Following Jesus, Knowing Christ

Engaging the Intimate Relational Process

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Contents

One The Relational Process _____1

Going Deeper 1
Thinking Relationally 3
Evangelicals, Spirituality and Practice8

Two The Relational Connection_____11

Tension, Comfort Zones, Boxes 11
Between the Manger and the Cross 13
God's Glory: (1) His Being, (2) Nature (3) Presence 14
Making a Connection 22
Learning Our Part in the Relationship 24
A Heart Vulnerable in Relationship 26
Examples of Relational Consequences 27
Learning From the Disciples in Relationship 31
The Authentic, Genuine *Me* 35
The Demand of Grace 37
Relational Work Wanted 41

Three Establishing This Deeper Relationship_____43

Knowing Where Our Relationship Is Focused 44
Eternity Substance 46
Two Critical Errors of Relationship 49
To Journey *in* Eternity 50
The Relationship of Eternity 52
Counter-relational Work 54
Relational Tests 56

Four ...to Uncommon Intimate Relationship_____65

The Relational Imperative 66
That Which is Common 67
Its Relational Consequences 67
Relationally Accountable No Matter What 72
Honest Relational Work 74
Sin's Relational Control 76
Worth the Change 77

Five Developing This Intimate Relationship_____81

Two Cautions in Relational Work 82
Redefining the Self 83
Saved to What? 86
Heart Merger: The Son Doing Relationship With the Father 88
The Only Relationship That Works 91

Being Relationally Loved 94
Being Relational: the Pursuit of Peter 96
Life Faster Than Grace 109

Six The Relationship of Following 111
Clarifying the Terms 112
Clarifying What We Follow 114
Contingencies and Conflicts 115
Disciple to Friend to Family 116
Serving Is Not Our Vocation 118
How Relational Consequences and Outcomes Happen 119
Relational Responsibilities, Not Contingencies 123

Seven The Nature and Extent of Our Involvement: Vital Relational Acts 125
I. Worshipping God and Others 126
The Nature of Involvement: Attachment and Priority 127
Broader Issues of Relational Work 129
II. Loving God and Others 130
From Appearance to Substance 131
The Substance of Love 135
Love's Involvement 136
The Extent of Involvement 137
Total Involvement Undifferentiated 140
The Relational Question 141

Eight Extending the Relationship 143
The Forgotten Person 143
Discovering *Others* 146
How Do We Do Church? 148
The Relationship of Fellowship 150
Examining Our Results 151
Churches to Take to Heart 152
Equalized in the Relational Process 156
The Church as Equalizer 158

Nine The Relational Conclusion 159
A Foreign Language 159
The Experience Gap 160
It's *in* the Story 161
The *Whole* Story 162

Study Guide & Growth Plan 163

Scripture Index 183

Chapter 1 RELATIONAL PROCESS

Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do.
Prov. 4:23 NLT[1]

This study is for those who have a relationship with Jesus Christ, whether relatively new or long established. It's for those who want to genuinely *know* God further but not in the conventional way of more information and technique. We will expand on the relational process of experiencing God in intimate relationship which results in *knowing* him more and more. In this sense our study will not be about spiritual growth and spiritual formation as these have popularly come to be connoted, though it certainly involves spiritual growth and will result further in it. I think you will find this study confronting and challenging but also potentially comforting and satisfying in a relational way.

It's important that you use your Bible as you undertake this study in order to interact with God's word. Also, I hope you pause along the way increasingly to interact with him directly. I further suggest that you read the sections of this study in their order because they build progressively. The process of relationship is certainly not linear and this study is not presented as structured steps for relationship. But understanding the relational process is a cumulative experience of Jesus' person and words which build toward greater and greater intimacy with God. (I use Jesus' "words" instead of "teachings" because the latter tends to get disconnected from his *person* in our thinking.)

Though growing in a relationship does not take place in a straight line, the relational process keeps unfolding and developing, with no shortcuts or substitutes. If you're looking for something easy or a simple formula for successful Christian living, you won't want to involve yourself in this study. If you want to go to the next level of relationship with God, I know you can experience that in the study of Jesus' *person* and his words. As familiar as his life may seem to you I think you can still experience further adventure and discovery. In fact, you may find more than you're looking for.

Going Deeper

All the global changes and instability we've been experiencing since the latter third of the 20th century, as well as the diminishing dominance of the modernist worldview, have created much more uncertainty in our lives, collectively and individually. Christians are living in very challenging times and I'm excited about our opportunities. Yet, we have some serious work ahead of us, more specifically what I call *relational work*. This makes the study of Jesus imperative.

As we anticipate studying his person and words, we have to prepare to work through the complexities of our everyday living (individually and corporately as God's

[1] Unless otherwise noted all quotes from Scripture are taken from the NIV.

people) which have profoundly affected our interpersonal relations and the satisfaction we experience in our relationships. This effort involves **three major issues**:

(1) how we've come to see ourselves and thus define ourselves;
(2) as a result of this definition, how we then proceed to do (live in) our relationships, both with God and with others;
(3) how these two then influence and even ultimately determine how we do church today.

These three major issues will be a continuous focus interwoven throughout this study. They are basic issues which we will need to deal with along the way.

At the risk of oversimplifying global relations (political, economic and socio-cultural) the specific condition of these relationships is just a macrocosm of interpersonal relationships on an individual level. When we examine this condition it reveals: how much we define ourselves by what we have and what we do; and how we base our relationships on this and how this determines essentially how we relate to others. Such relationships illustrate the pervasiveness of how we define ourselves affects how we do relationships.

There have been various ways of following Jesus throughout church history. Many of those ways usually have concentrated on what we should do (follow his teachings and example) than on his *person* and the relationship. For example, they may focus on exercising your spiritual gift, serving in some role or even bearing a title, all the while unintentionally overlooking him and the relationship. Growth in this relationship also has been measured in various ways. Think for a moment how you measure growth. Increasingly, for the most part, growth has come to be viewed in terms of *quantity*. For example, growth is perceived in how much you've done together (church activities, service, even Bible study or fasting) or accomplished (particularly in service for God), in how long you've been together or how much information you know about him. Yet, none of these so-called indicators of growth necessarily results in a *quality* relationship.

All of us are familiar with marriage relationships, maybe even of our own parents, for whom quantity did not result in quality. In spite of this lack, our tendency still is to embrace these standards, to accept these relational conditions or to be essentially resigned to them. We make these choices instead of going deeper in the relationship for more substance and satisfaction. Consequently, we end up making substitutes and settling for less.

The use of the above indicators of quantity to reflect a quality relationship is directly tied to defining ourselves by what we do and have. They are both based on lies which result in our focus on secondary areas and our settling for less than is available to experience. Of course, sometimes quantity may be the only area in a relationship available to us but we can't impose this limitation on relationship with God. He is so much more to know and to experience than mere quantity.

Consider the following questions:

- In the multitude of conversations (short or long) we have in an average day, how many of those are actually with God?
- Do you feel closer to God when he is doing (has done) something specific for you?
- Do you feel the most satisfaction in your relationship with Christ when you are doing something (e.g., serving) for him?

These are all relational questions. They deal respectively with: *when* we are involved with him (e.g., only at set times or even at a particular place); *how* we are involved with each other (e.g., primarily through deeds or in activities); *why* we are really involved in the relationship at that moment (e.g., essentially because of a need, a sense of duty or obligation). Most of these focus on secondary areas and indirect connections in the relationship. They establish us in virtual connections with God but not relationally significant ones. There is a definite sense of the relationship but not the real experience which comes from intimate involvement.

How many areas of life, including the church, do we assess on the basis of secondary matters? This is vital for us to examine. Hopefully, we will come to understand the subtle presence and influence lies may have in our relationship with God. The person and words of Jesus reveal to us what is necessary and what is sufficient for a quality relationship with God—and therefore also with others. As we grasp this, we will see that his relational truths stand in direct conflict with the lies of self-definition and relationships perpetuated by the author of all lies, Satan. Some of this will comfort us and some will confront us. Most of it will expand us.

Thinking Relationally

With all the changes taking place around us, relational changes are the most critical. Globalization is forcing us to think more about relationships (at least in economics) beyond our provincial boundaries and comfort zones. These relationships, however, focus only on an exchange process (e.g., of labor, goods and services), not a relational process. This is not how we need to think relationally, though the exchange process is how many personal relationships are conducted, even with God.

Emigration has affected all our lives in one way or another. At no other time in history has a group of persons "faced" so many other peoples different from themselves than exists today. This has strained our comfort zones and either threatened us or challenged us to expand our relationships, even to change how we do relationships.

The current displacing of modernism (and its dependence on reason and the mind) is another relatively recent development influencing our perception of relationships which is important to briefly note. Modernism has been instrumental in creating further distance from our heart and helping to prevent intimacy in relationships. Now it's being said of the Western world that we seem to be realizing the limits of the mind and the talk of spirituality is increasing. While this is encouraging, we have to wonder about the extent of this shift and its real significance, especially for relationships. It is not apparent if any shift is increasingly focusing us on the heart of the total person and is also lifting the modern constraints on relationships toward greater intimacy. This change is vital for our redemption from the negative effects of modernism.

Do the heart and the experience of intimacy still escape us today? I think the answer is unequivocal—yes, even among Christians. But I don't think this condition has been the consequence unique to modernism. This worldview and mindset has only further entrenched us and formalized our existing tendencies in how we define ourselves and do relationships. Therefore, I don't think we adequately reverse the flow and formulate a

new direction for ourselves merely by addressing the issues from the philosophical tenets of modernism. If indeed we are moving into postmodernism (and a reliance on experience), it is that much more urgent to understand the relational process and practice it in relationship with God and others.

Merely acknowledging God, for example, however sincerely and consistently, does not mean it will lead to knowing God. The latter is a relational outcome involving the heart and is not guaranteed by a shift in intellectual position. On the contrary, a limited shift could even result in further misperceptions about God and the *person*, and the relationships which are basic to both.

I think the common Christian concern underlying various spiritual approaches and traditions in church history essentially boils down to this: the interpersonal relationship between Christ and *me*, and the development of this relationship toward greater intimacy between us. Rightly so, because this is what Jesus came to establish and what the Spirit will bring to completion. Yet, we haven't always looked at our relationship as a *function of relationships* nor engaged the relational process in our practice. Jesus makes this fundamental to all which takes place between God and us.

Basic to examining his person and words is understanding his interpersonal relations. In order that we don't take Jesus out of the relational context, our examination will need to look also at the other participants in his relationships or interactions. Merely focusing on the teachings is not sufficient. We need to go deeper in order to better see Jesus the *person* and the others involved. For example, by going beyond merely what he did and the others did, we can focus more deeply on their persons, as well as focus on the total person, and on what is actually taking place in the relationship.

The cultures of biblical times and Western culture today differ in many important ways. The individual today is seen as an independent person, with individualism the norm. The individual was not so defined in the cultures of that period in Christ's time. The individual was not seen apart from the family, kinship network or the community in which one lived. Yet, the tensions involving the individual in one's relationship to Jesus functionally still work similarly to today. That's because the tensions are relational and not circumstantial or situational, as we will see in our study. What prevents receiving Jesus, connecting with him or deeper involvement in relationship with him is common for all of us (with slight variation), whether in the 1st century or the 21st. Those issues back then are still the issues today, particularly involving how we define ourselves, how we do relationships and church. As we examine the biblical narratives of Jesus, we will also see other participants in this relationship who were much like we are today. In that sense we can put ourselves in their shoes in those accounts because that's what is happening in our relationship with him today.

This process is forcefully revealed in the early disciples' relationship with Jesus. One particular interaction stands out to illustrate this; I comment it on here, with further examination of their relationship to come later.

As Jesus was preparing to complete his earthly ministry, he openly shared vital words with his disciples, particularly for their life ahead (see John 13-17). Since they had been with Jesus intensely for three years, there are certain assumptions at this point which could reasonably be made about these disciples: their faith in Jesus, their commitment and sacrifice to follow him. For the most part they seemed to demonstrate these. And it would be reasonable to think that they also knew Jesus fairly well by this time. But is it

really correct to say that the disciples *knew* Jesus at this point? The answer is revealed in their interaction (read John 14:1-11) when Jesus clarified and challenged their faith. Let's examine this interaction.

Jesus: "Do not let your hearts be troubled ... you know the way to the place where I am going" (14:1-4).

When Jesus said "you know the way," he used the word "know" (Gk. *oida*)[2] which means to intuitively know, to be acquainted or familiar with based on one's intimate knowledge of the subject. Jesus was basing their knowledge on what they should have experienced in intimate relationship with him – a deeper epistemology. Thomas responded to Jesus in a way most of us probably would.

Thomas: "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (v.5)

Is this a perfectly reasonable response? Before you might be too quick to reprimand Thomas for not knowing *the way*, think about it. How can anyone know the *way* to a place if they don't first know *where* the place itself is? So, Thomas asked a reasonable question, a valid, correct one, that is, correct based on how we usually think—conventional epistemology, not a deeper epistemology Jesus pointed to. Jesus built on his first words with the well-known words.

Jesus: "I am the way ... If you really knew me, you would know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (vv.6,7).

Notice where Jesus sharpens their focus: on his person ("*I* am the way"), not on a place and some mode or mental directions to it. Then, he implied that they had come to know, experience (Gk. *ginosko*) the truth of God because it was contained in his person – plus made the bold statement that they had seen the Father. Like many of us, Philip was eager to "see" the Father.

Philip: "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us" (v.8).

Does his request have any similar sense to the Jews asking for a sign? Well, I'm sure we have all asked God at some time, in effect, to "show us." But, like our requests, Philip's request was based on conventional epistemology also. In one sense these are reasonable requests. Yet such knowledge we would gain from having these requests fulfilled is not sufficient to provide us with the fuller understanding of the truth of God that includes the heart, as well as to provide us with the experience of God so vital in our relationship with him. That's why in response to Philip's request – in the same manner he often responds to

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[2] Greek and Hebrew word studies used in this study are taken from the following sources: Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* 3 vols (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce Waitke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980); Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1981); Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible*, (Chattanooga: AMG Publ., 1996).

our such requests—Jesus returned the focus to his person.

Jesus: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (v.9).

Why does Jesus keep returning the focus to his *person*? Because the person of Jesus is so intimately connected to his Father, both relationally and ontologically (cf. Jn.10:38b), that the transmission of deep knowledge about one to the other is accomplished in the relational context of this intimate relational process (cf. Jn.12:45). For the disciples to truly know and experience the Father required their intimate connection with Jesus in this relational process. That's why Jesus so openly shared his person and his words with them. Yet, Jesus understood that something was missing from the disciples even though he had been involved with them and shared with them from his heart those past three years. Note his frustration and sadness.

Jesus: "Don't you know me, Philip...? How can you say, 'show us the Father'?" (v.9)

If I could paraphrase his words, Jesus would say: "I've been opening the deepest part of my heart to you all this time and you still don't *know* me? I shared with you my intimacy with my Father so you could experience him also, but you keep us at arms length from you. You won't let us get close to you. As much as I've loved you, you still don't trust me!"

So, the disciples clearly were not deeply connecting with Jesus and, as a result, they didn't *know* him. Whether it was because of their thinking or because of their way of doing relationships, the disciples did not experience all which Jesus made available to them. They would need to change—to be transformed. But, then, that's what Jesus was to go to the cross for. Just as he would save them *from the old*, he came equally to save them *to the new*. The *new* is what he vulnerably brought to them to intimately experience in his person and words.

We will go further into the dynamics of their relationship later in this study. But as their relationship demonstrates here, any involvement with Jesus which depends only on conventional epistemology or on merely *doing* things usually becomes involvement somewhat distant from our heart. That distance increasingly separates us from our true humanity and from the longing in our heart to experience him. This heart is created in the image of the God of heart and is made for intimate relationship with himself. To practice our faith without engaging this relational process then becomes primarily an intellectual exercise. Like the early disciples, such faith does not make relational connection with the person Jesus to really know him.

This means in order to fully understand this person Jesus and his words, as well as ourselves, we need to start ***thinking relationally***. For some this may mean an uncomfortable paradigm shift; if part of postmodern thought truly includes this shift toward intimacy, then we would do well to learn from this aspect of such thinking. If a so-called quest by Generation X for something deeper in life truly exists, this generation especially would learn from Jesus. For all of us **this means specifically focusing on the relational process and understanding *relational messages*.** The *relational messages* in any interaction basically are about one or all of the following (made verbally or non-verbally, directly or indirectly, usually implied in the message):

(1) What is the other person communicating about you, how they see you or feel about you?
(2) What is the other person saying about their relationship with you, how they see it or feel about it?
(3) What is that person saying about their own self?

These relational messages become very important for our deeper understanding of Jesus Christ and for our experience in our relationship with God.

There is so much which God designed, plans and desires for us to experience about him, life and being together. It's not enough, as far as God is concerned, for us to define all this merely in beliefs and values, propositions or systems of theology, no matter how much of the truth it reflects. Likewise, it must frustrate God to see us exercise this truth in limited or selective parts of our total person by which, for example, we may be only stirred in our minds but not touched in our hearts. This frequently happens during formal theological study, as it did for me; but it also happens during the course of everyday Christian living, for example, in personal Bible study.

Those who take Jesus seriously realize there are imperatives in his teachings to his followers. Generally, we tend to focus on different imperatives and do not always agree if a teaching is imperative. We also give different priorities to his imperatives. Whatever imperative we practice, it is important to realize one imperative from Jesus which is fundamentally necessary for all the others. This is the *relational imperative* by which all the other imperatives need to be undertaken. This imperative clearly and strongly emerges from his person and words, as we will see in this study.

