

First Love
Engaged
August 11, 2019

Good morning everyone.

That skit is a great way to bring us to the next level of what we've been talking about in this series.

- Three weeks ago we began by looking at why God would pretty much demand that those of us who are Christians *love* Him first and most with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength.

And we discovered, among other things, why that command is actually for *our* benefit and not His.

- Then, two weeks ago, we talked about

the fact that sometimes God – especially as He appears in the Old Testament – doesn't *seem* all that lovable.

And we saw why that's primarily a problem of our perspective (specifically our post-modern and Western worldview) and not His character.

- And then, last week, we *began* talking about the problem that the drama illustrated: how do you relate to someone (in this case God) who you cannot physically see, hear or touch? And, even more importantly, how do you express your love to them since that is what is commanded?

So last week we looked at what *God himself* says about that – what you and I can do (and *not* do) that shows Him we love Him.

And if you missed any of those messages, as always, I encourage you to check them out in the media section of our app, website and also on our podcast.

But today, as I said, we're going to take it to the next level because loving God – actually, loving *anyone* – isn't simply performing a set of actions. It's not a list of things you do or don't do as much as those things might express love.

Loving someone means *relationally engaging with them*.

It means ...

- Connecting with them
- Interacting with them
- Being with them.

It means ...

- Knowing them ... and being known by them.
- Trusting them ... and being trusted by them.
- Sharing in their joys and sorrows ... and allowing them to share in yours.

And the list could go on and on.

Loving someone means *relationally engaging* with them ... which is hard enough to do (and do well) with a flesh-and-blood human being!

So how in the world do you do it with – again – someone you can't physically see, hear or touch? How do you relationally engage with God?

That's what I want to talk to you about this morning.

And I believe this message will be the missing piece for at least some of us because ...

- Some of us think of God like the “Bonco God-o-matic” in the skit – He’s always there when we need him but *only* when we need him. He never makes a demand of us.
- Some of us think of God at the opposite end of the spectrum. He’s “the Almighty Lawgiver” who makes *constant* demands of us, so we’d better figure out the rules *and follow them* lest we cross Him.
- And some of us see God as a divine vending machine ready to dole out blessings that make our life even more comfortable than it already is.

And the problem with all of those images ...

When you think of God in any of those ways ...

If any of those are your primary understanding of who God is ...

The problem is that *you don't think of God as a person*. And, therefore, you don't think of relationally engaging with God.

You may think of *obeying* God. You may even think of *honoring* God and doing things *for* God.

But you do not think of relationally engaging with Him; connecting with Him personally.

And therefore, you are missing out.

You're missing out because, out of all of

God's creations, you and I were uniquely created with the ability to have a relationship with Him.

As God Himself once put it through the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah:

"If people want to boast, they should boast about this: they should boast that they understand and know Me."

Jeremiah 9:24 (NET)

What an incredible thought – that you and I, as mere flesh-and-blood mortals, can somehow know and understand God even though we cannot physically see, touch or hear Him.

That's just part of what it means to be human and created in God's image.

So for you to be the person you are intended to be – for you to experience life as God

intends it to be – you need to relationally engage with God. You need to love God and be loved by God. That’s when we are fully alive. That’s when we experience “life to the full” as Jesus once put it.

So, this morning, I want to talk to you about how to do that. I want to talk to you about how to personally connect with God.

And I know that a lot of you are far better at that than I am and I don’t want to insult your intelligence, but my goal is to make this as simple as possible, especially for those who are not followers of Jesus.

And if that’s you and you’re here in the room or watching online, we’re glad you feel comfortable enough to hang out with us. Part of the reason we’re even here as a church is for people like you.

And I want to help *you*, in particular, understand what it looks like to relationally engage with God because once you realize that Christianity isn't just a new set of "rules to live by" (and everyone lives by *some* set of rules, either their own or someone else's) ...

Once you realize that Christianity isn't just a new set of "rules to live by" but a *new person to live with*, it changes everything.

Let me say that again.

Christianity isn't just a new set of "rules to live by" but a new person to live with.

And that changes everything.

It's true that there *are* new "rules" (if you want to call them that) because the Way of Jesus is different from the way of this world. It's different from the way that human beings naturally live.

But Jesus didn't come just to show us a new way to live. He came to make it possible for us to have a relationship with God. And out of that relationship – that relational engagement – comes the desire and ability to live in the new way.

