our desires....we will find we have not only reduced God but the greater good of life.

The good that God bears is greater than the self-consuming desires we often have. So we will need to submit our lives in service to a greater good.

**James 4:3** "When you ask you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

*"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."* – 1 **John 5:14**

We will grow most connected to God when we allow His pleasures becoming ours.

As the Psalmist describes, the right desires flow from delighting in God.

*Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this. - Psalm 37:4-5*

The answer to our self-centeredness is to OPEN OUR HEARTS TO GOD'S HEART. This may involve realizing that we are not the center.

**Flannery O'Connor, the famous Southern Writer**

*“Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon . . . what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing. I do not know You God because I am in the way.”*

Some of us may need to open our hearts to the reality that God loves us ...but His good is greater than simply our needs. Just as marriage can only become intimate when we allow it to become a process of de-centering us....so it is with God.

**3. Pride of Independence** (Maintaining a sense of superiority that not only judges others...but limits our humility before God.)

We all do well to realize that there is a natural healthy independence...and a dangerous independence. There is a natural individuation as person. We become “our own person”...and that involves emerging out from those we deem to have been over us...in authority.

But with that process...there is a danger.

Becoming your own person can be a humbling experience... but pride can slip in to avoid that natural humility. As we **now claim we are becoming “our own person”...it can come with a sense that it is a bit superior to others.**

Some of us can separate ourselves from others by separating ourselves from the common...we're “different”... we're not just like everyone else...not as hypocritical. The truth is that such pride deceives and destroys us....it separates us from others...and from God.

In Genesis... we are told how our state was defined by a choice... the pride of independence...in trying to be our own god. Here is the truth: we can either claim that we are god...or we can know God. We can claim our independence...or our intimate dependence. That is the choice. It has never changed. It never will.

**God doesn't mind wrestling with those in the ring, but armchair coaches don't move him.**

We do well to never forget the power of pride to separate us from God...and others. [2]

**Proverbs 16:18 (TEV)**

Pride leads to destruction, and arrogance to downfall.

**James 4:6 (NIV)**

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

*“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”* - James 4:10

Some of us may need to face the vanity of our pride...and humble ourselves.

Similarly

#### 4. An Unmerciful Heart (Unresolved anger that raises a self-righteous and ungracious wall.)

The Scriptures never declare anger itself to be a sin. It's a natural response to feeling another has wronged us. It gives us a feeling of strength against what we perceive as opposition. But we can want to hold onto that strength...that sense of being able to punish another. And that is not a position we ultimately hold.

Anger and lack of reconciliation in our hearts can block our very means of relationship with God. [3]

*"...if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" Matt. 6:14-15*

The very work of God is an invasion of mercy into a world under the power of condemnation. If I condemn others, I'm identifying with the enemy & refusing God's work.

God knows that as we hold onto the wrong of others as unforgivable, we can't at the same time expect to enter His mercy & forgiveness.

Usually we're projecting our own shame, and therefore refusing our very need for God's mercy on ourselves.

So Jesus told us,

*Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24*

Some of us know we have been holding on to contempt to someone or people in general...and refusing the mercy and grace by which we find life. We need to be rescued by humility.

#### 5. An "Idol" Given Misplaced Trust (Something or someone we have been keeping an unhealthy trust in)

Idolatry is one of those words we can easily relegate to some past pagan religious cultures... because we don't have physical statues we worship. (Though I am convinced ever religious culture of the past might look at us and see these little iPhones as beyond anything they ever worshipped. Remember worship means simply giving WORTH to something.)

Many of us may place worth in God. But there may also be **something or someone** we really **don't want to surrender from our lives**. ...that we want to keep on the side...because we really believe we need them or it to meet our deepest needs.

- It's the room in house we don't invite Jesus into.
- It's the old girlfriend or boyfriend we don't tell our spouse about.

At it's root... we are trusting in it to provide for deepest needs. We usually have a sense that it cannot fulfill them...but at least it gives us some pseudo sense of well-being...of being loved... significant.

And so we give them worth...which really means worship. We may worship God...but he sees us slip off...for they are where we run...and we come to God as a second God...a backup.

God calls us out to face the broken cisterns that can never hold the water we need. To bring our thirst to him.

**6. Unconfessed Sin** (Any other area of our life which we are not being honest with God about.)

I don't think at any time we're going to be aware of all our unconscious wrongs, but **at any given time** there are **certain convictions** God is **likely trying to make us conscious of**.

He's putting His finger on it and we're not dealing with it.

In this case, there's ambivalence in our desire to meet with God; at one level, we're not sure we want to hear from him. [APPROACH—AVOID]

Like with a friendship or marriage, when you both know there's an issue between you that needs to be discussed... UNTIL IT DOES, IT'S AWKWARD.

And so it is with God, **WE SHOULDN'T EXPECT TO MOVE WITH GOD, TO WALK IN AGREEMENT WHEN DISAGREEMENT IS AT HAND.**

God wants to deal with that first... and we must **OVERCOME OUR AVOIDANCE**,

Our connection to God involves a **clear conscience**

As we all know, **true hearing is more than just a physical phenomenon.**  
**Ears hear sound...** but only **the heart can choose to hear the message.**

**As Jesus said,** Matthew 5:8 (NIV)

**Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**

**Word translated "pure" (katharos) referred to 'clean'... used in speaking of clothes clean from dirt, corn sifted and cleansed from all chaff.**

➤ **This points to the issue unconfessed sin in our lives.**

If I begin to consciously lie, cultivate lust, hold onto contempt toward another... I will be trying to ignore and insulate the spirit within me.

Only honest confession will release the sensitivity of our spirit again.