This imperative of the relational process provides the context and the process for the others, indeed for relationship with God. Our tendency is to make the situation the context over the relationship. We are also influenced and controlled more by circumstances than by the relational process. **To think relationally means to make the relationship the context, and thus focus on persons and the relationship**. This helps us make aspects of the Christian life more functional as real relational experiences rather than as practices of merely doing something which often become routine and even ends in themselves. Faith, for example, is not something we have and do, it is the exercise of trust we vulnerably give to God in intimate relationship. Faith as well as grace are absolutely necessary for ongoing intimate connection with God, yet they easily become more like concepts to us with little relational significance. These, along with others like truth, eternal life, spirituality, fellowship, even church, need to be understood in the relational context and put into practice by the relational process for us to have deep connection and substantive experience with God. Without the relational process our practices have no relational significance to God. If they don't to him, how much can they have for us—and for others?

God wants so much more for us, he has so much more for us to receive and experience in life with him, as well as to share with others. Proverbs tell us "to *guard* (i.e., observe, watch, inspect) our heart, for it affects everything we do" (Prov. 4:23 NLT). To paraphrase this: "be aware of your heart, attend to it and deal with it because your heart issues are brought into everything you do and influence how you are." So, we are challenged in these days, challenged by him relationally to open our*self* fully to *the Word made flesh.*

Jesus, we need new eyes to see your person, and we also need new ears to hear your words. Free us from the old *in us and open the eyes and ears of our heart to the* new. *We want to experience more of you—you, our Lord and our God!*

Evangelicals, Spirituality and Practice

I think it can be accurately said that evangelical theology formulates and articulates the Christian mind but it does not usually touch and express the Christian heart. This is partly understandable because evangelicalism in the 20th century emerged as an apologetic response to liberalism and its dependence on rationalism from the Enlightenment. But there is a serious gap here, the deficiency of which is not so much quantitative (regarding truth, though theological problems exist) as it is qualitative (the actual practice of our beliefs). The whole issue of *understanding* Jesus and the matter of *knowing* him are only secondarily related to his miraculous deeds and objective information about him. They were not the primary and direct areas which resulted in understanding and knowing Christ during his earthly life. Despite Thomas' experiences (see Jn.20:24-29), Jesus said that relational connection through intimate trust is what fully satisfies (*makarios*, 20:29b). This relational context was clearly brought out in John 14 as Jesus defined this deeper epistemology to Philip and Thomas.

Evangelicals still labor in a bias for the intellect. But without the relational context, apologetics, for example, has little significance. Without the relational connection with Jesus, apologetics has no meaning. Biases and a closed mind prevent that connection, as rationalism in our time and persons seeking signs in Christ's time illustrate. But even an open mind without heart will not yield the relational connection necessary to understand and know Christ. Even his disciples demonstrated that.

Postmodernists say "So what!" to our apologetics. While we may question their relativism, they may look for the significance of our beliefs. The postmodernist tells us to "Show me the experience!" in our faith, and we may have little more than information to give. It will be valuable for us to examine the significance of our Christian vocabulary in relation to our experience. What in fact is a reality in our experience or only has virtual sense? When we seek this kind of understanding, I suggest that we need to immerse ourselves in our relationship with him and engage him in the relational process in order to pursue the relational significance of our practices.

This qualitative deficiency in our everyday Christian practice takes us back to the original biblical issue of justification by faith or by works. As our study proceeds, we may be surprised by the areas of our practice which are in tension or conflict with the person and words of Jesus Christ. And the main reason any practice of ours would be in conflict with Christ is that it essentially (even though unintentionally) becomes a form of self-justification. Such practice does not change our theological position on grace and faith but it does effectively change our relational position with God and with others. I will develop this later in terms of how we basically define our person and how this diminishes our relationship with God (particularly in our relational messages and trusting him) and how it affects our relationships with others (especially in our loving).

The deeper appreciation of the person and words of Christ has always involved

the pursuit of authentic spirituality. Because of the current popularity of the term "spirituality," we need to understand that not all spirituality is authentic. I don't consider any spirituality apart from biblical authority to be valid; it may be useful for an individual for certain purposes but not valid as a basis for one's life. Furthermore, I don't hesitate to say that it is not automatic for Christian spirituality to be reliably authentic, nor, for that matter, substantive in its practice. Spiritual authenticity is rooted in the biblical person and words of Christ and its substance emerges from the relational experience of intimate involvement with him.

There is a wonderful movement among biblical Christians (particularly evangelicals) that has rediscovered biblical spirituality. This is resulting in the experience of a deeper, more authentic spirituality. Biblical spirituality has always existed in one form or another since the time of Jesus Christ. This specific rediscovery of Christian spirituality and spiritual formation engages various aspects and disciplines (e.g., contemplation, forms of prayer, *lectio divina*, fasting) which I will not cover in this study. There are many good resources available for that purpose.

Though some may place our discussion in the area of contemplation and practicing the presence of God, what I seek to do in relation to any practice of biblical spirituality is provide the relational context and process necessary to maximize the practice of those disciplines. This is important in order for these practices to ongoingly provide intimate connection with God and not merely become exercises of limited experiences, however valid. These new ways (i.e., new for Protestants) of spirituality don't guarantee this intimate relational outcome for everyone; life with Christ is not merely new behaviors but the transformed life of a transformed person living in a transformed relationship. These spiritual practices also are susceptible to becoming ends in themselves – ends used as another means of self-justification. When properly discussed, the writers in this movement express this same warning.

Authentic biblical spirituality has little to do with certain methods or disciplines. But it has everything to do with our hearts and the function of our hearts in relationship with the heart of God. As Jesus revealed, we cannot have biblical *spirit*(uality) without involving our heart; and we can't have *authentic* spirituality without honesty, that is, being vulnerable with our true self. God is this way and he is this way in relation to us. So, God looks for the same in those deeply involved with him, as we will see later in John 4:24. This "honesty of our heart" is basic to the grace Jesus brought, and it is fundamental in practicing our faith in him.

Yet, the area of spiritual growth can be confusing in how it's approached. For example, it is often a curious matter to me that Christians define spirituality at its core as a loving, deepening relationship with the living God but then basically focus on non-relational issues and a non-relational process. The heart dimension is focused on, but the relational dynamics are not often present or clear. In a very useful book (which I recommend) for evangelicals summarizing Christian spirituality by Bruce Demarest, he expresses:

> "Christian spirituality concerns the *shaping* of our inner beings after the *likeness* of Jesus Christ by the indwelling Spirit and the *living out of Jesus' values* in service to others" (italics mine).[3]

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[3] Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1999), p.74.

Demarest does discuss relationship but usually not the relational issues and process involved in "shaping," "likeness" and "living out." Writers on this subject, like Demarest, are either vague about relationship itself or leave it up to you to figure out the process.

If a deepening relationship with God is sought through more intimate connection with him, then we are talking about a relational process of interaction. There is nothing mystical about this relational process, even though there is certainly still some mystery about God. It's the same process which involves all our relationships; therefore, issues in how we do relationships in general certainly affect how we relate to God. This interaction operates only within the relational context and, thus, must be engaged by its participants: the God of heart, who created us in his image to be persons of heart who, in turn, must respond back with our heart to consummate the heart-to-heart connection. It's this connection, otherwise known as ***intimacy*** (defined as hearts opened to each other and coming together), that we long for in our relationships both with God and with others. It is this relational experience our hearts so deeply yearn for. This is understandable because this created relational context and process are God's design and purpose for our lives.

So, in experiencing the intimate presence of God, whether we call it *contemplation* or use the various practices associated historically with it, the only important matter here is to *experience* God intimately and to *know his* heart and person. This is the growth which can only take place in the ongoing relational context and process of God's design and purpose. The reality of this growing relationship is secured by Christ's person; the fulfillment of it is completed by the person of the Holy Spirit.

Along with the ongoing relational work of his Spirit, whatever disciplines, methods or "tools" which help us experience this deeper intimate connection with God should be valued. Whatever means helps us grow to this joyful, relational end is a valuable resource, no matter where its period in church history or what its place in church tradition. Those who use Scripture as the authoritative word from God should not be afraid to utilize the various traditions of brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before us. Yet, for any resource to remain a valuable *means* to this glorious *end*, it must be exercised within the dynamic relational interaction of our hearts coming together with the extended, vulnerable heart of God.

Ultimately, even for those who hold to Scripture, we need to develop our relational focus primarily on the Word himself in the flesh and intimately connect with the vulnerable life and words of this person Jesus. That will be the purpose of this study.

Thank you, Father, for your mercy, grace and love which further await me. Expand my mind and open my heart to receive you as never before.

Chapter 2 THE RELATIONAL CONNECTION

The Word ... made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory.
John 1:14

It takes two persons to form an interpersonal relationship. But it takes two cooperating persons to extend that relationship beyond mere form to a working relationship. Still further, it takes two willfully open persons to go from only *doing* something between them to actually making relational connection together, especially with their hearts. From our earlier discussion on John 14, the disciples didn't seem to be at this last stage yet.

Tension, Comfort Zones, Boxes

Generally, I'm not excited about meeting new persons. There's always some degree of initial tension until we can each find a comfort level in the interaction—that common ground with which we can feel comfortable. It always appears, or at least usually seems, more enjoyable to meet a friend than a complete stranger. Yet, when we're meeting someone for the first time whom we admire, respect or like, then there's excitement surrounding that encounter. Why is this different from a stranger? Because we commonly make certain positive assumptions (valid or not) about that desirable person, he or she becomes more familiar to us; we can feel more comfortable. The point to understand from these interactions is our tendency to pursue a comfort zone in relationships.

Comfort levels put constraints on relationships; some constraints, of course, are necessary and good. But for purposes of growing relationships, comfort zones put relationships in a *box.* The limitations on a relationship created by this box are under my control and, therefore, allow me to determine the relationship on my terms. Under such conditions growth is not really continuing in the relationship, though growth may appear to take place based on the quantity indicators mentioned in the first chapter. With such constraints (often imposed unintentionally or unknowingly) the other person is not able to be their complete self nor am I able to be my true self.

So, where would you put God in the above examples: someone respected, honored, liked, a friend or "stranger"? More specifically, where is Jesus? If what we're actually establishing or even pursuing in our relationship with him is merely some comfort zone, then I don't believe we're making relational connection with him.

Some of us try to put our relationship with God in a box. In various ways, mostly indirectly, we operate in this relationship on our terms. For example, we "request" of him to do something, we "ask" him to do it in a certain way or time, we even demand

responses, answers or signs. Then when God doesn't act accordingly, we either doubt his love for us, whether he's really involved with us, if we can count on him, if he's abandoned us or even go so far as to question his existence. More often than not, we're just praying for *results*. Such results are important to us as indicators of God's love, our worth or success.

These results may even be in areas of evangelism, church growth or personal Christian development. It's not that God doesn't want growth in these areas. But these results we're often praying for have more to do with our *success* than with actually trying to please God. This so-called success is the *fruit* we think we should bear. If we look at this more closely in terms of what's happening relationally between God and me, this is what we may find. Often we are moving ahead of God, are off on some related tangent or even acting independently from him. Our intention may even be to do something *for* God. But the relational fact is we are not *with* God; that is, we are either distant or separated from his presence, his person. Is God pleased, is this what Jesus came for? We will see later what his first disciples had to learn about this.

When God doesn't act in the ways we think he should (based on our desires, not Scripture), we start to get uncomfortable. For example, we are uncomfortable with God's so-called silence. We become insecure as we interpret what that silence could mean. We also become impatient or frustrated with God's timing because we are uncertain of what will happen. So, one major solution to our insecurities or fears is to try to put our relationship with God in a box where we can be in better control, where the unexpected or undesirable can be minimized. We do this by making assumptions about God to make him more comfortable for us.

A more comfortable God may mean a more manageable God, a less demanding God, a more predictable God or an even less serious God. For example, we all hold the belief that "God is love." But some also add the idea "God is nice"; therefore, this nice God would not be hard, would never say anything upsetting (e.g., that we're bad), would essentially be a great guy. This stereotyping of God, like all stereotyping, prevents us from seeing the true person.

God is not flattered by these assumptions because they are lies which cover up the truth of who he is. Such preconceived notions of ours effectively limit and constrain God in all he is and all he can do. There's no real mystery to God anymore; our assumptions or notions have made him too familiar. Yes, the tension is gone and it's comfortable in our relationship with him. But we've eliminated intimate relational connection with him. Gone also are the excitement, the anticipation, the expectation of experiencing him more and knowing what he's doing, the adventure of where he's going to take us, the deep satisfaction of being taken to the next level of life beyond which we haven't gone before or even imagined. We've put a ceiling on what we can discover.

In the box, we eliminate this about God and what we can experience in relationship with him. Whatever you want to call this arrangement, it is not a growing relationship between two persons making relational connection. God, however, will not be manipulated to be whom we try to make him. **If we want to experience ongoing and growing relational connection with God, then we need to embrace, not merely accept, tension in our relationship with him**. Tension can be positive or negative. It's negative if we anticipate a negative outcome. Tension is positive, however, when the expectation is positive, even though scary. We need to embrace tension in our

relationship with God because that's partly the experience involved in the Bible's emphasis on *fearing God.* To fear God is to acknowledge his true being and to affirm his total character (without my assumptions of familiarity). On that basis I can expect God's mercy, grace or love even though I don't measure up.

While we are embracing tension we are also foregoing the comfort zone pursuit in our relationship with God. That necessitates that we let go of our assumptions about him.

If we are willfully ready to embrace tension, to forgo pursuing a comfort zone and to let go of false assumptions, then we are in a position to experience ongoing and growing relational connection with God.

Please help us, Holy Spirit, to fully connect relationally with this God who came in the flesh!

Between the Manger and the Cross

Who, then, is this *person* with whom we can form a relationship? What exactly was his part in cooperating to make our relationship more than mere form? And how did he specifically open his person to us so that we could actually make relational connection, especially with our hearts?

Our study will make initial responses here to these questions. But we should be aware of additional responses throughout this study which will supplement our understanding of the vulnerable life and words of this person Jesus. At this stage we must start with his vulnerable introduction: the incarnation.

Don't let familiarity with this word—incarnation—keep you from deeper involvement. We are talking about the incarnation of God. Allow him to come out of the box and let the Word become living flesh. Set aside this propositional truth for the moment. If we're not just interested observers of an historical event or merely processing some information about God, then the fact of his vulnerable presence should start creating that tension discussed earlier. The tension would be natural because we have reason to be uncomfortable.

This means that we need to take Jesus out of the manger when we talk about the incarnation of God. As miraculous as his birth was, it's not the person in the manger with whom we want to make connection. That would be too comfortable! Jesus' birth tells us very important things about God which we need to understand. But to receive God's person in the incarnation as a babe in the manger is to remain in a comfort zone relationally.

In a similar way, after taking Jesus out of that manger we should not be too quick to put him on the cross. Christians have a tendency essentially to condense Jesus' life as going directly from the manger to the cross. This makes it relationally a lot easier for us, much more comfortable because in doing this we don't have to deal with the rest of this person's life and words. In so doing we can distance ourselves from the deeper relational matters, issues, outcomes and consequences which Jesus vulnerably revealed through his person and how he lived. Yes, there is so much more of this person between the manger and the cross for us to understand.

So, who is this *person*? For our initial answer we need to turn to John's gospel. I

like the way John begins because he immediately establishes for us what the incarnation is all about, whom it involved and why. John gets right to the point—the relational point of encounter—and leaves us no room to get comfortable. In other words, John, makes us tense in the beginning.

After establishing fundamental truths about his person and the fact of where he came from (John 1:1-5), John proceeds to totally discomfort us: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us..." (v.14), that is, "God has arrived in *person*, he is in the house" (to paraphrase). Wow! Neat! Cool! may be the response. But not so fast! God wasn't just in the neighborhood. He is in *my house* pursuing *me* face-to-face to look me straight in the eye. "We have seen his glory ...," John goes on to say. Wait a minute, this is not the tiny "God with us" Immanuel of the manger. This is the total "God with us" "One and Only" person complete with *glory* and full of *grace* and *truth* (Jn.1:14).

God's Glory: (1) His Being, (2) Nature and (3) Presence

Glory is one of those words whose significance gets lost in familiarity. We may be impressed with the term but how much does glory really mean to us, how much does it touch our heart? The word for glory in Hebrew (*kabod*) comes from the word "to be heavy," for example, with wealth or worthiness. To use a vernacular we might say "Jesus was *heavy*—a heavy dude."

How was Jesus *heavy*? The concept of "the glory of God" denotes the revelation of God's being, his nature and presence to us. Jesus did exactly that—revealed God's being, his nature and his presence to us. Jesus was "heavy" with God's being, nature, presence.

As John tells us, no one had distinctly seen God in their perception before (Jn.1:18). But, now, this was changed dramatically because Jesus, God in living flesh, "has made the Father known" (v.18). The word for "make known" is the English transliteration "exegesis": to relate in detail, explain, to lead out into full view. Unlike some academic task of exegesis, however, Jesus was to bring out, elaborate on and fully disclose God intimately in person for us to see openly.

The significance of the incarnation is that we now have this revelation in objective, observable substance. We don't have to assume who or how God is. Jesus objectified God for us. In direct ways Jesus provided the objective and observable basis for God, the Father and all his glory.