And once you understand that – once you realize that Christianity isn't just a new set of "rules to live by" but a new person to live with, *God Himself*, it changes everything.

What Jesus Did

So let's start at the beginning. Let's start with the basics which means starting with what Jesus did to make a relationship with God possible.

And we've talked about this on many occasions – how so many people think that

“the way it works with God” is that ...

- We all start out on God’s nice list. We all have a relationship with God.
- And then we commit a sin so bad or just too many sins in general that we wind up on the naughty list.
- We become separated from God. We’re “spiritually dead” so to speak.
- And if we die at that point, we go to you-know-where.

But that’s *not* how it works according to Jesus.

What He taught and what his followers taught is that we’re *already* spiritually dead at birth. We come into the world *already* separated from God because of what sin has done to the human race and to the whole world.

And the only remedy for death is a resurrection, which is something only God can do.

And the only remedy for *spiritually dead people* is for them to be brought back to life spiritually, which, again, is something that only God can do.

And, incredibly, that's what God has made possible in Jesus.

Here's how the Apostle Paul once described it:

*When God our Savior
revealed his kindness and
love ...*

Meaning "when Jesus died on the cross" ...

*When God our Savior
revealed his kindness and
love, he saved us, not because*

of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:4 (NLT)

What Paul is saying is that we can't raise ourselves up from spiritual death by trying to do more right things than wrong things.

So, if we're going to be saved, God has to do it for us out of His mercy because, as those who are born in sin and continue to sin, not only do we not deserve it, we're powerless.

And that's what God does and did in Jesus.

He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. Titus 3:5 (NLT)

Paul says that what happens is Jesus dies in our place to wash away our sins.

And when we put our faith in Him, when we

believe in Him, when we receive Him, the Holy Spirit raises us up from spiritual death. We're born from above, born of the spirit, born again.

We're off the naughty list. We're alive towards God.

But look what else God does and did.

He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Titus 3:6 (NLT)

The Spirit of God – God Himself – Paul says comes to live *within* us. That's how a personal relationship with God is even possible.

That's why I say that Christianity isn't just a new set of "rules to live by" but a new person to live with.

Now, here's a very important point you shouldn't miss. The reason some of you have a really hard time relating to God is because you have never been born of the Spirit. You are still dead in your sins. There's no spiritual life in you.

Does God still love you? Yes.

Does God desire a relationship with you? Yes. That's why Jesus died in your place.

But until you respond by repenting, believing and receiving, you will not be able to relationally engage with God because the Holy Spirit will not indwell your spirit.

So, the first thing you must do is accept Jesus. That opens the door and makes a relationship with God possible.

And following that, you should be baptized.

We usually do that twice a year but we're going to start doing it more often, at least once per quarter. So when we do it later this fall you should sign up and do what Jesus has asked you to do: get in the water and participate in ...

- The sign that joins you to all other believers throughout history.
- The sign that visually communicates "I was dead in sin and buried with Christ. Now I am raised with Christ, alive in Christ, joined to Christ and to his Body, the church."

So that's the first step. Nothing happens for you or me or anyone else spiritually without that.

But once that does happen – once the

possibility of relating to God becomes a *reality*, what do you do?

The SCM Model

I suppose there are lots of ways to talk about that but what I want to do is to put it in terms of a simple model that our pastors discovered a long time ago, way back in the first few years of our church's life. What I'm about to tell you is not original with us.¹

We call it “the SCM model” where ...

- “S” stands for solitude.
- “C” stands for community.
- “M” stands for ministry.

And the idea is – the *reality* is – if you're a Christian, if you're a follower of Jesus who is spiritually alive with the Holy Spirit of God living in you, these three elements of solitude,

community and ministry are conduits of relational engagement with God.

They're pathways that connect you to God, allow you to be with God, interact with God and know God.

So, let's take a few minutes to look at each one, and let's begin with "solitude."

But before I tell you what it *is*, let me say what it is NOT. Solitude is not simply *isolation*.

Solitude – at least as we're talking about it here – is not when we say "It's just too much, I've got to get away from these people, this job is just driving me crazy, I need a break" and then we sit at home and watch TV or play video games.

"Solitude" means spending time alone *with God* in prayer, scripture reading, and personal reflection.

Solitude is when we call time out from people, noise, entertainment, work – whatever it is – for the purpose of being with God.

