

Playground
Adult Supervision Required
October 11, 2015

PRELUDE – Come Ye Sinners

Feature – Lord I Need You /Maher

Communion Introduction – Rick

Feature – Behold the Lamb / Communion

Worship Song – This Is Amazing Grace

Video Announcements

As Shannon just said, today we are beginning a brand new series ... which is actually a series we've done before ... but, not exactly, because we're not repeating any previous series message-for-message or word-for-word. I say this is a series we've done before because the concepts and principles that we're going to talk about in this series are concepts and principles that

we've talked about (in some form or another) more times than I can count since we started this church back in 1994.

Back then, as I said last week, I had no idea of all the things that would be involved in launching a church and being a pastor. Pretty much, all I knew was that accepting Christ as my savior when I was teenager and following Him as a young man had made such a difference in my life that I wanted to help other people have that same experience. So, I spent a lot of time thinking about how a church could reach people who were not already Christians with the Gospel (that “main thing” we spent some time remembering at the beginning of this service) and then, as Jesus Himself put it, teach them to do what He said and to live the way He lived.

It never really occurred to me at the time just how similar launching and running a church would be to launching and running a business. It also didn't occur to me that, as I said last week, I was going to be "the boss" for a lot of different people over the years. (By the way, if you were not here last Sunday and you are the boss or a leader in some capacity, I highly suggest you listen to, watch or read the message; it's available on our church app and website).

But there was one other thing I didn't expect way back in the beginning. I'm a little bit embarrassed to even admit this but, hey, God has to grow and develop all of us in different ways and this is part of what He has had to do in me. I had no idea at the beginning of the amount of time and

energy we would put into learning and teaching and emphasizing and even becoming somewhat known for ... *how to do relationships*. It never occurred to me that *doing relationships well* was going to become such a big deal at NHCC (and to me personally).

I'll never forget how it all began. We had been in existence for about four years and, from all appearances, things were going great. We had reached a lot of people (many who had not been participating in church). We had great services and ministry programs. We were led by a very competent staff. But there was just one problem: *we didn't love each other*.

And I'm not talking about the people of the church. I'm talking about *the leaders of the*

church – me and that very competent staff! We were really good at producing those great services and ministry programs but, behind the scenes, we really didn't like each other. And we played a lot of games with each other.

We were really good at the one where (and a lot of Christians are good at this one) ... the one where you smile in people's faces and you pretend everything is OK because "ain't it so special that Jesus loves us and we love Jesus" ... but, really, you can't stand them. And behind their backs you run them down to other people. We were doing that in our staff.

At one point God spoke to me about it. Not audibly – it was a very strong impression that came to me at a leadership conference

we were attending. God said, “Rick, if Christianity doesn’t make a difference in how you and your staff relate to one another, you guys have no business teaching anyone else.”

At our next staff meeting I told everyone what I thought God had said. And after confessing that *I was the worst offender in the group*, I said “we’re going to stop playing games and learn how to relate to one another like Christians even when it’s hard.” I also said that “if that makes you uncomfortable, eventually you’ll want to work somewhere else.” And everybody’s eyes got real big. And eventually, a couple people did move on.

Now, at that point, I still had no idea of the effect it would have on our culture as a

church to say nothing of the effect that would have on me, personally. By personality type, I'm much more task-oriented than relationship-oriented. But over time, God took the commitment we made that day and He began to teach us some things. And as we began to implement those things and see the difference they made in our staff, we began to teach them to everyone else in messages and in classes and even one-on-one. And we saw the difference they made in our people.

And it changed the culture of our church ... so much so that, a while back, I someone who, at the time, was fairly new to North Heartland said to me: "I've been in church for a long time and I have never heard this kind of stuff. I've never seen people do

what you all do in this area of relationships.”

That’s what I mean by the effect on our culture as a church.

Of course, I don’t want to give you the impression that today we are perfect in this. We’re not. We still mess up in this area. But the one thing we do right on a fairly consistent basis is that we address it.

When something messes up relationally (whether it’s between staff members or between staff members and people in the church or between people in the church), we go after it. It is not uncommon to walk through our offices during the week and see staff members talking with staff members or staff members talking with

people in the church or staff members helping people in the church talk to one another *about issues in their relationships with one another* – trying to clear up misunderstandings, trying to work things out, trying to come to peace and harmony.

To us, that's just a normal part of what it means to be a Christian.