What is this glory Jesus revealed of God's being, nature and presence? Let's cast off our preconceived notions to keep him familiar and anticipate the answer with the excitement of meeting God in person for the first time.

As John helps us to understand in the opening verses of his gospel, God is a self-existing spirit distinct from all his creatures, who alone has life within himself and is the life-giver. And the Word is one in the same. At this point you may be thinking "OK, well yeah, that's who God is—I expected God to be something like that," without being stirred beyond the fact of this information.

This description of God is awesome in itself, yet this transcendent God is much more with regard to his being and nature. Thankfully, John didn't stop at this point to tell us about Jesus. This Jesus, who is one person in the same God, brought to us the being

and nature of God in quite different terms than described in the opening verses (1-5) above. John brings out this difference in 1:14,18. I hope our discussion of these *different terms* of God's being and nature shown openly by Jesus' person will open up the relational process for us.

(1) God's Being as Heart

Let's take a moment to reflect on Christian living. In terms of God's being, biblical Christians understand in their minds that God is not merely a cosmic force or an ethereal entity; God, of course, is a personal being, in three persons. Yet, so often many of those same Christians don't connect directly with the personal God. This may be true even while they have an active church life. Functionally, not theologically, for them God is distant or unapproachable, beyond their direct experience. God is that self-existing spirit distinct from them, and that's the way it is, that's all they know experientially.

Christ came to change this for us. In order to help us understand *how*, let's look at his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4). The significance of this exchange tells us a lot about what Jesus considered more important than social etiquette, cultural values and traditional race relations, about how he sees all of us (with added import for women), about how to share with others (e.g., for evangelism) and be involved with them with love. But for our current purpose we will limit our focus in this wonderful interaction only to Jesus revealing further this first aspect of his glory, God's being.

As the interaction between Jesus and the woman turned to a discussion on religion and the place to be involved with God (4:23,24), Jesus suddenly tells her that this has all changed (v.23). Why has it changed? Because "God is spirit" (v.24). How is it now possible? Because "I who speak [am now here to openly show you that spirit]" (v.26).

We've always known that the God of Scripture does not have a physical being. Though he is described figuratively by various physical body parts to help us understand, God is a spiritual being. And we know that we have to relate to him spiritually. But there's a vagueness about what that means which often leaves us feeling that we're not spiritual enough to consistently connect with God. So, we conclude that we have to do something *more* or *better* in order to connect with God. Christ came to change this for us.

What is Jesus saying about God's *being as spirit* that differs from the common practice of so many Christians? In telling us that the Father seeks this spirit from us to be involved with his spirit (v.23), Jesus explains that this spirit is a *must* for us to be involved with God (v.24). The Greek word for "must" (*dei*) means: must, necessary by the nature of things, in contrast to "must" (*opheilo*) merely as an obligation. What exactly is this spirit which is necessary and intrinsic to God's spirit in order to be involved with him?

The answer is given to us both by the emphasis in Jesus' words (e.g., Mt.15:17-20) as well as throughout the Bible (see Deut.4:29; 1 Sam.16:7; Ps.51:16,17; Isa.29:13; Acts 15:8-10; Rom.2:28,29). Basically, this common emphasis throughout Scripture is the distinction between the outer person and the inner, the distinction between what we are doing in outward behavior and what truly exists inwardly, and the important difference between these two because God seeks only one thing. That one thing which God seeks and all these verses focus on is *heart*: the core of one's being which includes deep thought, feelings, desires, affections, passion—essentially, our inner person. That's

why Jesus, in another context, repeated God's words in Isaiah about worship and the necessity (because it is intrinsic to God's spirit) of heart (Mt.15:8).

Heart is the dimension of God's being which Jesus openly brought to us. In and through Christ, the "God is spirit" becomes our "God of heart." This is the aspect of God's glory in his very being with which we can connect. Why is this possible? It goes back to why God seeks heart (spirit) from us to be involved with his heart (spirit) and why our heart is absolutely necessary by the nature of things. The God of heart (this self-existing spirit distinct from all his creatures, who alone has life within himself and is the life-giver), this God whose heart is now openly before us, *made us in his image!* That image, which is inherent to God and which he seeks as being intrinsic to him, is *heart*. The God of heart made us *persons of heart.*

This is so exciting to me. Since the God of heart made us persons of heart, then this is our potential—in *what* God is and how he made us. The potential of my heart is not in my genetic make-up or because of environmental influences. The potential of my heart is the very heart of God! At the same time, the fact that God has openly revealed his heart to me because he wants to be involved with my heart creates mixed feelings. While I have this part of me in common with God by which we can make relational connection, the tension further rises with this realization.

How can this connection with God become a reality beyond just an intellectual belief or practice to a relational experience of my heart? Because Jesus the Christ came! Yet, remember, that he came in *different terms* than we may have been thinking. Jesus brought us the heart of God, and Christ in turn redeemed (freed) our hearts to be reconciled intimately with the Father's heart. But Jesus didn't reveal God for us to contain in propositions, or to reduce to values, ways or methods. Again, in terms of relationship that would be the easier thing for us to do.

Jesus revealed God's heart in a totally relational way, in a distinct relational context, for a relational purpose. In his closing prayer for his disciples before his death, Jesus clearly told his Father that "I have revealed you to them" (Jn.17:6). The word "reveal" (Gk. *phaneroo*) means to make manifest, known, show openly. This word is not merely the same as its synonym *apokalypto* (reveal, remove a lid) which refers only to the object revealed. *Phaneroo* also refers to the persons to whom the revelation is made. God's revelation in Jesus was not an end in itself but was totally for this relational purpose: to openly show *us* God and the Father with whom we can now intimately connect and have a relationship, just as he has. And he didn't just reveal all this to us but he also showed us in his own life what was necessary and important to make this intimate relational connection with God. That's why it's so important to understand his glory beyond mere information, and to embrace it relationally from him.

Before you continue, take some quiet moments to reflect on *God's being as heart* whom Jesus brought to you.

(2) God's Nature as Intimately Relational

The next part of God's glory Jesus revealed involves God's nature. Besides various aspects of God's greatness, theologians define the essential life of God as that of *fellowship*. They come to that conclusion because of what they see of the trinity of God and what takes place between Father, Son and Spirit. This fellowship they share in

together God then offered to Adam as his created purpose. This was further offered to Eve to share in together and extend beyond themselves as the purpose of the human race. Thus, God created us for fellowship—with him and with each other. But is this fellowship merely some structural arrangement by which we go about living out our lives?

Fellowship is another one of those familiar terms for Christians which has lost its significance. God created us for fellowship with him and with each other, but is what we define as fellowship today and how we practice fellowship the same purpose he created us for? Granted our imperfect condition until we get to heaven, but if this is all that God planned, then there is a serious flaw in the plan. Something is missing or dissatisfying.

What is missing is not *fellowship as activity*. Lord knows, we have a lot of activity. What is lost in our fellowship is *fellowship as relationship*. The substance of fellowship is relationship. We need to grasp this relationship to understand the true meaning of fellowship.

Jesus objectifies this relationship so we could actually see this relationship in the flesh. In other words, he openly shows us what it means to have a relationship and to practice it. The "One and Only" in John 1:14,18 (also translated as "the only begotten Son") is the translation of a word meaning "unique, only one of its kind." This term is used to show the very unique, intimate relationship of Jesus, the Son of God, to God the Father "who is at the Father's side" (v.18). Jesus was in the relational position of greatest possible intimacy with the Father. And he came directly from the intimate Father's side to openly show him to us. In order to objectify the "God is spirit" and the relational connection possible with this self-existing spirit, Jesus lived in the flesh this ongoing relationship with his Father and then offered this same relationship to us (see Jn.17:21,23,26).

The initial taste of this relationship between Jesus and his Father is revealed in words from the Father immediately after Jesus' baptism: "This is My Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Mt.3:17). How many children yearn to hear these direct explicit words from their earthly dads? These words from his Father tell us a lot about *what* God is. This "God is spirit" is indeed "the God of heart." But those words also show us *how* God is. This God of heart is also very relational—intimately relational. This is God's nature!

I think the full substance of this revelation came at the transfiguration (see Mt.17:1-13). I always had difficulty understanding in my heart the significance of the transfiguration of Jesus other than as a highlight event of his life. Yet, the transfiguration seems to mark the complete transformation of Jesus in revealing God's glory (i.e., his being, nature and presence) in its fullness.

In this vital moment, the glory of God is expressed in Christ (Mt.17:2), and he is joined by Moses and Elijah (v.3). Then the *nature* of God's glory emerges as his Father speaks to him with words similar to his baptism (v.5). Apart from its appearance as some heavenly summit meeting, this marks the stage at which God reveals himself not just in his deeds (i.e., miracles) but more fully in this deeply intimate relational way. Here we see the intimate connection of the Father and his son, that is, at least to the extent we humans are able to take in (see v.6).

But note this important fact also in closely taking this all in. The Father didn't share his words only with his son but he also shared with his disciples (and with us):

"...Listen to him!" And just as the Father extended himself to make relational connection with them, Jesus also extended himself in this relational context to his disciples for their relational experience. He provided them this experience when he physically reached down to touch the disciples in their fear (vv.6-8). The word for "touch" (Gk. *hapto*) is not just about physical contact but touch with involvement and for the purpose to influence, to affect.

How many of us long for this touch, even human touch? Touch in Western cultures has become so strongly associated with sex that we're tense about it. Christians have compounded this tension. Otherwise, the infrequency of touch in general in all our relationships has made us uncomfortable with it. Yet, touch is so vital to basic interpersonal relationships that the absence of touch, for example, in the formative years of childhood, has a major negative impact on that person's development. What about the formative years of a new Christian's development? Has the absence of experiencing God's "touch" been one of the major reasons for stunted Christian growth?

It is impossible to experience the touch of a self-existing spirit that remains transcendent. It is also difficult to experience the touch of a personal "God is spirit" who does not extend himself to make relational connections. But Jesus came to *touch* us with the person of God in relational connection: **to touch our hearts with the heart of God in intimate relationship**.

Now as we closely take in Jesus' transfiguration, the tension may really be rising. The thought of being touched by God's intimate presence! This is getting uncomfortable and makes us susceptible to seek our comfort zone. Not surprisingly, the disciples experienced this tension also (see Mk. 9:6; Lk.9:33,34). But I think Peter also sought out his comfort zone in wanting to put up some tents.

As the disciples witnessed all this, Peter tried to constrain God's glory to a *place* by suggesting to Jesus his desire to erect tents. That is, Peter wanted to limit this relational connection to a place. Compare this to Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman about religion and the place to worship God in John 4:19-24. The idea of a tent is related to the Tabernacle (also Tent of Meeting), the place in Old Testament times where God connected with his people. So, unlike the Samaritan woman, Peter here missed this crucial connection of God's glory now being revealed to him in the *person* of Jesus. Peter's God was still in a box.

When we stop to reflect on this, it is clear and makes perfect sense. **The God of heart can be properly expressed and fully revealed only in this relational context of intimate relationship (by hearts coming together).** The glory of God couldn't be adequately reflected in nor limited to a place (like the Tabernacle), or even to his great deeds (i.e., miracles). This could only be fulfilled in *person*, the person of Jesus who now goes forth openly with his heart to make intimate connections.

God's nature is relational, intimately relational. This *being* of God (as God of heart) and his *nature* (as intimately relational) were the main reasons for the disciples' tension. Mark's account of the transfiguration tells us that Peter didn't know what else to say except suggest the tents because they were scared (Mk.9:6). Like many of us, Peter said something unimportant because it was easier than opening himself to a deeper relational connection. Peter was not alone among the disciples in this way of doing relationships, as we discussed in Chapter 1. Yet, Peter was the key representation of how the disciples defined themselves and, therefore, how they did relationships. We will

examine more of Peter's life later.

Since God's nature is relational, then everything God is, says and does is relational; and this is how he wants us to relate to him. This is specifically what may be problematic for us in experiencing God. Ever since Adam and Eve introduced negative relational practices in the garden, relationships have been difficult, especially so for us today. Even in cultures which *think relationally* more than Western ones, it is still difficult to actually *be relational*, not to just think it. We are just not used to being relational. Life has become that way. Until we stop substituting other ways for being relational and practicing deeper relationships, our experiences in those relationships will always be limited.

Why did the Father tell us to "listen to him"? How we answer this question largely depends on what kind of God we have or on how we perceive him. If he is a sovereign King, then he's probably the lawmaker whose laws we shouldn't break; so, that's what Christ can help us with—the law. Or the hard Father and following the rules. Maybe it's merely the Creator and having values, meaning in life. Your perceptions may only focus on the truth of God, so you listen to Christ as God's truth in order to have a set of beliefs you can feel confident in. A Guide or Helper is also useful; so we'll "listen" to Christ to help us do our own thing better. The focus in all these is on what Christ *did* (even on the cross) and/or his teachings. But there's something missing here.

What did the Father tell us? Listen to *him*, the person—not what he did, not even his teachings. In this study I choose to say "the person and *words* of Jesus" instead of "the person and *teachings* of Jesus" because *words* involve communication in a relationship. The focus on communication must include the *person* who said the words. This is vital. So often the discussions of the teachings of Jesus ignore the person and reduce his words to propositions, values or ways.

To ignore the person of Jesus is to overlook the person of God. In so doing, you may have truth in hand, but you do not have God in your embrace. Jesus came to reveal God's glory. But that glory was totally about the person, his heart and his intimate relational nature. Once again, this was all not an end in itself, the incarnation was not merely an objective presentation of God. Jesus came to openly show *us* his Father; "I have revealed you *to them"* (Jn.17:6, italics mine). And Jesus' person and words were for us to see the Father, to hear him, touch him, embrace him, so that we could also experience our relationship with the Father just as his son has. He didn't reveal this to us to make us jealous or to show us how favored he is; he wants us to experience the same love from the Father as he does (Jn.17:26).

When the reality of his crucifixion was close and Jesus predicted his death, he vulnerably shared his troubled feelings (Jn.12:27,28). In that intimate moment with his disciples and his Father, the words of the Father are heard clearly once again (Jn.12:29). (See Gethsemane for another more intimate time, Mt.26:36-42). Jesus said that the Father's words were for our benefit, not his because he must have received his Father's response directly to his heart (Jn.12:30). Earlier, during the raising of Lazarus, Jesus thanked his Father for hearing his prayer (Jn.11:41). Jesus knew his Father always hears him, so, in this moment also, Jesus said this for our benefit—that we could see their relationship (11:42). And this same relationship with the Father is available to us.

It is not enough for Christians to believe in the personal God; we have to experience him in our heart. This means we have to enter the relational context of this

relational God. **To know this God of ours beyond mere information is to engage God's *person* within the ongoing intimate relationship made possible by Jesus**. It is not sufficient just to read about Jesus and to observe him – no matter how faithfully we do that each day. It is also not enough even to follow him, as the disciples were awakened to by Jesus (from our discussion on John 14 in Chap.1).

To truly know God's person—or any person—is a function only of relationship. That is, it depends on deeper relational connection of the ongoing relationship in which the hearts of the participants are opened to each other. Such an experience doesn't happen mysteriously or as an outcome over time. Such intimate connection by its nature can only be experienced within the relational context. That's what Jesus clearly brought us.

We began this chapter stating that it takes *two persons* to form an interpersonal relationship. Here in Jesus is the person of God. I also said it takes *two cooperating persons* to extend that relationship. Well, Jesus didn't just come into our midst and then turn passive. Jesus actively presented his person to others and pursued them with his heart; in other words, he did his part for the relationship. Maybe this is more cooperation from God's person than we want—that is, more cooperation than we want to give and be responsible for in our person. To extend our relationship with him beyond external form requires actively working on the relationship.

The reality is, however, that Jesus is now in the house—our house—and he's looking for us. It's time to get nervous if we're not used to deeper relational connection. So, what are we going to do? Literally and figuratively, do we quickly start doing something to keep busy while he's here so that we don't have to present ourselves to him; do we start cleaning our house or change our clothes or make dinner for him in order to make ourselves more presentable; or do we hide in the "closet," maybe even leave the house, until he's gone? Or, in contrast, are we going to come and sit at his feet like Mary did (see Lk.10:38-42)? This is what it means *to follow Jesus*. Will we embrace him in our heart intimately like the prostitute in Luke 7:36-50? This is what is involved *to know Christ.*

(3) God's Presence as Vulnerable

In the beginning of this chapter, I said further that it takes *two willfully open persons* to go from merely doing things together to having an intimate relationship. Jesus' willful openness takes in the third and last aspect of God's glory: his presence with us. How did Jesus reveal God's presence with us, along with God's being (as God of heart) and his nature (as intimately relational)?

The earthly presence of the Word obviously expressed the willing choice of the son in response to his Father, as Jesus consistently affirmed. It wasn't out of obligation nor merely the dutiful choice of a son. When the Word became flesh, God's person came to us on intimate terms. He wasn't detached from us emotionally; he didn't keep his distance from us or protect himself from being affected by us; and he didn't come in all his superiority (power, privilege and prestige). As John tells us, he came "full of grace and truth" (Jn.1:14).

In the Old Testament, the terms for "grace and truth" are usually translated "unfailing love and faithfulness." "Love and faithful" are always joined together naturally (for example, in the Psalms and by God in Ex.34:6) because they involve and reflect

God's covenant commitment to his people. *Unfailing love* in Hebrew denotes "befriending." So, unfailing love tells us not only *what* God is but also, more significantly for us, *how* he is. That is, as the God of heart who is intimately relational, God made his presence vulnerable to us in taking the initiative in Christ in order to make connection with us. Yet, vulnerability is no single choice or easy act even for God. Why was this vulnerable for God?