And you might do that five minutes or 25 minutes every day or an hour every other day. Or maybe you do it be for several hours once a week. Everybody is different in what it takes for them to be able to disconnect from the world for the purpose of connecting with God.

So what do you do when you're alone with God? You talk to Him. You pray.

Well, what do you pray about?

I did a whole series on that two years ago in May of 2017 called *The Great Prayer Mystery*, and if prayer is new to you or confusing to you, you should look it up on our app, website and podcast. It will really help you

understand and focus. There are even some guides and experiments to try each week.

But, for today, in short, you don't just pray for people who are sick or who are going through a hard time – though you should certainly do that.

You also pray for things like ...

- God's will to be done in this world *beginning in your own life.*
- You ask for the power to overcome the things that keep you from being the person you're made to be, the person God wants you to be.
- You share with God the things that scare you and confuse you and hurt you and you ask for courage, clarity and healing.

- You ask God to reveal where you are falling short in your love for Him and for others.
- And you thank God that in Jesus those sins and failures – in fact, *all* of your sins and failures past, present, and future – are forgiven.

Again, check out that series if you want to know more. It will really help you.

In addition to prayer, solitude with God typically includes reading the scripture.

And if you've never done that before, let me just say "please, please, please don't start at the beginning of the Bible."

Not because there is nothing there worth

reading and not because it's unimportant but because the Old Testament is primarily about God's relationship with Israel.

We talked about this two weeks ago when we looked at what one of the very first Christian leaders wrote ...

... about that part of the Bible.

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways ... Hebrews 1:1 (NIV)

But, he continues:

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. Hebrews 1:2 (NIV)

... which means ... if you really want to know what God is like, you should start with Jesus

because ...

*The Son is the radiance of
God's glory and the exact
representation of his being.
Hebrews 1:3*

So, I always tell people who are new to the Bible to start reading about two thirds of the way into the book ...

- Where the New Testament begins.
- Where the eyewitness accounts of what Jesus said and did are recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
- Where we find the story of how the Holy Spirit used His first followers, the first Christians, the Church to carry on His mission after his resurrection and return to the Father.

If you're a Christian (and even if you're not), you want to make sure you are well-grounded in *that* before you go too deep into the first part, because Jesus is the lens through which all of that becomes clear.

And, again, we talked about that two weeks ago so no need to say any more.

By the way, one thing that is incredibly helpful these days when it comes to reading the Bible is an amazing *and free* little app called the YouVersion Bible.

One of the things I really like about this app is that you can set it to notify you of the verse of the day. So, for me, every day at around noon, I get a little pop up that on my phone with a passage of scripture.

And it's amazing how often it applies to what I am doing that day, sometimes even in that

exact moment. It's almost like God speaking to me ... because it is.

One more thing about solitude and then we'll move on to community.

Solitude for the purpose of connecting with God typically includes some level of *personal reflection* in which we combine both scripture reading and prayer.

Here's how it works.

When you read the Bible, the Holy Spirit within you will almost always "say" something to the effect of ...

- "Hey, you need to remember that"
- "You need to do that – or not do that"

- “You need to rethink that”
- “You need to celebrate that or mourn that.”

There’s almost always some way to apply what we’re reading and hearing from God to our life.

And when we give that some thought and maybe even write about that – in a journal or a blog – that’s personal reflection.

Okay, let’s talk about the second conduit to relational engagement with God – *community*.

And, again, let me say what I *don’t* mean by community before I tell you what I *do* mean.

By “community” I’m not talking about the

surrounding area. I'm not talking about the Northland. I'm not even talking about your neighbors and mine.

By “community” I mean being with other people who are also engaging with God.

Now, I'm not going to spend as much time on this one (and also on “ministry”) as I did on solitude because that's clearly the core element of interaction with God.

But this one is important, too, because one of the principles that is abundantly clear in the teaching of Jesus and in the experience of the first Christians is that God is present in the gathered body of believers.

Jesus said it like this:

“Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” Matthew 18:20 (NIV)

The Apostle Paul later expanded on that idea when he wrote:

*Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives among you? 1
Corinthians 3:16 (NLT)*

So, if you want to connect with God, if you want to interact with God and hear from God, you need to be with others who are doing the same thing.

Now, how do you do that?

And, again, I know I'm being very basic here and I hope I'm not insulting your intelligence but two very simple things we can all do.