So, when I say “this is a brand new series ... which is actually a series we've done before” that's what I mean. We're going to be talking about biblical concepts and principles that have, over the years, shaped us as a church and made us, from what we can tell, somewhat unique. And this time around *we're going to use the analogy of a playground.*

As most of you know, since last spring we've been working on the playground project we saw in the announcement video. At one point, I was looking at the proposal for the "rules sign" they were going to put up and it occurred to me that a lot of the rules that you find at a typical playground actually correspond to the biblical principles about relationships that we've come to value around here.

For example – and these are all rules we're going to look at in this series ...

- *No Littering* – In the same way that trash on the playground really messes things up, the junk we have inside of us affects every relationship we have ... so we'd better deal with it.
- *Play At Your Own Risk* – the truth about

all of us is that we are at the same exact time glorious creatures made in the image of God and fallen sinners made in the image of Adam. So, somehow we have to believe the best about each other while being prepared for the worst.

- *Use Equipment Properly* – in the same way there's some really cool stuff to enjoy on the playground, there are some very helpful tools we can use to improve and maintain relationships.
- *No Pushing or Shoving* – on the playground – and in relationships – there's always going to be conflict. How can we deal with it constructively instead of destructively?

- *Playground Closes at Dark* – sometimes it gets very dark relationally. What do you do when a relationship gets to the point where you just can't play anymore?

This is going to be a great and helpful series!

The “Rule” Explained

And, today, as Shannon said, the playground rule we're looking at is ... *Adult Supervision Required*.

Hmmm ... what does *that* mean? What's the corresponding biblical principle that applies to the relational world?

Well, let's think about it. The reason we

require adult supervision on most playgrounds is that ...

- Kids typically need guidance and direction from someone wiser and more mature.
- They need the security and protection that comes from someone stronger and more capable.
- They need someone with authority to warn them to stop when it's dangerous or they get out of line.
- They need someone to patiently encourage them to play nice with others.

The list could go on but, the point is ... whether the child realizes it or not, *how they relate to the supervising adult to a great degree determines their experience on the*

playground. If they trust that adult – if they listen to and follow their directions, things tend to go pretty well. But if they don't listen, then bad things can happen.

In the same way, how we relate to (for lack of a better term) *The Ultimate Adult* – God Himself (the One who is wiser and more mature, stronger and more capable than we are) – to a great degree determines how we relate to others.

I'll state the principle like this: the relationship we experience with God directs and influences how we relate to others. <repeat>

And I have seen this again and again in others over the years and personally experienced it countless times myself.

- When my relationship with God is right, I tend to do relationships with others right.

I don't mean that things are always pleasant and peaceful. I mean that I am able to go beyond my natural self. I can be patient with others. I can be direct when I need to be direct. I have wisdom in how I deal with people. I can control my anger. I don't say as many stupid and hurtful things. When my relationship with God is right, my relationships with others almost always go well.

- On the other hand, when I struggle in my relationships with others, it's almost always a sign that something is out of kilter in my relationship with

God.

When I have a bad attitude towards others; when I'm overly sensitive or overly critical; when I am impatient and condescending; when I don't listen to what people are really saying, it can almost always be traced back to some problem in my personal connection with God.

In the same way that a kid's experience on the playground is in large measure determined by how he or she relates to the supervising adult, my experience with others on the adult playground of relationships is directed and influenced by my relationship with God.

And so is yours.

What the Bible Says

Of course, you shouldn't trust what I'm saying just because it's my experience or because I've observed it to be true in others. You should trust it because that's what the Bible tells us ... over and over and over ... in so many different ways.

For example, we see this “Adult Supervision Required” principle illustrated in the difference between the way a self-righteous religious leader treats Jesus and a lowly sinner treats Jesus. The Gospel of Luke chapter 7 beginning in verse 36 tells us that ...

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so

Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat.

When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited [Jesus] saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!"

Then Jesus answered his thoughts. "Simon," he said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you."

“Go ahead, Teacher,” Simon replied. Luke 7:36-40 (NLT)

Then Jesus told him this story:

“A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?” Luke 7:41-42 (NLT)

Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt.”

*“That’s right,” Jesus said.
Luke 7:43 (NLT)*

Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Look at this

woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume." Luke 7:44-46 (NLT)

"I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love."
Luke 7:47 (NLT)

So, why did the "immoral" woman treat Jesus with such astounding affection and generosity and servitude? Because, Jesus

said, she had been “forgiven much.” She was experiencing grace in her relationship with God and that then manifested itself in a loving and generous heart toward others.