John initially described how Christ was not received by his own—those supposedly closest to God rejected his person (John 1:11). Here again we need to *think relationally* about this. This rejection was not a process of reason or rational work but what resulted from direct relational interaction. The Word was more than the concept of God but the very vulnerable presence of God. And they rejected his person right to his face.

But God also relationally engaged all of humanity through the person of Jesus. Even after becoming a Christian, our ongoing response to his relational acts of unfailing love (grace) involves first and foremost responses or reactions (which include "no response") to his person (God's being, nature and presence), not to some teachings, beliefs or propositions. God's person makes himself vulnerable to all our reactions to him: ignore, make less important, keep distant or hide, reject, be indifferent. Any person's heart, including God's, is affected by such reaction to their person. That's why we don't like to make ourselves vulnerable, so we usually don't. But God does.

Whatever our limitations and deficiencies may be, let's not project them onto God. Jesus came *full* of unfailing love and faithfulness, so his vulnerability to us is his ongoing willing choice. *Love* does this; it makes oneself vulnerable to the one being loved. *Unfailing love* makes oneself vulnerable no matter what the other's reaction is.

God's person here in the flesh not only opened him to our reactions but, more importantly, it also exposed him to our sin. We know that sin creates hostility with God (Rom.8:7; James 4:4) because he hates it. The holy God also can't come into contact with sin. We tend to oversimplify this relational conflict and paradox with theological jargon that effectively minimizes the relational significance of God's vulnerable presence with us. How is it that we correctly get the propositional truth yet don't seem to connect well with the intimately relational God of heart who makes himself vulnerable to us? We need to let God out of our boxes so that we can intimately experience *him* as he actually *is*

In the midst of this hostility God takes the initiative relationally to us, extends his favor to us (grace) with his vulnerable presence and, then, pursues us actively to *befriend* us (unfailing love). He does this because of his covenant commitment to us, showing us that he doesn't break his word. Jesus expanded the meaning of *friend* to *intimate friend* sharing everything with one another (Jn.15:15)—a relational privilege not even someone who merely serves Jesus can experience. Furthermore, his *faithfulness* (also rendered as "truth" in relation to God throughout the Bible) means someone you can count on, you can trust to do what he says. This seals his covenant commitment to us.

Wow! Put "unfailing love" and "faithfulness" together and we see the glory of God. **In Jesus' person, we experience *the vulnerable presence* of God—**the third aspect of God's glory along with his being and nature.

With God's vulnerable presence before us in his being (as God of heart) and his nature (as intimately relational), the glory of God in its fullness is now presented to us in Jesus. Going back to the transfiguration, Moses represented God's revelations to him at

Mt. Sinai and the old covenant of the law; Elijah represented God's revelations at Horeb and all the prophets (who pointed to the Messiah). Here God fulfills all this in Jesus and reveals his being, his nature and presence directly in the *person* of his son. And though God's glory has been directly and relationally revealed, his *full* glory has yet to be revealed. No one can see God's full glory and live. But that's the potential we can keep growing in until the full glory of God is revealed at his second coming. That's when we will be able to completely take in the God of heart and experience the *whole* intimate relationship for which we are created.

The Word becoming flesh objectified all this by establishing the relational context for us to see. God's glory cannot be put in a box and constrained to a place (like the Tabernacle) nor limited to his deeds (miracles). **His glory is the quality of God we can only see in this relational context**. By vulnerably revealing the intimate God of heart, Jesus also clearly set in motion the relational process which restored (redeemed and reconciled) relationships to God's original design and purpose. This is fundamental to God. If we fail to understand this God person Jesus, then we will practice our faith with constraints and limitations on the relational heart of God. Not only will this displease the relational God (as he complained to various churches in Rev.2 and 3) but it will also not be deeply satisfying for us.

God didn't come to us in Jesus' person merely to give us charity and to do good deeds for us. Actually, if that's what it came down to, except for the cross, Jesus really didn't have to go through all that trouble. Thankfully, instead, Jesus befriended us in intimate relational connection. Even more so, Jesus took us into his family for intimate relationship, not as guests but as his Father's very own children (Jn.1:12). This has been the Father's deep desire for us from the very beginning (Rom.8:29). This is what he promised and this is what he does—because as Jesus revealed, that's *what* and *how* God is. Awesome!

Thank you, Father! Thank you, Jesus!

Making a Connection

But, wait, before we can honestly thank him, we have to examine the extent to which we have actually received the *person* Jesus. We know who didn't receive him (Jn.1:11). But who actually *received* Jesus? The word John uses in verse 12 for *receive* (Gk: *lambano*) means to take in hand, embrace, listen to, trust, and follow as a teacher. This means that "to receive Jesus" includes discipleship, which (despite the various ways discipleship has come to be defined) also needs to involve deep relationship—intimate relationship.

We are used to emphasizing the "believe" part of the oft-used John 1:12, not the "receive" portion. Just merely "believing," or giving intellectual assent to Jesus, isn't sufficient to *receive* him. To *receive* is a relational act. How we commonly connote "believe" today is not the cooperation from our person needed to extend our relationship beyond form to a functioning relationship. Even if we've initially opened our heart to him to establish that relationship, that does not automatically tell us our heart remains open today. When I first became a Christian at age twenty, my heart was open and my faith

somewhat childlike. Then my heart got displaced by the pursuit of the intellectual knowledge of God. It took years to rediscover my heart and restore it to my relationship with God. The process continues.

Relationship is a dynamic, ongoing process. That means what we did in the relationship yesterday does not necessarily indicate that we are continuing to exercise the same today.

Let's pause at this point to reflect on the *relational messages* (review them on p.7) in John 1:14. We've been discussing a lot about "what God is saying about himself": who he is, what and how he is. But, notice the mystery about him, his resolve to hang in, what's important to him, how he feels about himself, and his passion to sacrifice. (See Phil.2:6-8 for help.)

Now, what has he been saying about our relationship with him: how does he see this relationship and how do you think he feels about it? This particular relational message speaks to why Jesus went through all that trouble in order to come to us. It tells us the strength of God's feelings for the relationship so that he persists to take the initiative to pursue us no matter what.

We may not necessarily pay attention to relational messages. In fact, we often are unaware of them or just ignore them. Yet, they are given in all communication. As noted earlier, in biblical times the individual did not have the focus Western cultures of today give to the individual. A larger group (e.g., family, community, village, city) was always more important than the individual, so individual issues (prominent for us today) were lost in collective life.[1] Nevertheless, however people live due to their social structure or culture, ***relational messages are always being communicated***. This is basic to all interpersonal relationships, in accordance with God's relational design and purpose for life.

Likewise, the relational heart of God is always giving relational messages, which we need to receive to further know him and experience him. The remaining relational message is the most problematic for us. What is he saying about *me*: how he sees me and feels about me (Jn.1:14)? "What he says about me" can be problematic because this is the area that creates the most tension for us. That tension can be over both positive and negative messages about *me*. Since John 1:14 doesn't have negative messages, what are the positive messages God is saying about me?

Take the time to quietly listen to him.

Learning Our Part in the Relationship

How do we relate to this person Jesus who, in God's glory, came full of unfailing love and faithfulness? Initially, I think we can learn how to relate to God from another friend of his—Moses. His interaction with God in Exodus 33 and 34 is considered classic in religious tradition. But, in reality, I think it is an example of making deeper relational

[1] Read *The New Testament World* by Bruce J. Malina for detailed discussion on helpful insights from cultural anthropology; 3rd edition (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

connection between friends (33:11).

Obviously, Moses feared the Lord almighty and never reduced God down as an equal. Yet, notably, his interaction with God was not a formal, polite, passive, routine encounter. This wasn't a typical quiet time where Moses was there just to listen to God and do what God wanted. Moses went to the tent for direct, intimate connection with God, "face to face" (33:11)—though not the literal "face of God" (33:20). Then, he shared his thoughts and feelings rather boldly with God (33:12). To paraphrase for today: "Listen God, you've been telling me to do this but I feel alone and that you're leaving me hanging. You also tell me how much you like me but you seem stand-offish." Moses goes on to say he wants to know God in person (v.13) and that no substitute, not even an angel (v.2), is enough to make up for God's personal presence. Now this is openly sharing oneself with God and putting the relationship on the line.

God responded to Moses' objection. "My presence will go with you" (v.14). The word for presence involved the face or the obvious front of the person; in other words, his direct and intimate presence. Paraphrasing Moses' response: "Good, and if you don't follow through, then don't tell me to do what you asked" (v.15). "How else will anyone know we're close friends unless we're being together?" (v.16). And, amazingly, Moses asks God the rhetorical question "what else will distinguish me" (v.16). What defined Moses is not what he *did*, as great as it was. He was defined by who he was in his *being* with God, not his *doing*. Like Moses, what distinguishes all of us is God's presence—the intimate relationship between God and his people being together, openly sharing together.

But Moses didn't stop there. "Now show me your glory" (v.18). He wanted all of God in person—nothing less would do, and certainly no substitutes for God personally and directly. In what is rightly described as awesome, God responded to Moses (33:19-34:7). Yet, don't be distracted by the images of what happened. The relational God responds directly and intimately to Moses to reveal his glory, though only partially. (The full revelation of God's glory is fulfilled in the person Jesus.) Moses' direct, open and honest sharing of his thoughts and feelings with God help us know how to connect and relate to God's person.

It's hard to imagine having greater access to God than Moses had. Yet, his access to the perceptions of God which God made available to him were limited. Can you imagine needing to go into a tent or up to a mountain every time you wanted to be with God? Of course, Moses' experiences were awesome and very stimulating. Christians today tend to look for more sensory stimulation or mountaintop experiences to encourage their faith rather than deeper, ongoing relational involvement directly with God. But this is what Jesus makes available to us, this deeper access to God in which our experience of him is taken to a higher level than Moses'.

What the person of Jesus did by his cooperation and willful openness is only one half of the relational equation. The other half of this relationship is what we do as a person. When Jesus came to openly show God's glory to the original witnesses, they could not just passively "see" and "receive" him (as we discussed earlier about *receive* in Jn.1:12). That is, they were not able to see God's glory if they were passive observers of Jesus.

When John said "we have seen his glory" (Jn.1:14), I don't think he was referring

to just anyone or everyone who laid eyes on Jesus. The word John used here for "seen" (Gk: *theaomai*) is different than the word "seen" (Gk: *horao*, to see distinctly, actually perceive something) used in his statement "no one has ever seen God" (Jn.1:18). The word "seen" (*theaomai)* in verse 14 means to behold, view attentively, to contemplate something which has a sense of wonderment. This word involves a contemplative focus which carefully and deliberately observes an object in order to perceive it correctly and in detail. As a person does this, *theaomai* would involve more than merely seeing something; it also includes noticing, recognizing and taking note of something with deeper reflection and acute interest.

So, John was referring only to those persons actually doing this. They were the persons who had *seen* the glory of God's son. Now, when we put this word "seen" (*theaomai*) into the context of Jesus' life and words, we're not merely talking about a mental process here but more importantly **the relational connection of the heart of the person *seeing* with the heart of the person *seen***. This is part of the cooperation by our person necessary to make connection in this relational equation; this is part of what the Father seeks from those involved with him (Jn.4:23).

Whether we undertake our part through the spiritual disciplines from tradition or other means, we *must* (*dei*, not as obligation but because it's intrinsic to God, see Jn.4:24) engage in this relational work. With all the effort Jesus exercised to do his part in making God's person available to us for relational connection, we *must* likewise exercise consistently and ongoingly the effort of our person in order to take our relationship with Christ beyond mere form. The Father wants us to be conformed to his son in this way (Rom.8:29).

Sadly, even Christians today could functionally fall outside of those "having *seen* his glory" because they don't experience relationship with God consistently other than in form. In relationships, *function* does not automatically follow *form*. The kind of relationship that follows always depends on *how* we are and *what* we do in the relationship.

Let's be sure we're understanding **what is meant by effort and relational work**. We are not necessarily talking about *doing* something more, like more service to God or even more Bible study and quiet times. In a relationship it is very important to make the distinction between *quantity* of what we do in relation to the other person and the *quality* of the presence of our person in the relationship. In other words, how much of *me* am I really putting into the relationship—not necessarily my time or my energy, and certainly not my money.

This is a major source of tension for those who define themselves by *doing*. It's difficult not to feel like we need to be doing something in relationships. We can't just be together, we have to do something to have a relationship. When we define God by his doing, we feel blessed the most as God is doing something for us or in relation to us (e.g., our prayers). We can't just be together and feel blessed. Yet, that's the greatest blessing of all: enjoying the presence of God and his involvement with us, and being able to participate in his life.

As we practice measuring our lives on the basis of our *doing*, we pay the great cost of minimizing, overlooking or disparaging our *being* (the total person) and our relationships. Our focus and mindset have to change if we want more connection with God. Jesus already showed us that the Father only wants our heart (Jn.4:23). It is this

inner person of ours which we must involve in relationship with him. (Jn.4:24). We cannot substitute for nor invest anything less than our heart; the most important aspect of our total person is heart, not our mind, spiritual gifts, good deeds or whatever else defines us. That's the way it is because that's what Jesus openly showed us: who, what and how God is; how he created us and how to fulfill God's relational design and purpose.

A Heart Vulnerable in Relationship

Because Jesus further demonstrated the willful openness of God's heart being vulnerable to us, our heart also *must (dei)* willfully open to be vulnerable to his person and God's heart. Even with this intention, though, the presence of our heart is obstructed by constraints we put on it. Negative fear about God, for example, can create a barrier, cause feeling bad about our self, uncertainty about our relationship together, or any other matters which could distract, divide or diminish our heart, all of which strain our heart and could cause barriers in our relationship with God. This may include any current tensions you're having in reading this study. What do we need to do in these times? How can we eliminate barriers we create, or prevent them?

When Jesus told the Samaritan woman what the Father seeks and what was necessary for deeper involvement with him, he not only told her about heart (spirit) but also about truth: "in spirit and in truth" (Jn.4:23,24). We can only relate fully to the Father "in spirit and in truth." Truth is not an abstract concept in the New Testament but specifically refers to the person of Christ (e.g., Jn.14:6). From our earlier discussion on "grace and truth" in John 1:14, truth is often translated "faithfulness." The person of truth, faithfulness, is a person you can count on relationally; you can count on their word in what they say as well as in what they'll do. You can also trust their presentation of themselves to you because it's true. That accurately reflects Jesus.

Now, in presenting ourselves to the Father to be involved with him, Jesus said we must be in this truth. Obviously, that means in the truth (faithfulness) of the person Jesus. But, as "spirit" involved not only God's heart but the necessity also of our heart to make this relational connection, we must understand "truth" here to include our person as well, not just the person Jesus. That is, we need to present ourselves to God and relate to him *in truth,* in faithfulness, of our person as one who can be counted on relationally in what we say and do. To put this more simply, "in truth" means *with honesty*—the honesty of our heart. **We need to present ourselves honestly to the Father**. Truth, or honesty, of my heart essentially tells him "what you see and hear is what you truly get." This is our only presentation that has any relational significance to him.

Honesty is a vital condition for our heart to be truly open to God; it's a necessary condition to be vulnerable to God in the relational process. To give him anything less than honesty is to give God something other than our real true *self.* Without it means essentially we aren't really being ourselves with him—our weak, fallible or sinful self. What we present becomes more like playing a role. We may be sincere in how we do that role-play but we are not being authentic about our person.

Certainly, this has become an acceptable norm in human interaction. Wearing a mask is routine attire, even among Christians. For Christians, however, the relational consequences from not presenting our true self are far greater. Any alternative

presentation effectively amounts to degrees of deception in how we represent ourselves, which then really turns out to be promoting a lie. Outer sincerity and good intentions do not diminish any falsehood involved. When a lie is consistently practiced, it becomes hypocrisy, the leaven of the Pharisees Jesus warned us of (Lk.12:1). In relational terms this means there are barriers in the relationship which prevent deeper connection with God. The resulting relational distance or temporary break from God can exist for us even during periods of peak church involvement or intense Christian service. This contradiction is not apparent unless we examine what is specifically taking place relationally between God and us.

We also need to fully understand that this relational distance or break with God is what Satan tries to keep us unaware of. Satan creates illusions about Christian living because his goal for Christians is to distance us from our hearts and interfere with our relational connection with God. We'll discuss his work later.

The heart of God vulnerably present in the person Jesus seeks hearts willfully vulnerable to him (Jn.4:23). These are "the true worshipers," Jesus said, those who connect with the Father and are involved with him. The word he used for "true" (Gk. *alethinos*) means real, genuine, authentic, not counterfeit. Therefore, what Jesus revealed to the Samaritan woman he reveals to us too: **the authentic Christian life must (*dei*) involve "the honesty of our *heart"* in order to relationally connect with the Father, God of heart**. The authentic Christian ongoingly lives out this relationship in growing intimacy.

Examples of Relational Consequences

Honesty of the heart has always been vital for relational connection and continued involvement with God in persons throughout the Bible. Whether in relation to their thoughts, feelings, desires or matters of sin, the lack of honesty in the heart of God's people resulted in major problems in their relationship with him. In the following key persons in the Bible, reflect on their relationship with God.

Moses Revisited—Let's go back to Moses. It seemed characteristic of Moses to openly share with God what was on his heart; our earlier discussion focused on such a wonderful interaction (Ex.33,34). Despite how Moses usually was with God, there was one sad and tragic time when he wasn't.