1. First, *join a church and get involved in a small group.* That's why we have a small groups ministry here and why we're going to be expanding it this fall.

You can find out more info on our app, website or welcome center. Or you can find Nic or Marci Allen and they'll tell you about it.

2. Second, actually *go to church services*; physically gather together with other believers to worship Jesus.

And I know you can do church online and you can worship on your own. You can listen to great worship music in your car or in your bathroom. And some of you physically can't make it to church and that's OK.

But there's something uniquely spiritual about being in a room with other believers who are worshiping and learning about God. Something happens that does not happen and cannot happen when you are alone.

And that is ... *it's not all about you.*

If you're a Christian, what happens in this room isn't all about you – like it is when you're alone.

When you physically gather together with other believers to worship and learn about Jesus ...

- It's not all about what you "get" or don't "get" out of the message.
- It's not all about whether or not you like the music.
- It's not all about whether or not you like to sing about God and to God.

Those things are important and they do matter.

But, if you're a Christian, the truth is being in this room on a Sunday morning is not as much about *you* connecting with *God* as it is *God* connecting with *you* through the presence of others and *God* connecting with *others* through *you*.

Let me give you a non-spiritual illustration that I hope will clarify what I'm saying.

How many of you have been to a Royals game recently? Almost nobody goes anymore. If you've been to "the K" in recent months, it's depressing, isn't it?

And not just for the fans. It affects the players, too.

And we know that because of what it was like in the two years the Royals went to the World Series. Again and again the players talked about the energy and encouragement they

drew from the all the people who literally surrounded them.

It works the same way with attending services. Your presence and your participation is a way that God's Spirit energizes and encourages everyone else ...

- Including me and everyone else who prepared for and leads this service
- Including the people sitting around you
- Including the person who showed up for the very first time out of a desperate hope that they might *in some way* encounter God.

If you're a Christian and in the room, you're part of that way. You're part of how God engages with all of us. And all of us are part of how God engages with you. All of us

together are the temple of God and the Spirit of God lives among us.

And if you shortchange this experience ... and if you never get into a group with other Christians ... you will not only shortchange *your* engagement with God. You'll affect ours as well.

That's why one of the early Christian leaders once wrote:

Let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NLT)

So, we've talked about solitude and community – the "S" and the "C" in SCM.

Now, let's talk about ministry – the “M” in SCM. And, again, I'll tell you what I don't mean by it.

When I say ministry, I don't mean what people like me do for a living. I'm not talking about the profession of being “in the ministry”, i.e., being a pastor or a staff member in a church.

What I mean by *ministry* any Christian can do because ...

“Ministry” is simply joining God in what God is already doing in this world.

So what *is* God doing in this world?

He is establishing his Kingdom on earth, one life at a time. He is redeeming individual men and women from sin's bondage and curse through the truth and grace of Jesus of Nazareth.

And “ministry” is simply serving in ways that move that process along.

It might be something formal you do such as taking a volunteer role here in our Adventureland Children’s Ministry or the Arts’ ministry – you play in the band or run slides behind the scenes.

It might be taking a volunteer role in a Christian non-profit organization like Hillcrest Platte County or Restoration House or Parkville Women’s Clinic.

Or ministry might be something informal too, something in the moment, where you give a cup of cold water to someone in need.

Of course, a good question might be why is ministry a conduit of relational engagement with God? Why is it a pathway that connects

you to God? How does it lead you to interact with God and know God?

After all, you're just doing stuff. You're just changing diapers or answering phones or writing questions for small groups, right?

Wrong.

When you do ministry – when you serve in some way that advances God's Kingdom on this earth ...

- You are getting in step with what concerns God.
- You are aligning your heart with His heart.
- You're learning to care about what He cares about.

And that's what relational engagement is about, at least in part – connection with what really matters to someone else.

Observations

So, there you have it: a simple – at least, *simple to understand* – model for knowing God, connecting with God, and interacting with God.

- “Solitude” is spending time alone with God in prayer, scripture reading, and personal reflection.
- “Community” is being with other people who are also engaging with God.
- “Ministry” is joining God in what God is already doing in this world.

Now, just so you'll know, most Christians who

engage in these practices tend to balance them differently according to their personality type. For example, extroverts tend to spend less time in solitude and more time in community. Introverts do the opposite.

And that's OK, but one thing we've noticed is that if you completely ignore one of the elements, you're going to experience some unpleasant consequences. I'll say more about that three weeks from today in a message I'm calling *Dumb Things Smart Christians Do*.