When your relationship with God is right, you tend to do relationships with others right.

On the other hand, why did Simon treat Jesus so poorly? Because, as an upstanding Pharisee and keeper of the Law of Moses, he saw no need for God’s grace in his life. He had “only a little” to be forgiven of. He wasn’t experiencing much grace, so he showed Jesus (*and* the woman) “only a little” in the way of hospitality.

When you struggle in your relationships with others, it’s almost always a sign that

something is out of kilter in your relationship with God ... because the relationship we experience with God directs and influences how we relate to others.

We also see this principle reflected in some of Jesus' direct instructions to His followers.

For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, He says:

“If you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.”

Matthew 5:23-24 (NLT)

In other words, when you are in a relationship with God characterized by true worship, that's going to impact how you relate to people who you have hurt and offended.

Even more directly, Jesus says ...

*“This is my commandment:
Love each other in the same way
I have loved you.”
John 15:12 (NLT)*

In other words, when you are truly experiencing God's love, that experience will affect the way you relate to people around you. God's love is going to overflow from you to them.

And we see this same principle in the

writings of Paul.

For example, he writes ...

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:1 (NIV)

Same exact idea as what Jesus said. A life of love is intended to flow from the experience of being loved.

Here's another example from Paul.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.

Romans 15:7 (NIV)

When you experience the acceptance that

comes from what Jesus did for you (in spite of your sin), that should manifest itself in how you accept others in spite of theirs.

And another ...

*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.
Colossians 3:13 (NIV)*

This is similar to the point Jesus made to Simon. When your life is rooted the experience of God's forgiveness, it will manifest itself in the ability to forgive others.

And one more from Paul

God comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort

*others. When they are troubled,
we will be able to give them the
same comfort God has given us.*

2 Corinthians 1:4-5 (NLT)

Can't get any clearer than that. The comfort and encouragement we get from God gives us the ability to do that for others.

**And John the Apostle – probably
Jesus' closest friend – wrote:**

*Dear friends, let us love one
another, for love comes from
God. Everyone who loves has
been born of God and knows
God. 1 John 4:7 (NIV)*

When your relationship with God is right, you tend to do relationships with others right.

John also states the other side of the equation:

*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 1
John 4:20 (NIV)*

When you struggle in your relationships with others, it's almost always a sign that something is out of kilter in your relationship with God.

Why We Have Trouble

So, it's overwhelming from a biblical perspective: the relationship we experience with God (whether that's good or not so good) directs and influences how we relate

to others.

That's the principle. That's the foundation on which we build all of our relationships. And unless the foundation is good and solid, no amount of hard work will make our relationships what God intended them to be.¹

I like the way Timothy Lane puts it in his book, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*. He writes:

Only when we start with God—someone bigger than ourselves—can we escape the destructive results of our own selfishness. If our heart's foundation is solid, based on God's truth, design, and purpose for us, we will be able to build healthy, God-

honoring relationships even though we are flawed people living in a broken world.

He concludes:

When I relate to you knowing that I am God's child and the recipient of his grace, I am able to serve and love you.

And that explains why a lot of us have so much trouble in relationships. We're not receiving *from God* the things we need to be able to give *to others* to make relationships work – at least, as much as that depends on us. We don't have that kind of relationship with Him.

Instead, what a lot of us have with God is

something that's only conceptual and intellectual. We know the facts *about* God, but we don't have the experience *of* God. We know the stories *about* Jesus, but we don't experience an ongoing relationship *with* Jesus. We have it up here (head) but it hasn't gotten here (heart).

So, I want to talk to you for a bit about why that is because it's so important not just for your relationships but for your daily experience as a Christian (assuming you are).

As a pastor (and in my own personal experience) over the years, I've noticed five reasons why people who know *about* God don't really *know* God and *experience* God. And I'll tell you in advance that the first three are easily corrected. The last two

(which may be the most important) are not.

So here we go. First reason why people don't really know and experience God is ...

1. Lack of biblical knowledge of what a personal relationship with God looks like.

A lot of us have faulty images in our heads from things we've heard other people say, like ...

- “God really doesn't care about the details of your life”
- or “God's going to get you if you mess up.”

A lot of us have faulty images about God based on what we've experienced in our own families:

- an abusive or distant parent,
- or the other extreme: a helicopter parent where the whole world revolves around us and making us happy.