After dealing with the Israelites' complaints, whining and disobedience for nearly 40 years, Moses once again was confronted by them over the lack of water (see Num.20:1-5). He, along with Aaron, went to the tent and fell face down (v.6); nothing else about what Moses shared with God is recorded here. This appears to be in contrast to Moses openly sharing his frustration (maybe also fear) with God during an earlier issue also about the lack of water (see Ex.17:4). I suggest that the absence of further sharing with God by Moses in Numbers 20 is extremely significant.

In this later water incident, God responded to the situation by giving Moses specific instructions: "Speak to that rock ... and it will pour out its water" (Num.20:8). Moses went back to the people but in what seems like an outburst of his frustration and

anger, expressed these rash words (cf. Ps.106:32): "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (v.10) and then proceeded to *strike the rock* twice with his staff (v.11). God had told Moses specifically "speak to that rock," but Moses "struck the rock"—not just once but twice.

Why did Moses do that? Moses either didn't clearly listen to God's specific instructions, maybe because he was preoccupied with his feelings; or perhaps in the heat of the moment he forgot and acted somewhat instinctively (from the earlier incident when God did tell him to strike the rock, see Ex.17:6). In either case, the relational implications of this situation are important for us to understand, even though the consequences for Moses (along with Aaron) may be difficult to fully accept (since this one incident prevented Moses from entering the promise land, Num.20:12).

When Moses spoke and acted as he did, this is what was seriously happening in his relationship with God: (1) he didn't listen to God; (2) he "didn't trust in Me enough" (20:12); (3) he did it his own way; (4) he didn't "honor Me as holy" (v.12), that is by giving the focus of attention to God and his covenant love and covenant faithfulness to keep his promise; (5) instead Moses brought the attention to himself. In relational terms, Moses made the relationship more about himself when it was really about God. And Moses wasn't able to plead "extenuating circumstances."

We can empathize with Moses because we've all been in frustrating situations or relationships. But God held Moses accountable for his relational actions—as he does all of us—because this all could have been prevented. Moses obviously had strong feelings about how his companions on this journey were and how they treated him. He certainly had justification for these feelings. Yet, he did not openly share these feelings with his God, as he had done previously (e.g., see Num.11:10ff).

I suggested earlier that this absence by Moses is significant. You may suggest that Moses, like all of us, wasn't perfect and that one mistake should not really be that big a deal. From the standpoint of imperfection I would agree. But the issue here is not the quantity of perfection. God has never been concerned with how perfect we could be; that's *our* self-concern which we project onto him. The real issue here is the quality of relationship and *the honesty of our heart*.

How did Moses present himself to God in this moment? True, he fell face down at the tent but was he really being honest with his heart? Well, you may say that he wasn't being dishonest. From the standpoint of spoken truth or lies, I would agree that Moses wasn't dishonest; there isn't a recorded lie he told God. Once again, however, when it comes to presenting ourselves in a relationship, honesty is about openly sharing our heart and being our real self. Therefore, honesty is measured both by what we share as well as what we don't share.

Moses had feelings—strong feelings—in his heart. By keeping them inside he created a barrier in his relationship with God. Since he didn't openly share these feelings with God, he prevented God from:

(1) being with him in those feelings—they're in this together;
(2) attending to the needs in his heart—e.g., for comfort, healing or cleansing;
(3) helping him to move on so he wouldn't be controlled by the feelings—e.g., by forgiving the others.

Instead, Moses may have just routinely fallen face down at the tent—maybe like how we often go to church. I could suggest this scenario: "Well, here I am again, God. They're doing the same thing. You've heard it many times; we've been here before. OK, let's get this situation over with!" In this possible replay we can hear some of Moses' thought but you don't see his heart. If Moses had expressed honesty of his heart, he would have connected with God, not been alone, been attended to in the needs of his heart, been able to be different.

But Moses didn't exercise this honesty, so his heart was distant from God's heart. Thankfully, the God of heart lovingly held Moses accountable in the relationship, like he does with us, because the relationship and he (we) are important to God. Sadly and tragically for Moses, this distance and its consequences could have been prevented.

David—Another person in the Old Testament whose life was altered by the absence of honesty was David. We all benefit from the many psalms in which David openly shared his heart with God. Quiet reflection on such honesty is disarming even to the most guarded heart. Yet, one incident was to change his life because he didn't exercise the honesty of his heart.

Despite David's record of openly sharing, he found himself one evening keeping his heart distant from God's (see 2 Sam.11:1-4). Whether his thoughts were preoccupied with war or his feelings at the moment were only personal, his wandering eyes (and distant heart) became fixed on Bathsheba (v.2). What happened from here is recorded history (see 2 Sam.11 and 12). David's life was changed.

Could this have been prevented? It's worth our speculation because we all face issues of temptation (or testing). These are an ongoing part of life which Christ also faced (which we will discuss in the next chapter).

Whatever caused David to get up from bed and walk around that spring evening, it was an opportunity to connect with God (e.g., see David in Ps.63:6). The need for that connection intensified when he saw this beautiful, naked woman. At this moment David was faced with the critical decision to openly share his heart with God. Should he share with him his thoughts about her beauty? Should he tell him that he's feeling alone, that he's needy or feeling vulnerable at the moment? Maybe he even needs to tell God how much he desires her.

Unfortunately, David chose not to express the honesty of his heart to God. He maintained his distance from God, kept all this in his heart and pursued his own thing (2 Sam.11:3,4). Even after David acted apart from God, he could have at any time taken the opportunity to openly share with God to connect back with him. But David kept making the same choice to hide his heart from God, thus compounding the situation. It wasn't until Nathan directly confronted David about his actions that David assumed the responsibility for his treatment of God in their relationship (2 Sam.12:13). Psalm 51 reflects again the honesty of his heart which David learned the hard way.

Honesty of our heart can prevent this consequence by giving God the opportunity to respond relationally to us and act directly in our life. Even if we don't make this choice initially, we can still choose again because God's grace makes it possible for us to be restored to relational connection with him at any time.

Elijah—Elijah also failed to give God the opportunity to respond to him directly in a critical time of need. After the dramatic victory over the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kings 18:16-40) and the awesome experience of Elijah physically running ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way to Jezreel to beat the rainstorm (18:44-46), you would think Elijah's faith and confidence were high. Not to mention the fact that his name, Elijah (meaning "The Lord is my God"), was the essence of his life and work. Yet, immediately afterward, when Jezebel vowed to wipe him out just as he did to her prophets, Elijah ran in the opposite direction, fearful for his life (19:1-3).

Wow, what a contrast going from chapter 18 to 19. The issue we've been examining here is: could "the honesty of our heart" make a significant difference in the lives of God's people—whatever the situation? Despite the strong contrast in Elijah's behavior that we see in these situations, the more important contrast is what's happening in the relationship between Elijah and God from one situation to the next.

In chapters 17 and 18 we see Elijah's ongoing relational connection with God in a variety of situations. Then, in Chapter 19 Elijah essentially said to himself, "I'm outta here!" Rather than openly share his fear with God and talk with him about what to do, Elijah not only distanced himself from the situation but also distanced himself from God. Along with his fear, Elijah must have been deeply discouraged about the effectiveness of his ministry. Settling into despair, all Elijah could tell God was "I have had enough, Lord. ake my life!" (2 Kings 19:4). We can empathize: "I can't take it anymore," "I'm only human," "Get me outta here, Lord."

Is this honesty of our heart? In a partial sense, yes. But there are deeper areas in our heart which need to be openly shared and attended to by God.

Elijah withheld those areas in his heart from God and withdrew from the relationship (19:5). Like many of us when facing tense periods in life, Elijah tried to regain a sense of control in his life by determining the terms of his relationship with God. What he told God in despair was really telling God what to do rather than openly sharing deeper needs in his heart. Even when God pursued him further with the penetrating and disarming question full of relational messages—"What are you doing here, Elijah?," not just once but twice, 19:9,13)—Elijah answered only with the facts of the situation while indirectly hinting how he felt about it.

Since God asked him the same question again only to receive the same answer, Elijah shows us that he wasn't understanding God and making connection relationally with him. The reason for this consequence involves Elijah's failure to openly share all that was in his heart. But you may ask, what if he didn't realize what was in his heart? This is a fair question. God doesn't expect us to always be aware of the deeper feelings in our heart. Many times we stay so focused on the details of a situation that we're not in touch with our feelings about it. What God does expect, however, is for us to honestly talk about it, so that we could learn what's in our heart. Relational communication must be kept honestly open for connection to be made and for God to have the opportunity to respond to us. Elijah distanced his heart from God and, therefore, relationally didn't give God the opportunity to be with him.

These examples illustrate for us the necessity of honesty of our heart in the relational process with God. They also demonstrate the relational consequence when we

don't honestly engage this relational process in presenting ourselves to God. As you reflect on your own relationship with God, realize the relational consequences which can be prevented for you. Maybe more importantly, anticipate the relational outcomes which God has waiting for you.

Learning From the Disciples in Relationship

Honesty is an absolutely vital condition for our heart to be truly open to receive God and all he has for us. I think the Samaritan woman's honesty with Jesus—see her response in John 4:16-18—opened her heart and gave Jesus the opportunity for all he shared. That relational connection opens our understanding of relationship with God. If we are to be involved with God in intimate relationship, then that ongoing connection can continue only through *the honesty of our heart*. As Jesus shared, this is a must (*dei*); it is unavoidable. This is what God seeks from us, so that we will experience him and *know* him. In no better example are the dynamics of this relational process impressed upon us than in the early disciples' relationship with Jesus.

When Jesus told Thomas and Philip that they essentially didn't know him (Jn. 14:1-9), as we discussed in Chapter 1, this didn't mean they had no knowledge *about* Jesus. They had plenty of information about Jesus, but they weren't making deeper relational connection with Jesus in order to experience him more intimately so as to truly know Jesus, the person. How could this happen after three intense years together? Let's take a further look at their relationship for more answers with further discussion later.

Jesus' Disciples—Examine the following interactions (take the time to read each passage) and *think relationally* as well as identify relational messages:

<u>John 4:27-33</u>

- When the disciples returned to find Jesus interacting with this Samaritan woman, they were surprised at his cultural *faux pas* and religious no-no. But they kept their thoughts to themselves, so no one pursued Jesus on this (v.27).
- When they urged him to eat the food they had brought back, Jesus countered that he had a better alternative (vv.31,32). A little bewildered by this, they wondered among themselves but, again, no one openly asked him about it (v.33).

Since this occurred relatively early in the disciples' relationship with Jesus, this interaction may seem quite understandable to you. Furthermore, you may point out that the disciples merely acted according to their culture's norms for teacher-disciple relations. As a show of respect, disciples didn't question their teachers. But, I would add, if their teacher was so different from and in conflict with the cultural and religious norms of their time, they would have had some serious doubts and uncertain feelings about the teacher's validity. Unless the disciples exercised "blind faith" these inner stirrings needed to be addressed.

<u>Mark 4:35-41 (Luke 8:22-25)</u>

- On this adventurous boat ride together across the Sea of Galilee, the disciples

> were nothing short of speechless from fear due to the awesome display of power by Jesus to calm the storm. But they couldn't help asking each other, "Who is this ... ?" (v.41)

It's reasonable for them to ask the question. But what does it mean that the disciples didn't direct to Jesus this question and all that was going on inside them? Again, you can cite the cultural role of a disciple to explain or even justify their behavior. But I suggest that this would constrain our understanding of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus. This Teacher extended, if not redefined, his disciple from being a mere learner or faithful adherent to the privileged position of a friend. In addition, he reordered the traditional teacher-disciple role structure by replacing it with the process of intimate relationship between them in which they would share everything together. What culture effectively accomplishes in relationship with God (back then and today) is to provide a comfort zone in which we can maintain distance from God. What culture also does effectively to God is *put God in a box*. But Jesus never stayed in that box; we know this from both his words and how he lived in relationships. Peter was to experience all this at his footwashing, which we will examine in a later chapter.

<u>Mark 8:14-21</u>

- On a later boat trip the disciples didn't understand what Jesus was talking about. So they speculated among each other what he meant (vv.14-16). In fact, at this stage of their relationship with Jesus they still had no clue about him, in spite of all they *had done* together. They just didn't get it! (vv.17-21).

I don't think the reason for this was due to any lack of intellectual ability to comprehend or put the pieces of a "puzzle" together. Relational distance or barriers prevented them from connecting with the person Jesus and thus *seeing* (*theaomai*, as John said in Jn.1:14) him for who he really was. But, since Jesus never stayed in their box, he often pursued them on the questions they didn't openly share with him (Mk.8:17). The relational message he was telling them by often doing this was "it's OK to ask me.." He wanted them to open their hearts to him so they could have a deeper relationship.

No one wants to appear "stupid" and ask a dumb question. Yet, how do self-concern and pride affect how well we can connect in relationships? We can have illusions about the state of a relationship, but what do we often substitute for getting close in a relationship?

<u>Luke 9:44,45</u>

- After Jesus healed a demon-possessed boy, he told the disciples something important which they couldn't relate to ("understand", *agnoeo*) because it was totally foreign to them ("grasp", *aisthanomai*). This news just blew their minds and, sadly, "they were afraid to ask him about it" (v.45).

Being afraid could cause us to do different things in a relationship but the main effects on the heart level is to make us more cautious, to create distance or withdraw from the other person by seeking out a comfort zone. This can be going on while all other activity together appears fine. Activities are always easier than direct relational interaction. How

can we deal with such barriers in a relationship—especially with God?

Mark 9:33,34

- Immediately after the above interaction, while on the road to Capernaum, the disciples engaged in an argument among themselves. Since they apparently detached themselves from rumblings in their heart in the situation just prior, they turned their focus on secondary matters of greater importance to them. Realizing what was happening, Jesus asked them directly about their argument. His direct question to them was answered with silence—not a good silence. There are two kinds of silence. Good silence opens or reaches out with the heart in order to embrace. Bad silence pulls back the heart to stay away.

Debate over one's status within a group in their culture was probably just as common as striving for one's individual status or prestige is today. Such self-concern is not unique to culture but to humanity. So, it may be understandable that the disciples were shy or embarrassed to talk with Jesus, though that didn't stop Jesus from pursuing them in the matter (vv.35-37). But even in their reluctance to talk, still their silence spoke relational messages. What were the relational messages they communicated loud and clear? Remember, this interaction comes on the heels of the previous one in Luke 9:44,45. What were they implying about Jesus by not talking with him? What were they saying about themselves in all this? And what did they communicate about their relationship with Jesus—what they felt about it, how they saw it?

Mark 10:17-27

- In this classic encounter—which we will discuss in-depth later—the disciples were flabbergasted at Jesus' response to the rich young man (vv.24,26). Doubts must have swirled around in their minds. Yet, again, they were not willing to openly share them directly with Jesus (v.26).

At what point does this relational barrier no longer become excusable (culture notwithstanding) and must be considered negative on their part? The honesty of our heart should not be taken lightly because the absence of it is not neutral.

John 13:21-24

- In the upper room Jesus openly shared his feelings with the disciples. When he told them one of them was going to betray him, they just blankly stared at each other, stunned, unable to think whom he's talking about (v.22). This shocking announcement left even the usually bold Peter without the courage to directly address Jesus. So, rather than share himself, Peter asked John to approach Jesus for him (vv.23,24).

Peter chose to connect with Jesus indirectly, using a substitute. Often, we don't share our thoughts, feelings or desires in a relationship directly. We express it in a roundabout way, usually making the other person responsible to correctly interpret, guess or otherwise to

fully understand where we're coming from—all the while excusing our own self of the responsibility to openly share with that person. Honesty of our heart requires us to openly share our self directly, with no substitutes for our person.

John 13:28,29 (Luke 22:24)

- The disciples quickly distanced their heart from this shocking announcement, maybe somewhat relieved it wasn't one of them (Jn.13:26), and engaged in further speculation among themselves (Jn.13:28,29). In the midst of this crucial time with Jesus they also created further relational distance by distracting their heart with secondary matters at the expense of being responsive to Jesus' heart.

Disregarding the importance of the total person and reducing the primary place of relationships in God's design and purpose should not surprise us. We've been doing this since Adam and Eve. How do we do this in our relationship with God?

John 16:17,18

- It shouldn't surprise us by this time, that even at the height of their anxiety and insecurity about the future, they weren't willing to ask Jesus directly a question burning inside them.

These interactions demonstrate a pattern of unwillingness by the disciples to openly share themselves with Jesus, especially at significant times in their relationship. Despite circumstances or culture, they were responsible for creating distance or barriers in their relationship with him. What we didn't discuss but is also clearly obvious in these interactions is how much Jesus openly shared himself with them. As the last interaction in John 16 demonstrates, there were numerous times Jesus still took the initiative to further share with them despite their lack of honesty (see Jn.16:19-28).

The patterns of *doing relationships* seen in Jesus and the disciples each have different outcomes and consequences. Their results are summarized in those dramatic moments in the garden called Gethsemane (read both Mt.26:36-46; Lk.22:40-46).

Here we see Jesus fully vulnerable before his disciples and his Father (Mt.26:37,38; Lk.22:44). Jesus openly shared the honesty of his heart with them (Mt.26:29,40,45; Lk.22:46). He even shared with his Father in full honesty that he didn't want to die (see also Mk.14:36). The outcome for Jesus was the deepest intimate connection with his Father, resulting in the opportunity for his Father's deep involvement to respond directly to his heart and to attend to his deepest needs. Therefore, even though Jesus initially felt strongly about not wanting to go to the cross (his strongest desire was to do his Father's will), he was now wholeheartedly resolved to fulfill his Father's will. Their relationship couldn't have been deeper or stronger.