But, as long as each element is present at some level, we've seen this model help people to develop a real and meaningful relationship with God; one that goes beyond seeing Him as the "Bonco God-o-matic" or "Almighty God" or "Vending Machine God."

In fact, let me state it like this:

- If you spend time alone with God in solitude ...
- If you are in community with others who know God and speak into your life and encourage you ...
- If you are investing time, talent and treasure in the things that God is up to in this world ...

Over time, the result of the SCM model will be a growing sensitivity to God's presence in your daily life.

You will be mindful of what God is doing and what God wants you to do because you will know God.

For example, you'll have moments in your life like I did yesterday when my dad and my sister Debbie came over for a birthday party

for one of my granddaughters. I looked at them and I looked at her felt such gratitude and thankfulness that they know each other; and that God has allowed me to see their joy.

And in that moment, I said a little prayer of thanksgiving "Thank you Lord for this great blessing" because I was aware that it was God's doing in my life and theirs.

Just a little moment of engagement with God.
Just a little expression of my love for God.

If you spend time in solitude, community and ministry, you'll also have moments where you look around at creation – at the incredible beauty and variety of life in all of its forms – and you'll find yourself worshipping in awe the One who (however He did it) made it all.

Happened to me a couple of times last week when I was digging a trench in my backyard.

And then you'll have moments where you realize that whatever trial you're experiencing is actually God's hand at work on your character; shaping it so that you look more like Jesus and less like you.

That also happened to me just this past week, at the end of a particularly hard and discouraging day, when I felt God saying to me, "Rick this is just how people are. You don't have to like it. You don't have to lower your expectations.

"But to do what I've called you to do, you have to bear with the failings of the weak *like I do for you*. You have to give grace *like I do to you*."

And the reason I could hear those words from God in my mind is not because I'm a pastor or somebody special. It's because I have

spent ...

- Years reading the scriptures in solitude
- Years being in community with others who challenge me and encourage me to stay the course
- And years trying to help people grow in their faith, which is ministry.

The SCM model has enabled me to relationally engage with God. And it can do the same for you, too.

The Challenge

Now, as I said, that's a simple-to-understand model. At least, I hope it is.

But that doesn't mean it's simple to do.

And not because any of those elements are particularly difficult. The challenge is *time*.

- Making the time for solitude.
- Making the time for community.
- Making the time for ministry.

See, the truth about most of us who are Christians ... and the reason we don't have a deeper relationship with God ... and therefore we don't love God as we wish we did ... is that ...

We're too busy for God and too much in love with the things of this world.

You can't love someone you don't take time to be with and enjoy.

A husband can't love his wife well if he never sees her and he's never home (and vice versa).

And you can't love God well – you can't relationally engage with God – if your life is consumed with activity and stuff, even good stuff like your family or your job ... the very blessings that come from God's hand.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, puts it this way:

“The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning when all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals.

“So the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. But it won't come in if we

simply let the wild animals rule.”ⁱⁱ

That’s a great description of life for so many of us – the wild animals start running as soon as we wake up and they don’t stop until we climb into bed at night.

And if we don’t say no to them – even if they’re good things – we’re going to miss out on the best thing.

One of the most fascinating images in the whole Bible is one from the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation.

In it, Jesus is speaking to seven different churches in the first century world. And He comes to one of the churches, the church of Laodicea ...

And he says ...

"Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends."

Revelation 3:20 (NLT)

Friends, Jesus wants a relationship with us. He's done what's necessary for that to be possible.

The question is will we?

As you can see, the band is in place and I've asked them to lead us in a song we've been singing a lot in recent days; as song that I think it's a good expression – it's actually a prayer – that draws us into relationship with God.

So, let's stand and sing together - Bigger Than I Thought

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Next Sunday

- a. Another opportunity to worship and connect with others

- b. Final week of the series ... talk about the amazing impact of loving God on everything and everyone else.

- c. PLUS an important announcement
I think you'll want to be here for.

Endnotes

ⁱ SCM originated with Christian writer and spiritual director, Henri Nouwen. See http://enterrmission.typepad.com/my_weblog/files/moving_from_solitude_to_community_to_ministry_henri_nouwen.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Quoted at <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/loving-god-andrew-hamilton-sermon-on-worship-definition-50825?page=2&wc=800>