But the Bible paints a very different picture of what a relationship with God looks like. We've already seen a bunch of examples in this message but a more thorough survey would reveal that God ...

- Loves us; encourages us; comforts us
- Gives us grace; forgives us; lets us yell at Him without getting angry
- Pursues us; guides and directs us; gives us strength
- Walks with us; listens to us

And God also ...

- Expects us to listen to Him and obey
- And He tells us when we're wrong
- He demands that we worship Him – that we put Him and His Kingdom first in our priorities
- And God disciplines us and rewards us

When you experience God – when you have an ongoing relationship with God – that's the kind of stuff that happens to you. You feel those things. You sense those things in the same way you would feel and sense them from any person.

So what some of us need to do, I think, is to just start reading the Bible ...

... in particular the New Testament – and see the kinds of things that people

experience with God and then start paying attention and notice them in your life. We need to fill in our lack of knowledge.

Another reason why people don't really know and experience God is a simple ...

2. Lack of time that it takes for any relationship to develop and mature.

Once you know and understand what a relationship with God is supposed to look like and feel like, you have to experience those things over and over before it becomes natural to you – just as you would in any relationship.

For example, I was a father up here (head) long before I became a dad down here (heart). Part of what I needed for that to

happen was time. It took years, in fact, for me to go through stuff with my girls and process it until it the experience of being a father became real to me.

So, what some of need to do in our relationship with God is to just be patient.

Keep filling in the gaps of what a relationship with God looks like – keep reading the Bible and just let it soak in.

Don't give up too soon. It will come if you persevere!

The third reason why people don't really know and experience God – and this one is a problem for those who *do* have the biblical knowledge of what a relationship

with God looks like and who have persevered to the point where they have occasionally do experience “God moments”– the reason a lot of us don’t experience God as we could is a ...

3. Lack of discipline to engage with God regularly and systematically.

Relating to God is a lot like relating to anyone – you’ve got to spend time together on a regular basis. You need to build it in to your schedule. It needs to be a priority. And you need to discipline yourself because if you don’t, what happens? You grow apart.

It works that way in business partnerships, in friendships, in marriages, in relationships between parents and children ... and it works that way with God.

So, what some of us need to do is to develop a “time with God” plan and tenaciously follow it.

Now, that plan will look different from person-to-person based on personality type in terms of scope and frequency. But no matter what that looks like, the plan will include a set of activities that is not dependent on personality.

I’m talking about activities like ...

- Surprise! Reading the Bible
- Going to church for worship and teaching
- Praying – talking to God not only but about the things that concern you but also about the things that concern Him; things that you will know from reading the Bible and being taught.

- Listening – just being quiet and open and saying, “God speak to me about anything” ... and then not only writing that down but also testing it against what the Bible says because God is not going to reveal something to you that is contrary to what He has already revealed in the scripture.

Now, as I said (and I think you can see), you and I can do something about these first three problems. They are easily solved with a little bit of effort on our part.

But these next two ... only God can do these for us. We have to cooperate – we have to say yes when He does – but God is clearly the initiator. It’s up to Him and not us.

The fourth reason why people don't really know and experience God personally is a ...

4. Lack of faith – we can't believe this kind of experience with God is meant for us, personally.

There's a doubt in our hearts that says, "Why would God be interested in me? Why would God want to have a relationship with me? I get that God loves everyone and that Jesus died for everyone and that I'm included in that in a global sense. But, on a personal basis, it's just hard to believe."

Now, as to why some people have that kind of doubt, the reason isn't all that important. What's important is to realize, as I said, that only God can do something about it. Only God can break down the wall

that is keeping our heart from opening wide to Him and truly believing “this is for *me*. God loves *me*. God wants *me*.”

So, what do you do if that’s your situation?

You need to pray a very specific prayer for yourself along the lines of what the Apostle Paul wrote in the third chapter of his letter to the Ephesians beginning in verse 16.

And I encourage you – if this is your situation to write down this reference: Ephesians 3:16-19 and look it up and start praying it for yourself daily; hourly if need be.

Here’s what Paul prayed.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in

your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ ...

... and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16-19 (NIV)

Such a powerful prayer! Paul understood that unless God's Spirit did something in our hearts, we will never fully experience what a relationship with God could be like, so he prayed.

And if you're stuck – if this is your problem – you need to pray, too. Pray what Paul prayed *for yourself*.

Ok, there's one more reason why people who know *about* God don't really *know* God and experience a *relationship* with God ... and that's a ...