The disciples, however, were a sad contrast. Because they consistently didn't share themselves openly with Jesus, they often conducted their relationship with him at an unspoken distance; and Jesus did raise the question of callousness or insensitivity of their heart creating a barrier in their relationship (see Mk.8:17). By not exercising the honesty of their heart, they stayed in a relational comfort zone and simply didn't *trust*

Christ – a fact he often noted to them along the way. This prevented a deeper relational connection, greater involvement with Jesus' heart, the intimate experience of really *knowing* his person and the full satisfaction of relationally sharing life together.

Seeing Jesus vulnerably present himself to them in the garden obviously affected them (Lk.22:45). But in maintaining their distance from Jesus as well as from their own hearts, they sought the comfort zone of sleep. That was certainly a lot easier than being involved with Jesus on this intense level. The predictable consequence was insensitivity to Jesus' person and lost connections in their relationship. The result was a failure to support him, to love him in his great need.

Lost was the deeply satisfying experience of intimately sharing in each other's life together. Their relationship couldn't get much more discouraging.

Think about the relational hurt and pain the disciples added to Jesus' already burdened heart. What were those relational messages they gave Jesus in the garden? These are consequences we need to seriously consider as we examine *how we do relationship with God*.

What do you learn about this relationship from the disciples?

The Authentic, Genuine *Me*

Examining these relational dynamics in the process of relationship with God shows us how vital the *honesty of our heart* is in order to connect with God. It is basic to our involvement with him, whether the interaction is worship, other prayer or listening to his Word. **This honesty of our heart is basic because that's *what* and *how* God is**. So, there is no other way to be authentic and genuine in presenting ourselves to God. Nothing can substitute for the honesty of our heart—not the best-sung song, not the most eloquent prayer, not the most impressive appearance nor the greatest amount of spiritual discipline. And no indirect personal expression is sufficient to make relational connection with God—no amount of church involvement, no amount of offering, no amount of service.

As Jesus vulnerably revealed of his person and his Father, **God wants *me***. He doesn't want what I have or what I can do. The God of heart wants my heart, my total person. And he doesn't want me for what I can *do* for him or *give* to him. God wants me for relationship—for intimate relational sharing in each other's life and sharing in life together as his family. But God doesn't have the authentic, genuine *me* without the honesty of my heart.

Let's not have any illusions about our Christian life. Reflect relationally! Like the biblical examples, we could be presenting God with a facsimile of our person, or some other substitute, but in reality may keep our heart at a distance from him. As demonstrated by Jesus and the disciples, the specific outcomes and consequences of their experiences in relationship with God were in strong contrast. What we experience *with* God and *from* God—not *about* God or *related to* God—can only happen in direct relationship with him when the honesty of our heart gives God the opportunity to be with us and to respond to us.

Many times we feel that it's up to us to go be with him; then we think about *doing something* to make this connection. When it doesn't happen, we try *doing something*

more. That, in effect, gets us out of the relational process; what we're *doing* starts taking on more importance than *being together* honestly. The truth is, God already wants to be with us. That's the only reason Jesus came. Now he wants us to give him that opportunity to relationally connect with us. We can't do anything more than what Jesus already did in order to make this connection an experiential reality.

If something seems to be missing in your relationship with God and you want more, or if you want to go to the next level in your relationship to experience more of him, then present your person to him in the honesty of your heart. With God this is a *must* (*dei*), an ongoing, increasing *must*!

Of course, presenting God with the authentic genuine *me* is problematic for us. I don't think we can have more tension in a relationship than about this. If anything makes us seek out our comfort zone, it would be this. So, we usually end up following the lead of Adam and Eve in their garden experience with God (see Gen.2:25-3:13). Like them, we either distance ourselves (Gen.3:10), hide (3:8) or put on a false front ("masks," 3:7) before God. Whether we're avoiding our sin or avoiding the feelings in our heart, we are uncomfortable presenting our authentic, genuine *me*. Even when God pursues or confronts us about this, it is difficult to take responsibility for our true self, choosing often to excuse our self by deflecting that responsibility to others (3:11-13).

When we compare the relational process of Adam and Eve's garden experience with God to the disciples' garden experience with Christ (as discussed earlier), the relational dynamics are essentially the same—with similar consequences. Seeking out our comfort zone rather than openly share our true self is the easier way to go in any relationship as an alternative to deeper relational connection. But, why would we choose to do this with God if we want a deeper experience of God and more satisfaction in our relationship with him?

The answer is basically because we don't want to be vulnerable before God with our true *self*. On the one hand, this answer may confuse us, if we consistently ask God for forgiveness of blatant sins. But, on the other hand, when you think relationally, "what would God really think or do if he openly saw the real *me*?" This is an ongoing relational issue which we struggle with all the time—in fact, ever since Adam and Eve.

Let's go back to the disciples' garden experience. When Jesus told them to "keep watch with me" (Mt.26:38) "and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (26:41), think relationally about his words here. If you only look at this situationally, the tendency is to think about some danger or falling into some undefined sin. The Greek word for "watch" (*gregoreuo*) comes from the word (*egeiro*) "to arouse, arise"; and "watch" denotes focusing attention on God's revelation of himself (as Jesus was revealing in the garden).

If we paraphrase Jesus' words with the focus on the relationship, not the situation, he would say: "I'm pouring out my heart now. Open your heart and be vulnerable to me so you will be *with* me. Let me *in* so we could be together. And let your heart be affected, it's OK. Just share (pray) honestly with God whatever's in your heart. Passionately do this, so that you don't fall into seeking your comfort zone and end up not being involved with me. Remember, Satan's goal for you is to distance you from your heart and to interfere with our relationship. Even though you have good intentions to be involved with me, you are still susceptible to going into your comfort zone—especially when it gets

tenser. So, I can't tell you enough! Be honest and openly share your heart with God in *all* that you feel at this moment."

These are Jesus' words to all of us now. If we don't take his words to heart and ongoingly act from our heart, we will duplicate the disciples' experience in the garden. Such relational distance or detachment from God is the strongest temptation (or hardest test) any Christian faces. We know intellectually that before our relationship with Christ was established, sin caused separation from God. Ever since that relationship was formed, the barrier of separation between us was destroyed. Now for each Christian, in relationship with God ***the "greatest" sin we can commit is to keep distance from God***.

God's greatest desire is for us to be together with him. What means the most to him is not the mere fact of our relationship but our ongoing relational involvement with him. In relational words, this means "God wants *me*!" And Jesus came to get *me*. Take the time to reflect on his relational messages to you about this, because we can only substantively experience this reality from a relational perspective, not a theological one.

The Demand of Grace

Theologically we know that God took the initiative to extend grace to us, and that his grace is the basis for our relationship with him—the sole basis. Functionally, however, grace is another one of those Christian words that has lost its significance to *familiarity*. We are comforted theologically whenever grace is acknowledged; and we feel safe and secure with grace in our vocabulary. After that, grace often doesn't appear to find its way functionally into our daily practice, except maybe for forgiveness of a sin.

Yet, what exactly does grace do? Essentially, grace tells us that God extends his loving favor to us in spite of *what* and *how* we are, and that we can never do enough to warrant his favor. God takes *me* just as I am. In fact, "just as I am" is the only way God can have *me* by the definition of grace, not only in the beginning to form the relationship, but continuously throughout.

We also need to fully understand how grace functions relationally. Without exception, from here on, grace allows us to be our authentic, genuine *self* with God; we don't have to use masks or hide (like Adam and Eve). This doesn't mean grace is a license to sin or an encouragement to remain in our *old* ways. Grace is the only relational means to come together with God and the only basis by which to be our true self with him. So, each time I receive his grace (e.g., to cover my sin) I am able to be more of myself with God.

Does this make you excited or tense? Don't feel too bad if you feel some tension. That's because we are confronted by a real problem with grace from a relational perspective. In living by grace relationally with God, the necessity of *the honesty of our heart* is not only undeniable but also unavoidable. It's not optional. The truth, which we don't always grasp theologically, is: **grace *demands* honesty of my heart and doesn't allow me to be anything other than my real, true *self* (weak, fallible, sinful) with God—and eventually with others.**

A constant tension weighing on persons who define themselves by what they do is *if they measure up or not*. Obviously, this is the most crucial in relation to God; and much

Christian activity is motivated by this concern. It also affects how one relates to others, in comparing how one measures up. Grace sets the record straight and settles the issue unequivocally. In relation to God, no one measures up. To receive Jesus is not only to acknowledge this truth in our mind but to accept it in our heart.

Yet, when we extend grace from theology to relationships, it probably creates more cause for tension than for celebration. This tension is real, and it gives us important feedback about a basic decision ongoingly facing all of us in how we're going to live. We have to deal with this and the implications of our comfort zones and boxes. So, what do we do with this problem of grace and the honesty of our heart? Those Christians who search for a more authentic, genuine faith need to look deeper with this relational perspective also.

This authentic, genuine *me* is not the "person of grace" we normally see in church. Instead, Christians often have created illusions about "living by grace" by substituting with what essentially are variations of *works*. We have become very sophisticated in disguising our works in order to present ourselves to God with other than what grace demands. Since we rely heavily on what we *do* (attain) or *have* (accumulate) to define ourselves, we try to present ourselves to God in a more favorable light on the basis of this definition. Despite statements of belief or good intentions to the contrary, the relational dynamics clearly indicate this process as essentially pharisaic efforts to control our relationship with God on our terms—not on his terms of grace. Since this way of defining ourselves and its influence on how we do relationships (particularly with God) have become pervasive, we can better understand why Jesus strongly warned against the leaven of the Pharisees—hypocrisy, which merely means to present one's *self* as other than real and genuine (Lk.12:1).

This process of redefining *self* has been taking place since Adam and Eve. The main consequence of living this way is the distance, separation and brokenness of our relationship. This impact on relationships is the result of making, often unknowingly, relationships secondary in importance and de-emphasizing intimacy. Furthermore, this way of defining ourselves and how we do relationships also reflects our lack of freedom, that is, our enslavement to the *old* wineskins and our established ways of doing things (see Lk.5:33-39). All of these contradict the glory of God in Jesus incarnating *what* and *how* God is.

Whether it's blatant like the Pharisees or more subtle like the variations of today, the issue about grace is the same; and the need for the honesty of our heart in relationship with God remains unmet. The incarnation of the glory of God was not an objective attempt to perpetuate *old* views of God and *old* ways of living. But we unintentionally and unknowingly can fall back into the *old* unless we embrace relationally the incarnation of the *new* in the God person Jesus.

Because Christ pursued *me* in his flesh and blood, he essentially came right up to my face and said "I want you"—knowing full well all the crap in my heart. (I use the word "crap"; other Christians might use euphemisms such as "imperfection" or even familiar "sin"; in street language they simply say "my shit.") So, I can stop playing this "life-game" of avoiding my true self and of trying to present myself in a more favorable light by what I do or have.

Reflect on the truth that this *old stuff* can all stop for us now. We don't have to

continue to bear the burden of feeling bad, less confident or insecure about our true self. God didn't come and then turn away from me because of "my crap." The holy God came, put his arm around me and said "I want you—in spite of your crap." My first reaction is to turn away from him. But how do I push away this favor, how do I deny myself this "love for *me*" that I've been longing for? This is truly the deep instinct of my heart. So, the fears and insecurities of my heart—which keep me distant—are overcome by the deep desire for love and intimate relational connection.

All Christians know basically that God is love. Many Christians often talk about God's love, even how much God loves us. Yet, we really don't have an experiential understanding of God's love when functionally we don't practice the honesty of our heart in relationship with him. If we are loved for (or in spite of) what we truly are in our heart, then we have to present our self in this way in order to experience his love. In truth, there is no alternative here from God. We must (*dei*) present the authentic, genuine *me* in order to be involved with him. Nothing less and no substitutes!

You may still wonder inside: how can I be really sure about this and trust that God feels this way about *me* and actually treats *me* in this way? Your theological beliefs may tell you "yes" but your heart may feel unsure. On the one hand, we don't want to depend merely on our feelings; the heart involves much more than feelings. On the other hand we don't want to make this only intellectual, and faith is not a mind-game. Unfortunately, too much of our practice in Christian faith vacillates between these two.

Except for the proud, grace is not a difficult concept to accept theologically. Yet, like the concept of incarnation, we certainly aren't able to explain the mystery that remains about grace. For the holy God, grace is a relational paradox. Nevertheless, none of this contradicts or denies the vulnerable presence of the person Jesus in the flesh. If he embraces the prostitute, the homeless alcoholic and drug addict, what would be his problem embracing me? This gap between the perceptions in our mind and deeper understanding in our heart involves a large part of our difficulty with God.

"Nothing less and no substitutes" of *me* is the absolute necessity to be involved with God because, again, that's who, what and how God is. Since God is like this, then he also expects me to be like this—not to be like God ontologically, but to be like God relationally, who (as the God of heart) created me in his image as a person of heart for intimate relationship with him. But realize in your mind and hopefully embrace with your heart that what God expects of us he also expects of himself. That is, **"nothing less and no substitutes" describes him as well as us in our relationship together.**

More specifically, "nothing less and no substitutes" describes the person Jesus of the incarnation. God came to us with his "one and only" self, no substitutes. Yet, we have to stop looking at the incarnation with awe (those perceptions in our mind) that keeps this God person at a distance. The authentic, genuine God person presented himself in the honesty of his heart to *me* for intimate relationship together. This takes us beyond a miraculous event and explains the incarnation in the terms God wants us to see him, embrace him and to experience him. God is too big (and holy) for us to see him fully and his ways are beyond our comprehension to understand completely. But, when our focus on God is only ontological, it is difficult to connect with him. When we get fixated on the mysterious ways (or bigger picture) of God and overlook the vulnerable presence of his

person, we don't experience him and understand his loving involvement with us.

The Holy Spirit needs to help us get to our heart in all this. We need to work with him to have *new* eyes to see the *person* Jesus and *new* ears to listen to his words. Pause and ask him now for the help to receive Jesus relationally in the presentation of his authentic, genuine *self* to you.

Along with the Spirit's conviction of our heart about God's relational messages in the incarnation and the grace it involves (how he sees and feels about us, what he is saying about our relationship and what he says about himself), our assurance and confidence in the truth of this reality can grow because we have his *Word*. This is not just a few of God's words, but the total Word of God himself. Now we can truly *know* him because the "nothing less and no substitutes" person Jesus objectified God and our relationship with him and the Father. Observe him, if you wish, coming in the flesh and pursuing our heart exactly as we are. Observe the reality of his grace (unfailing love) extended to us; personalize the scene and listen to him saying to you: "I want *you*—not your good works, what you can do, what you have, or anything else but *you*, and I want you to be with me for intimate relationship just like I have with my Father."

Because this "nothing less and no substitutes" person vulnerably shared and intimately revealed his Father to us, we can be assured of *what* and *how* God is as well as how he sees me, defines me and wants our relationship. If Jesus presented "something less," or if God sent "a substitute," we could not have this *intimate knowledge* of God and, therefore, have confidence that *that's how it truly is*.

"Anything less" or "any substitutes" would not provide us with this *direct experience* of God in relationship. This is how it was essentially for people in the Old Testament. They didn't have this direct, relational experience with God—through situations, yes, and through God's deeds they experienced him indirectly. But the ongoing, intimate relationship is not there. So, the OT does not experience God directly as intimate friend, except for Abraham and Moses as the friends of God. Otherwise, the OT related to God in a place (e.g., tabernacle) or through his deeds. They had a few of God's words but not the direct experience of the Word in vulnerable flesh. Unfortunately, this is also how it is for many persons *after* the OT, even to this day.

Jesus changes all that with "nothing less and no substitutes." That's *how* he came to pursue us, and that's also *what* he pursues in us—"nothing less and no substitutes" of *me*. This is the *truth* (faithfulness) Jesus revealed of *how God does relationships*. Do we honestly think that God accepts "anything less" or "a substitute" from us than the authentic, genuine *me*? This is the *grace* (unfailing love) Jesus revealed of *why God demands the honesty of our heart* in order to be involved with him. Can we realistically imagine a meaningful relationship with God without this kind of connection? He himself forgives me, redeems my heart, cleans my heart and makes me whole again in the image of his heart and, then, reconciles me intimately to his Father. That's why the God of heart, who created us for this intimate relationship, came himself in order to restore us to his original design and purpose.

Relational Work Wanted

To truly know God is a function of relationship—the ongoing relationship in which our hearts are opened to each other, just as Jesus revealed. Such intimate connection by its nature can only be experienced within the relational context—the context Jesus brought by presenting himself to us and the relationship Jesus established by the honesty of his heart. God has done his part, and continues to do it, in our relationship with him (Jn.17:26). But this raises another issue which we must address.

God did not create a structure about life called "relationship"—a structure which everyone automatically has to live by. He created us for relationship not as an outward form but as a deeper process. The substance of this relational process implies the cooperation of each person and includes their freedom of choice to participate. God lives by this process. That means that no matter how much God does or desires in a relationship, he is always "limited" in that relationship by the choices and cooperation of the other person. In other words, we can put God in a box—constraining him relationally, though not ontologically.