**7. Unresolved Disappointment** (A disappointment we have not reconciled with our expectations of God that leads to withdrawing.)

Some of us have a past prayer that God didn't seem to respond to. We went through, and may still be going through, real suffering... not sure where God was, or is in it... so perhaps unconsciously **we want to avoid disappointment by avoiding expectations.** [4]

This can lead some to drift away from all connections...but for many...there is no denying God...just an inner withdrawal of the heart...withdrawing to a "safe" place... as best we can navigate it.

There remains a faithfulness...because we are still acknowledging God... still present in community...but our belief becomes more an objective truth...inactive.

Faith becomes more of a noun than as a verb.

We become more comfortable believing in God than believing God.

Many have known such times in their journey.

- We experience a major crisis of loss or suffering that leads to disillusionment (health, financial, divorce, death of loved one, etc.)
- Our faith does not appear to “work.”
- We have more questions than answers, and the foundation of our faith feels unclear.

**The truth is that the journey of life will involve various levels orientation... disorientation... and reorientation.** There are **transitions in life...** from **one stage of understanding** the world to another.

Illus – child thinks ‘**Good people do good things**’...or ‘**Parents can stop bad from happening.**’ These reflect something that we might consider to **bear some level of truth...** at a basic or **simplistic level** of understanding but they **don’t reflect the whole of reality.** Such beliefs will face a time in which life is not making sense...disorienting...until they are able to let some presumptions go... and enter a new way of trusting life beyond those assumptions. Consider this assumption: “**God will always keep me safe.**” Is it true? Yes in an ultimate way but not in terms of the immediate safety we often presume.

**It is natural as finite creatures in relationship to an infinite God that we will come to points in which what we understand doesn’t fit into what we are experiencing.**

We can hear this experience in...

### **The Example of Asaph**

Asaph is one of the greatest worshipers... and wrote many of the Psalms in Scripture. He captures something of the wall in his own experience which is captured in Psalm 73. [4]

### **Psalm 73:1-3, 13, 16-17, 21-23 (NIV)**

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. <sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. <sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

<sup>13</sup> Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

<sup>16</sup> When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me <sup>17</sup> till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

<sup>21</sup> When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, <sup>22</sup> I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. <sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

> Here Asaph is **describing a juncture in which he hit the wall...** a point of being at a deep and defining sense of loss to understand how God could be at work. He cannot understand what he is experiencing... it doesn’t fit...he then considers that all his devotion may have been in vain... it becomes oppressive...but then he emerges from that isolating place... and **realizes God is there for him... even though he may not understand.**

**We may face a season in which we must realize that we cannot understand everything...but God has come to enter our suffering and to open up the door on the other side.**

**That is what Jesus did. That is what we come towards as we approach his death and resurrection.**

**Closing:**

Offer an opportunity to reflect... and if you identify in a notable way with one or more of these conditions of the heart which can hinder our connection with God..... acknowledge that with God.

Then as prepared...come receive communion. As we begin Lent...we stand before the greatest act of love.

**Romans 5:8**

*“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

**John 15:13**

*“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”*

With that act... God sends the Valentine: Be Mine?

We hear during Valentine’s “BE MINE.” It is a declaration...but also a question...“Will you be mine?” That is what God is asking of us this season of Lent.

**Notes:**

1. Regarding self centeredness,

Proverbs 21:13 “If a person shuts their ears to the cry of the poor, they too will cry out and not be answered.”

2. Regarding “pride” we can also note:

Galatians 6:3 (ESV)

For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

1 Peter 5:5 (ESV)

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Proverbs 3:34 (GNT)

He has no use for conceited people, but shows favor to those who are humble.

“Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend.” So said the late John R.W. Stott, a remarkably humble man of great abilities and accomplishments who is often said to have made the greatest impact for Christ of anyone in the twentieth century.

C.S. Lewis, another top contender for having had the greatest impact for Christ in the twentieth century, called pride “the great sin.” In his chapter by that title in Mere Christianity, Lewis said,



*According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind...*

*... it is Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Simon & Schuster Touchstone edition, 1996), 109, 111.)*

### 3. 1 Peter 3:7 (NIV)

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

### 4. C.S. Lewis captures the despair that can be experienced in disappointment.

[http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm\\_send/44](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/44)

In June 18, 1962, he writes: “the plumbing often goes wrong....I need to be near a life-line.”<sup>34</sup> Worse was to come.

After the loss of his wife, he asks the raw and naked question:

Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it even inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?

In times of such bitter sorrow, Lewis admitted that “I am not in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him.”

Of this we're certain; no one who dared knock

At heaven's door for earthly comfort found

Even a door—only smooth, endless rock,

And save the echo of his voice no sound.

It's dangerous to listen; you'll begin

To fancy that those echoes (hope can play

Pitiful tricks) are answers from within;

Far better to turn, grimly sane away.

Heaven cannot thus, Earth cannot ever, give

The thing we want. We ask what isn't there

And by our asking water and make live

That very part of love which must despair,

And die, and go down cold into the earth,

Before there's talk of springtide and re-birth.

Yes, this is perhaps one of the deepest experiences of prayer, to be able to say to our Heavenly Father, “Lord, not my will but thine be done.”

5. Rich Lusk notes: We should be encouraged that a man of Asaph’s stature had these kinds of struggles. He directed Israel’s choir under David’s kingship (1 Chron. 6:39; 15:17, 19; 16:4-5), spoke as a prophet (2 Chron. 29:30), and wrote inspired hymns sung by the church for 3000 years now (Ps. 50, 73-83). He was a godly man, a skilled musician, and a knowledgeable theologian. His sons/descendants were well known too (1 Chron. 25:1; 2 Chron. 20:14; Ezra 2:41).