5. Lack of spiritual life – we're not really Christians; we've never been "born from above."

The Bible makes it very clear that every one of us is spiritually stillborn: "dead in sin" is how Paul repeatedly describes it ... which means, again, that only God can do something about it. God has to intervene in some way and put new life into us, spiritually.

As the Apostle John once put it like this. He wrote:

He [God] came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. John 1:10-11 (NLT)

But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. John 1:10-13 (NIV)

The birth that comes from God – being born again; being born from above – is something God does when we come to the point of believing in Jesus and accepting

Him.

So, what do we need to believe?

Specifically, that God became a flesh-and-blood human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago; that he lived a life of sinless perfection and then died on a Roman cross to pay for our sin.

As the Apostle Paul wrote:

God made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we would become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:21 (NET)

We talked about this earlier in this service. We need to believe that, on the cross, God exchanged the perfect record of Jesus for the sinful record of *our* life.

In addition to believing that Jesus died for us, a Christian also believes that on the third day following his death, Jesus was physically raised to life in a new kind of flesh and blood that will never get sick or die; a body like the one we ourselves will receive for all eternity when Jesus returns to take his rightful place as King over this world.

That's what we need to believe about Jesus as a bare minimum. But, as John wrote, there's one more step.

In addition to believing in Jesus, we need to *personally receive Him* for who He is (God in the flesh) and what He has done for us. We need to say “yes” to Him. We need to say “yes, Jesus, I believe in you and I receive

you as my savior, personally. Be part of my life. Save me from my sin and teach me a better way to live.”

So, what some of us need to do is to pray a simple prayer of belief and acceptance.

And some of you, right now, are ready to do that.

So, what I’m going to do right now for you is this: I’m going to pray a simple prayer that expresses belief and acceptance. And what I want you to do is pray along in your mind with me.

Here’s the prayer (and there’s no magic in these words). Pray along with me if this is what you need to do.

- “God, I admit that I continually fall short of who you want me to be. I am a sinner.”

Just say that in your mind. And maybe even think of a few examples, big or small.

- “God, I believe that you came to Earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and died on the cross ... to pay for all of my sin ... past, present and future.”
- “And I say yes to what He did and I receive Him as my savior. Though I am not good enough, He is.”
- “Jesus, come into my life ... save me from my sins ... and teach me how to live the way you want me to live.

Amen.”

Now, if you just prayed that prayer with me (and you weren't just repeating words), you can be sure that God has done what you have asked. Because you have believed in and received Jesus ...

- You are forgiven of everything. You are free from the penalty of sin.
- You are spiritually alive in Christ.
- And the Holy Spirit of God now lives within you and you now have the ability to experience a personal relationship with God and to grow in that experience.

And as that happens – as your relationship with the Ultimate Adult, God Himself, develops – it will begin to influence how

you relate to others.

That doesn't mean that things will always be easy. Instead, it means that you will be able to go beyond your natural self as you deal with others. You'll be able to be more patient. God will give you wisdom in how to deal with people. You'll find strength to control your anger. And so on and so forth ... because our relationship with God truly is the foundation on which we ultimately build all of our relationships.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Ok a couple of things before we leave this morning ...

First of all ... offering @ Door.

Secondly, in a lot of churches when a person makes the decision to accept Christ, the pastor invites them to come forward to declare their newfound faith. And that's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. Basically every church I was part of in the 20 years before NHCC did that. And that's what I did when I became a Christian (as we have just defined it) as a teenager.

But we don't do that here at NHCC ... and, again, not because we have an issue with churches that do but because we would rather emphasize what Jesus emphasized with regard to this matter. And what Jesus told the church to do was to preach and teach the "good news" (which is what I just did at the end) and then to *baptize people who believed and received Him* as a sign that the old way of thinking about God and the

old way of living has passed away and that they are now alive in Christ.

So, if you just prayed with me, I want to invite you to *also* say “yes” to Jesus’ request in this matter by declaring your faith in Him at our next baptism on the third Sunday of next month – November 15th. And I know that some of you were baptized as infants or children and that’s cool. So was I.

And we’re not trying to discount that because there’s value in that. But there’s also value in making that decision for yourself. So, I hope you will. You’ll be hearing more details on how to sign up in the coming weeks.

Well, that’s all for today. Next week’s

playground rule ... No Littering. See you then!

ⁱ Timothy S. Lane, Relationships: A Mess Worth Making