When Jesus expressed his sorrow for Jerusalem, he shared how often he *longed* to be intimately connected with them (Lk.13:34). The word "longed" (Gk. *thelo*) Jesus used to express his deep desire means "to will, desire implying active volition and purpose." *Thelo* includes not only the will or desire but also acting on it. This word is distinguished from another word for "will" (*boulomai*) which merely involves a decision or intention without the resolve to act on it. Yet, no matter what Jesus did or desired, it was not enough to make connection with them. Why? Because "you were not willing" (v.34), Jesus said, using the same word (*thelo*) for them as he did for himself. It took both of them to make relational connection. Even intentions (*boulomai*) are not sufficient for connection.

Grace tells us we can't experience God in relationship based on what we do. But, **grace also shows us that we don't experience God in relationship solely by what God does and desires**. Such an experience with God requires our ongoing choice to openly participate in the relationship also. But this is more than a decision or intention on our part (*boulomai*). This relational outcome happens only from the conscious, volitional action (*thelo*) we take ongoingly within our relationship with God—the resolve to open ourselves honestly in response to the vulnerably present, loving person of God. Jesus' brother also instructs us to do our part by "approaching God intimately" ("come near," James 4:8) and God will do his part for the intimate connection.

Relationship means cooperation. This cooperation is not merely a decision made at the beginning of a relationship, nor a resolution made once or twice a year. Cooperation is our ongoing, active choice to exercise our commitment to be involved with God in relationship – even if it involves only giving God the opportunity to say something, be with us or respond to us. Without our cooperation, the relationship doesn't really function, no matter how long we've had it, no matter what else we do because of it, no matter how much God does or desires.

Unlike the limits and constraints of the O.T., God gives us all the opportunities needed to know him directly and experience him intimately. But these opportunities exist only within the context of this relational process in which we are responsible to openly

participate. So, **to grow in knowing God and experiencing him requires *relational work***. Such relational work could be problematic if we are not used to exercising this kind of effort and work in our everyday life and relationships. Most of this depends on how we define ourselves and then how we do our relationships.

Since the relational work Jesus revealed does not depend on establishing ourselves by what we do, we can't define ourselves in these ways. It doesn't matter if we have no experience at relational work, whether we're good at it or suck at it. This is not about measuring up. We can't do relational work by depending on *what we do.*

We cannot substitute for the relational effort and work needed on our part. For example, this involves: spending time being involved *together* with God but not just sharing the same space (even in Bible study or at church); sharing with each other openly but not just talking, reporting or data collecting (e.g., in prayer); doing something together but not just *doing* it as an end in itself but as a means of further *being* together (e.g., while serving or in worship). All of these necessitate that I involve more of *me*, my person, the honesty of my heart. God does his part of the relational work; now he lovingly pursues us to make the effort and do the work necessary for our part in the relationship. Remember, this does not necessarily mean *doing* more than you are now. Relational work is about quality, not quantity. You may actually need to do less in order to get to this quality.

The important matter in relational work is to put ourselves in God's relational context to engage God and get involved in the relational process. In whatever method this relational work is undertaken (e.g., spiritual disciplines), nothing less than the ongoing response back of our willfully open heart will consummate intimate connection with God. To know God and to experience him is to grow in this relational process – to grow by taking responsibility for our part in the relationship and acting on it, however imperfect. The alternative is to stay in our comfort zone or keep God in a box.

Two persons to form the relationship. Two cooperating persons to make it a working (functional) relationship. Two willfully open persons to experience intimate relational connection. The Father seeks only the latter!

Chapter 3 ESTABLISHING THIS DEEPER RELATIONSHIP

I have made you known to them ... in order that the love you have for me may be in them.

John 17:26

As we discussed in the preceding chapter, there is nothing mystical about making intimate relational connection with God. Although this connection demands a lot from us by requiring honesty of our heart, once we start thinking relationally, the actual relationship between God and the authentic genuine *me* is relatively simple to understand. This is not to say that there is no mystery here. Relationship with God involves significant mystery. Yet, because of the person Jesus and his words, mystery doesn't prevent, diminish or confuse the relational process. At the same time, there are many other issues which complicate the relational process of ongoing involvement with God by their influence or control on us. These issues are important for us to discuss as we continue to examine the life and words of the person Jesus.

Relationships are exciting not only because God created relationships in general and created us for intimate relationship with himself specifically; relationships are exciting also because of their dynamic nature. Any relationship is never static; that is, it is either growing or declining. It never merely stands still or gets suspended, though it may seem to. When we describe a relationship as "not going anywhere," we usually mean that it's not growing, or that it's starting to decline. Sometimes our relationship with God seems like it's not going anywhere. Those are times we can better understand and deal with by examining the dynamics of our relationship with him.

To make intimate connection with God is exciting. Yet whatever connection I had with him "yesterday" does not automatically determine that I have the same connection today. Relational work is ongoing. This doesn't mean that we start from scratch with each day. Growing in a relationship is a process of building together. So, God doesn't do all the work, nor do we. And we don't always do the same amount of work with each day in the relationship. This is the dynamic relational process of give-and-take which builds on an initial intimate connection to establish ongoing deeper relationship with God.

Such a functioning relationship with any person is truly exciting. This relationship keeps unfolding, evolving if you wish. In any such relationship there is always more to learn about and to experience with the other person. When the other person is God, such a functioning relationship becomes the ultimate relational adventure. There is so much of him to know and experience, and this process of discovery can be endless.

You may wonder how much is possible or what limits there are. How much our heart can take in and experience of him is not determined by our genetic make-up or environmental factors. The potential of our heart is the very source of its created image, the heart of God. Since Jesus brought this God of heart in the flesh and made the limitless God available to us for intimate relationship, there isn't anything from God's

side to put constraints on our relationship with him. He is ready to take us beyond what we can imagine (Eph.3:20).

Knowing Where Our Relationship Is Focused

Is this excitement about endless relationship and limitless relational experience real and valid? Or is it the product of "feeling-based" or "mindgame" faith? This is a fair question. We should always check our presuppositions—especially in Christian living.

If we ask ourselves "how much direct access to God do I really feel I have available to me?," we would all conclude differently about the amount—even though we know Christ opened the way to the Father. The reason our experience may not match our beliefs or theology could very well have more to do with *"how* we present ourselves to God" than the actual amount of access available to us. "How" we present ourselves has a lot to do with the kind of relational connection we make with God. This is as true for the quantity of connection as it is for the quality discussed in the previous chapter.

So, for example, when we Christians think about growing in this relationship, too often the focus is essentially on God helping us to do our thing—even if the intention is for his purpose. The concern becomes how we can experience his help, power, promises, even him in what *we're doing*. We spend so much of our time with God trying to get him to improve our life. This, in effect, is relationally trying to engage God only within the context of our life and have him involved in our ways, situations and what we're doing. But Jesus didn't bring us God in order to help us do our thing. He came to take us to his Father. Relationship with God is about him, not about me. It's about engaging God within the context of his life, not he in mine.

The difference could be very subtle and not readily apparent to us in appearance. The contrast of the relational processes, however, really shows the relationship going in opposite directions. Further examination also reveals that this involves the issues of how we define ourselves and how we then do relationships. And these issues likely express the substitutes we make in life or the "less" we settle for, instead of embracing all that Jesus makes available to us.

Jesus helps us distinguish the subtle relational dynamics in a critical interaction with those who were following him (read John 6). The scene begins with his feeding the 5000. When they saw his miraculous work and the implications of it, their excitement was too much to restrain. This was the *one* they'd been waiting for to make their king (6:14,15). Jesus tried to stay away from them but they persisted in following him (6:16-25). Now, what could appear better than following Jesus? Didn't Jesus want more followers?

In the interaction that followed Jesus clarifies what is *better* and what he wants from us. He begins by telling these followers that they are pursuing him for the wrong reasons (6:26). They, in effect, didn't really see "miraculous signs" (Gk. *semeion*), which are valuable not so much for what the miracles in themselves are as for what they indicate about the grace and power of the one performing them. Obviously, these followers were affected by what Jesus' miracles did for them; and that's what motivated them. Because they focused on that, these followers totally missed seeing the *person* Jesus, this person of God vulnerably before them in the flesh.

They missed *being with God* because they were focused on what he did and how they could benefit from it. In doing so, they only focused on secondary things (about God and their relationship) from a position of self-interest or self-concern. This is crucial for followers of Jesus to understand. In terms of the relational process, "in search of Jesus" (6:24) for them, as it can be for us, actually took their relationship in the opposite direction from the person Jesus.

Jesus redirects their life effort to his person when he challenged the substitutes they made in life and how they settled for less (6:27). They inquired further how they could bring about in their lives *doing* "the works God requires" (v.28). Since these followers defined themselves by what they did, they continued to focus incorrectly on secondary things because that's how they did relationships. They focused on "the works" (plural) they needed to do to define themselves worthy before God in order to receive. One way or another we've all done this in order to feel worthy relationally before God, even though our beliefs intellectually talk about grace.

Jesus countered that "the work" (singular) which God wants from us is only *relational work*: the relational trust of our hearts (our *being*), not our *doing* (v.29). Relational work is problematic for many followers of Christ, as it continued to be for these followers. Later in our study we will examine their further interaction and understand why it resulted in no longer following Jesus.

Relational work is problematic because it is incompatible with most approaches to life. When we define ourselves, for example, by what we *do* (or accomplish) or by what we *have* (or accumulate), then the *total person* (particularly as reflected by the heart) is given less and less importance. In the course of life, this creates conditions in which our attention becomes focused on secondary things about our person or the other person: things we are able to do, things we have, outward appearance, the color of our skin, the way we pray, etc.

If these are the ways we define our *self*, then these are the ways we define others also. How does that impact how we then do relationships? If the *total person* is made less important, then our actions in relationships are less critical. During the course of everyday living, that creates conditions in which the substance of relationships is substituted for, then we settle for a less substantive experience than what is available. In these conditions, *doing* an activity together becomes a substitute for *being* with each other and more directly involved; we settle for sharing the same space over sharing with each other while in that space. Work becomes more important than investing in time together. Providing things for each other is more important than making myself available to another. In fact, just having the *idea* of a relationship which has value for us is often sufficient these days rather than actually experiencing the relationship in function. The primacy of relationships in God's design and purpose is lost in all of this.

The substitutes we make for relational connection and what we settle for in place of deeper connection both create and maintain distance between persons in relationships. This effectively redefines God's design and purpose for relationships. Sadly, the most significant consequence of doing relationships like this is *the loss of intimacy*—both with God and with others.

From this discussion we can see how **relational work is not only incompatible with this way of defining ourselves and doing relationships, it is also in conflict with them**. For the followers in the above interaction with Jesus, they were confronted with

the need to be freed and to change from their established ways of defining themselves and doing relationships. These are issues for all of us—issues becoming points of contention in John 6 which we will discuss later.

Eternity Substance

Jesus also challenged the people in their life work to pursue that which "endures to eternal life" (6:27), that is, that which is lasting, never ending. It's obviously difficult for any of us to put eternal life into practical perspective. Yet we can all relate to wanting something good to last, some enjoyable or satisfying experience to never end. God wants that for us also. That's why Jesus came: "which the Son of Man will give you" (v.27). But, it is important for his followers not to define this merely in spiritual terms; here again it is important for us to think relationally.

Let's look at this term "eternal life" to see if it has more immediate meaning for us than in life after death. Although we generally assume everyone wants eternal life, few of us actually have an interest in eternal life other than some insurance about the distant future. And though Christians usually make eternal life the ultimate reward of faith in Christ, there is little understanding of what that really means. It's like saying: we don't know what it is but we want it and are thankful to have it; we don't know what we have but we want others to have it also. Eternal life essentially has become some vague concept which we make assumptions about and take for granted. This is understandable, in one sense, if that's all there is to know about eternal life. But this limited perspective is unfortunate because Jesus revealed much more to us than "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

First of all, we need to establish some groundwork from which the more immediate meaning of eternal life can emerge. The writer of Ecclesiastes provides this groundwork in his honest reflections on life. He tells us in those popular words that "God has made everything beautiful in its time" (Ecc.3:11). In the same breath he also mentions that *"God has planted eternity in the human heart"* (v.11, NLT). This part of the verse is actually more crucial for us and should grab our attention more than the better known part. That's because the writer's honest reflections inspired by God get us to the heart of everyday life and the underlying needs of daily living.

How does this relate to *eternity*? Eternal means lasting, never ending. We know God is eternal (Gen.21:33; Jer.10:10). This eternal God has a perfect plan in which everything is made beautiful according to it. And this eternal God has transplanted a part of his eternity-substance into our human heart. Yet, even with this eternity-substance of God in us, his big picture plan is still beyond our comprehension; our minds can't even imagine all that's involved (Ecc.3:11). In God's big picture plan, all the parts of it are wonderfully put together into this perfect *whole*. Though humans can't fully take in or imagine this *whole*, we can experience and enjoy the beauty of some of its parts. We can because God has made us with the substance of this *whole* in us; he implanted his eternity-substance in our heart. So, though our mind can't comprehend or imagine his big picture plan, our heart has definite understanding of it.

This understanding in our heart can be a burden or a blessing. It's a burden when it just brings out dissatisfaction and frustration with our life, as it did for the writer of

Ecclesiastes. But such honest reflections on our life are also a blessing when it helps us realize there is more in life to experience and enjoy. This is beyond merely an awareness; it is the deep desire of our heart for *more*.

This *more* that our heart desires is the working of his eternity-substance in us. This "eternity stuff" we've been discussing is basic to our heart's needs and desires. Our heart is never fully and permanently satisfied (though it is often fooled) with the temporary things in life we use as substitutes, nor satisfied with anything less we settle for. We were designed and made with the very stuff of eternity. That which is lasting in our life, which is a never-ending experience for us and that which is totally satisfying in us, this is what eternity is all about and what our heart needs and desires.

From this groundwork our understanding of eternal life can expand. How can we describe all this in a functional way such that it takes on more immediate meaning for us? We turn again to Jesus to complete our understanding.

On one occasion Jesus encountered an interesting, successful young guy who pursued him about eternal life (read Mk.10:17-27). That eternity-substance apparently stirred in his heart a great deal because he assertively imposed himself on Jesus (v.17). Whether he had been feeling this for awhile or whether seeing Jesus' loving treatment of little children just prior (10:13-16) triggered his feelings, he seized the opportunity to pursue *more*. Remember, by all standards back then or even today this guy was successful—and young.

What exactly was the *more* he was pursuing? You may think that since he asked "to inherit eternal life" (Mk.10:17) this was just a typical evangelistic conversation about life after death. But he wasn't merely seeking to prolong his life into eternity. So, if this wasn't about insurance for the future, why was a successful young guy pursuing more? The word he used for "life" (Gk. *zoe*) involves a deeper substance than another word for life (Gk. *bios*); and this really reflected the need and desire of his heart. This is about that eternity stuff from Ecclesiastes—not about time and quantity but about depth and quality.

This guy began the conversation by addressing Jesus as "good teacher" (10:17). From this address and his opening words we can see where this guy was focused. We can also begin to understand how he defined himself and how he did relationships. The word for "good" (Gk. *agathos*) means "good, profitable, useful, virtuous." What do you think he specifically meant by the word "good"? Jesus knew where his focus was. So, he immediately asked him: "Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God" (10:18).

Obviously, Jesus is God, though at the time this guy didn't realize that. Still, was he correct to call Jesus *good*? That depends on what he was focused on and how he used the word. If he focused on what Jesus *did* and implied that what Jesus *did* would be "profitable, useful" to him, then he was correct to call Jesus "good." But if he wasn't focused on the *person* Jesus (his *being*, not his *doing*) and referred to him as good (meaning to be virtuous), then he was incorrect. Jesus knew that this guy wasn't focused on *him*, his person, only on what he did. Consequently, he immediately tried to refocus the guy on his person in this somewhat indirect manner. If the guy hadn't been so self-absorbed, he might have asked Jesus: "do you mean that you're not good, or that you're God?"

After addressing Jesus as "good teacher," he asked "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:17). What do you think is the difference between "what must *I do*" and

"*how* can I inherit eternal life"? On appearance the two may seem similar to you. But there is actually a major difference. "How can I" asks for the way and/or the means to acquire eternal life. It doesn't necessarily imply any abilities or attributes of the one asking other than "how is it possible for me ... ?" "What must *I do*," on the other hand, sends distinctly different relational messages. Consider these messages and how you may give God these same messages:

(1) What is the guy saying about himself? I define myself by what I do, so I can do it, or at least I have to do it. Just tell me what I have to do.

Note: since he is pursuing eternal life, eternal also means "life which is God's"; this has implications in the following relational message.

(2) So, what is he saying about God? That God defines him by what he does also. This is how God is and what he is like.

(3) Then, what is he saying about their relationship? That the relationship depends on what they do, so he has to fulfill doing something in order to participate in God's life.

Since this guy focused on *doing* something, he didn't have a good grasp of his own heart. Yes, he pursued the stirrings in his heart for more. But he also missed seeing the person Jesus, because when we define ourselves by what we do or have, we also define others by what they do or have. That's why he focused on what Jesus did and had also. Since he focused on secondary things instead of *persons*, how he did relationships also focused on *doing* something, not relational connection between persons. Does any of this seem to reflect our lives as well?

After trying to refocus him, Jesus brought up actions basic to God's life—the commandments (10:19). As many of us do today, this successful young guy perceived these actions from his *doing* (the letter of the law) rather than his *being* (the spirit of the law); therefore, he also failed to grasp their importance for relationships in God's design and purpose. But, then, this would be predictable from how he defined himself and did relationships. Yet, he declared to Jesus that he faithfully practiced these behaviors since his youth (10:20). Despite his devotion, something still seemed to be missing for him, so he pursued more. Now, here was a guy who was not only successful from the standpoint of social and cultural values, he was also serious and devoted to his religious faith. Based on these standards, could we describe a better candidate for eternal life?

Despite all that he was accomplishing and all he had, this serious, devoted, successful young guy wanted *more* in his life. I don't think his sincerity was lost on Jesus. He wasn't like the Pharisees. So, Jesus pursued his heart further and loved (*agape*) him (10:21). Those familiar words which came out of Jesus' mouth seem so exceptionally demanding to us that we take them as an exception rather than the rule. These gentle, loving words were so burdensome to this serious, devoted religious guy, as they seem to us, that he didn't embrace them and walked away depressed (10:22). Was Jesus too hard on him? Wasn't he, after all, serious and devoted?

It wasn't the words that were important but the person who said them. In lovingly sharing those specific words with him, Jesus redefined this guy's person and what he based himself on; and by sharing these words, Jesus also lovingly revealed what was important to God, to God's life and thus to eternal life. The emphasis in his words is not

on *doing* something, like "go, sell everything ...," but on "*follow me*." Jesus tried to focus the guy on his God person, not demand more deeds from him. Jesus wanted this serious guy to be involved with *him*, not involved in *doing* things, even if they were for God. This is *relational work* that Jesus lovingly asked from him. That's *what* the guy lacked; ironically, that's also *why* he wanted more in his life—that *more* of eternity-substance. As long as he defined himself in that *old* way, he would continue to do relationship with God without making intimate connection. Was Jesus too hard on him, or did Jesus want *more* for him also?

Two Critical Errors of Relationship

This serious, devoted, religious and successful guy made two critical errors which are important for us to understand and examine in our own life. I will mention these two errors now but discuss them further later. This guy addressed Jesus as "good teacher." We need to understand the meaning of "teacher" (Gk. *didaskolos*) and the relationship implied with those who called someone teacher back in that time. It was not casual or even insignificant as it has become in U.S. culture. To have someone as your teacher meant that you were more than a student or learner. It meant you were their disciple, an adherent, which involved a deeper attachment to the teacher. Jesus defined that attachment as the intimate relationship of friends (Jn.15:15). (We'll discuss being his disciple in more detail in Chapter 6.)

This is the kind of connection that Jesus wanted to make with this guy. But this was his **first critical error**. He related to Jesus as his teacher but without being a disciple (Gk. *mathetes*). He came only as a student or learner, someone who was simply there to learn (Gk. *matheo*) without any attachment to the teacher. In other words, he saw Jesus as useful or profitable to advance his life. Since he defined himself by what he did and what he had, and related to Jesus in the same way, he thought Jesus had something useful to him. But Jesus gave him more than he asked for—he gave himself.

Defining ourselves by what we do (achieve) and by what we have (accumulate) provides us with comfort zones in how we do relationships. For example, it's always easier in relationships to talk about what we're doing rather than what we're thinking or feeling. It's always easier to present our *self* to others with what we do or have rather than with our basic person. Consider: what do you bring to a relationship if it's not what you do or have? These secondary areas become not only comfort zones; they also become a way of life to which we become progressively comfortable, attached, maybe addicted, not to mention seduced by, but essentially locked into—or, as the Bible defines it, *enslaved*.

This lack of freedom from what he did and had is clearly demonstrated by our serious, successful guy as he walked away. What would define him if he stopped depending on what he did and had? How could he be comfortable in relationships, especially with God, if he didn't present himself on this basis? Jesus tried to assure him that all that wasn't necessary, it's OK, he didn't have to do it on his own, he could trust God (10:27). But, he didn't let go and trust because he was enslaved to his *old* ways, as we often are.

Despite how he lived and his lack of freedom, he still sought to *inherit* (i.e., be an

heir of) eternal life. This was his **second critical error**. We also have to understand the significance of an inheritance in those days. Not just anybody could receive an inheritance. Where was he coming from? Since he was not free from his way of defining himself and doing relationships, he in essence pursued this inheritance of God's life from the position of a slave. Regardless of his best efforts, a slave could not qualify for an inheritance in those days, only a son would qualify. But this guy functioned only like a slave. In his serious, devoted religious practice, he wasn't really making intimate connection with God to experience *being* his son. He didn't *belong* to Christ in spite of Jesus' loving effort to establish him as his disciple in this intimate relationship.

Since he wasn't willing to turn from these critical errors, he didn't experience the *more* that the eternity-substance in his heart needed and desired. Christians today often have these same stirrings for more because they don't feel connected, satisfied or whole. Something is missing.

To Journey *in* Eternity

Astonished by the interaction between Jesus and the young guy, the disciples present wondered among themselves, if this serious, devoted, successful guy didn't qualify "who then can be saved?" (10:26). Now don't be too quick to pass over the word "saved" (*sozo*) with its familiar use and connotation today. The word also means "to make whole." This *wholeness* is basic to what the eternity-substance in our heart needs and desires. And wholeness is not just for the future but it also has immediate significance for us now.

But this understanding of eternity in our heart and the desire to be *whole* as a part of God's life and big picture plan, this eternity-substance can be a blessing or a burden. In the end it was only a burden for the young guy. Whether the *old* was an easier way for him or because of its seduction, he passed up the opportunity for *more*. The immediate significance of eternity creates either a burden or a blessing for all of us. Can we learn from the errors of this guy in order to increasingly experience more of eternal life? That's an urgent question Jesus challenges us with because that's what he came to save us *from* and save us *to*.

I don't know if you've felt like I have in the past. But there were times that I wanted more in my life, that I wasn't really satisfied with what I was experiencing—whether in what I was doing or in my relationships. After praying and doing what I could to improve things, I still was in the same condition. So, I concluded that for the most part I had to live with that condition until I got to heaven. Because I'm human and in an imperfect state I won't experience all that I desire now until I'm made perfect in heaven. Though there is some biblical truth in this, most of it comes from assumptions and extra-biblical Christian beliefs and practices as well as lies generated by Satan. As common as this thinking is among Christians it only serves to effectively keep us in a comfort zone or a place of resignation. It keeps us from letting God satisfy us deeply and ongoingly by expanding our hearts in what it can experience—especially experience about *love*.

Yet this is exactly what this eternity-substance is all about. **We are on this actual journey not only *to* eternity but also *in* eternity**—a journey with the eternal God in

intimate relationship together who keeps expanding us *in* his life now as we journey *to* his life. Certainly, on the one hand of truth, this journey *to* eternity and *to* the fullness of God's life won't be complete until we come into his full presence in heaven. But, on the other hand of truth, and even more encouraging for us in the present, with the reality of this eternity-substance implanted in us we are also on a journey *in* eternity—this part of our journey in which we are able to partake *in* God's life increasingly now and to experience intimate relationship with him now.

This is what the eternal God currently keeps expanding us in more and more until it "reaches eternity." **Functionally, if we don't live in this journey *in* eternity, then our life doesn't keep expanding**. We essentially plateau (reach a ceiling or even diminish) because we live instead by the limits of our humanity (and temporal substitutes) or by our assumptions, notions and lies which put God in a box. Any of these alternatives also constrain us from being free to experience all that is available to us which Jesus brought in his person and words.

As we ask along with the disciples "who then can experience the *wholeness of life which is lasting*?" we need to take to heart Jesus' response that "human effort is always insufficient to experience that which by its nature is only possible through God's loving effort; so trust me" (10:27). God is the one who implanted eternity in our heart. So, he is the one who now opens us to experience eternity—i.e., not to some endless "time frame" but to his *person*, his life. Life together in relationship results in that *wholeness* which our heart needs and desires. But Christians need to take to heart that, while human effort cannot replace grace to save us, neither does human effort replace ongoing relational trust in God to experience this life together. What Jesus opens to us in his person and words cannot be experienced by anything provided in our shortsighted time frame (the temporal) and by our limited ways (the common). What we come up with are all substitutes. So we are lovingly challenged by Christ, like the serious young guy who pursued Jesus for more but sadly returned to settle for less.

* * *

Given this discussion about the young guy and combining the two variations of this interaction in Mark (10:17-27) and Matthew's (19:16-26) accounts, I would suggest a modern paraphrase which might sound like this:

Having just observed Jesus' treatment of those active little children, a successful young guy was impressed by him, sensing that there was something unique, very special about Jesus. So, he excitedly imposed himself on Jesus and begged him to be his mentor.

Guy: *Mentor, I'm not experiencing all that I want in my life. Something is missing! So, what would be useful for me to do in order to really grab onto a truly awesome, satisfying life that will* last*—none of this popular or trendy stuff? Show me the real thing!*

Jesus: *Well, I don't know if you realize what you're asking but have you tried the conventional ways practiced in a church? That's the usual way."*

Guy: *I've done it all ever since I started back in youth group. I've done everything they*

told me; I've been a model church member. But something doesn't seem right, something is missing because I'm not really satisfied. So, what's going on? What am I doing wrong!

Jesus: *My dear friend, I can feel your frustration and I know you want* more*. But this is what you're missing. If you want to be whole and complete in life, then you have to stop defining yourself by what you* do *and* have*. That's what the majority do, even in my church. I know you've successfully done different things and have accumulated a lot at a young age. But you have to stop trusting in what you do and have—and also let go of the illusions of your accomplishments. When you do that you'll stop depending on yourself and will* trust me*. Then, we'll start connecting more intimately and you will experience the quality of life you've been missing.*

Guy: *But I've worked hard to get where I am and to get what I have. How can I just let it all go? What would I do then? What will I have left? I can't give it up. This is such a bummer—it's so depressing.*

Jesus: *The truth is it's hard for anyone to experience* more *when they believe* lies *about their* person *and embrace illusions of their life. Substitutes are always easier and can be seductive.*

The disciples couldn't believe what they were hearing.

Disc: *Wow, if this model guy (serious, sincere, devoted, successful) can't do it, then who* can *measure up, how can we become* whole*?*

Jesus: *That's the very heart of the matter! You can't do it—no one can, no matter what you've accomplished—even if it's for God. You want to see yourself as better than what you truly are. But all you can come up with are temporary substitutes. You're still all basically deficient and incapable by yourself to experience the* more *of eternity. That's why God lovingly extends his favor to help you. If you want* more*, you have to respond back to him ongoingly with the relational work of trust. I'm here to establish you in that intimate relationship. Trust me!*

The Relationship of Eternity

After Jesus' challenging words, Peter, speaking for the disciples, contrasts all of them with this guy: "We have left everything to follow you" (10:28). True, in contrast to one of the young guy's critical errors they were indeed Jesus' disciples. But, as we will see later in our study, the disciples, especially as represented in Peter, also lived in many ways functionally like slaves, not free from the *old*. That is, they still defined themselves and did relationships by the old. Yet, except for Judas, they gave Jesus the opportunity to be with them in this. So, Jesus assured them: "I tell you the truth, no one who has left [let go of] ... for me ... will fail to receive [partake of, experience] a hundred times as much in this present age [period of opportunity]" (10:29-30).

Reflect on this for yourself. This is not so much about sacrifice but about sharing in a relational life together. Jesus assured them that as they truly follow him—that is,

intimately involve themselves with him—they will be transformed to the *new* and be satisfied as never before (a hundredfold). His followers will be satisfied not by quantity but by the quality of eternity-substance which they will experience now, not in the future only. But he reminds them of the difference between the *old* and the *new* (10:31), implying from their interaction not to be fooled by, have illusions about nor settle for substitutes. Here Jesus clearly connects *being* a disciple (in a relational life together) directly to this eternity-substance and experiencing *more* now. We will extend the discussion on discipleship in Chapter 6.

The eternal God and his life vulnerably extended to us in the person Jesus is not about "time and quantity" but about "boundless depth and quality." Anything that limits this depth and quality constrains who God is and essentially puts him in a box. If we don't put constraints on God nor remain within our own limits, how far can all of this go? What is the potential of what we can experience and how much satisfaction we can have? When Jesus said "a hundred times as much," I don't think he quantified this potential. Though "100x" is an awesome amount, that could still be limiting. Being created as persons of heart in the image of the God of heart, the potential of how much our heart can experience is again directly determined by the heart of God. With eternity implanted in our heart, the potential of how far our heart can be expanded is all the way to eternity.

This may be difficult for us to comprehend or even imagine. That's usually when we rely solely on conventional thinking based on "time and space and quantity." When we include the heart and add thinking relationally, then we can start to better grasp "depth and quality" and move to embrace more and more of its relational significance. As we listen with our heart to Jesus tell us about eternal life, it increasingly comes into the *present*. As we embrace in our heart what he revealed about eternal life, we are brought "face-to-face" with God in the present as a lasting and satisfying experience of intimate relationship together.

This lasting and totally satisfying experience from eternity is what Jesus came to objectively present on our finite terms, on the one hand. But he goes beyond our finite terms to take us to the next level of his eternal terms to connect us with the intimate presence of the eternal God. In order that we are not left to incomprehension or to mystical imagination, Jesus provided clear understanding of all this in very simple, functional terms: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn.17:3). In this closing prayer to his Father for all his followers, Jesus goes on to define *knowing* the Father and him not as a matter of information and intellectual beliefs but as the ongoing deep intimate relationship of love, just as the Father and Jesus experience together (17:26).

From these words of Jesus, it all comes into focus. This helps us describe this lasting and satisfying experience of eternity in functional terms as an ongoing intimate relationship of love which we can now operationalize in daily living. **Intimate relationship with the Father and with Jesus is that never-ending experience of hearts being bonded together—together in the same love the Father gives Jesus without end**. But, remember any relationship is not static; its dynamic nature requires relational work. So, as we willfully exercise the honesty of our whole heart in trust to be intimately involved with the heart of God, that results in the deeply satisfying experience which will last.

All else in life is not fully and permanently satisfying, though it obviously provides a temporary substitute. Such substitutes are either easier choices or seductive alternatives. That's why we are continuously challenged throughout our life not to settle for less (that which is *too small*), as did the successful young guy, though from the standpoint of quantity he certainly had a lot. But the eternity-substance in our heart will always be restless in its need and desire for *more*. God has put himself in us, so that we won't be satisfied if we settle for what won't last. He has put his heart in us with his design and purpose—that is, a heart for intimate connection and relationships. This relational outcome is the only satisfying experience that will fill the human heart. And the relationships of eternal life (Jn.17:3) are the only satisfying experiences of our heart which will never end. This relationship is total, complete, whole, final.

Our relationship with God is also the baseline for all our other relationships. It is what transforms us from *old* to *new* to live transformed relationships with others, not the common way people define themselves and do relationships. It provides us with the intimate experience of love (especially through forgiveness) in order to love others. It is the model and experience of loving intimacy which God wants for all relationships, especially in his church. Given all that is involved in eternal life for us during the present time, what can have more immediate meaning and significance to our lives?

Counter-Relational Work

As we extend our study about experiencing intimate relationship with God, we need to go beyond familiar thoughts and views in order to deepen our understanding of this relationship. Accordingly, the more we talk about intimate relationship with God and the deeper our heart gets involved with the heart of God, the more urgent it is for us to discuss the most vital issue complicating this ongoing relational process. Earlier I only briefly mentioned this issue, but it is critical for us to examine further the presence and work of Satan. As we do, let's prepare to go beyond the familiar in relation to Satan also.

Satan is not just a neutral observer of our relationship with God; as God's enemy he will and does take action ongoingly to try to negatively affect the relational process. Therefore, we can expect his actions not so much in overt and blatant situations but in more subtle continuous ways against the relationship. As we've seen, relational work in itself is difficult enough without having it compounded by the likes of Satan. But this is the reality which even Jesus dealt with. So, the better we understand and the more we deal with Satan's presence and work, the freer the relational process will be for us to experience intimate relationship with God.

Since the God of heart created us in his image as persons of heart to be intimately involved with him in a heart-to-heart relationship, then **Satan's main objective for Christians is to get us as distant or detached from our heart as he can and, thus, interfere in this relationship**. Satan can't break our relationship with God, but he certainly tries to interfere with it. In other words, Satan is also engaged in relational work; but the work he does is only ***counter-relational work***. Nevertheless, his primary goal for Christians is to work on our relationship, not so much to get us to do wrong, bad things and sin (in a limited sense). How then does he work?

Satan does his counter-relational work more covertly than the overt ways he is usually considered and depicted doing. His covert operation especially takes place in Christian contexts where, as Paul said, he masquerades (Gk. *metaschematizo*: changes his outward form or appearance, but not his substance) as "an angel of light" along with his servants masquerading as "servants of righteousness" (see 2 Cor.11:13-15). Where else would this be going on the most today but in our churches? This involves only outward change which is qualitatively different than transformation of one's inner or total person (*metamorphoo*, e.g., in Rom.12:2).

Furthermore, Satan influences us with lies, being the father and author of lies (Jn.8:44). Lies, for example, to get us to try to be a "better Christian" by *doing* more Christian things rather than giving priority to our relationship with God and our *persons*; that make us feel we don't measure up to God's expectations, grace notwithstanding; that reduce our integrity as a total person by emphasizing our mind over our heart. Along with other various lies within church traditions, Satan's work in the church has confused us, for example, by blurring the distinction between God's grace and our works. It has entangled us in practices of our faith which focus more on *doing* than *being*, on secondary matters like activities over the primacy of relationships, on the outward appearance of faith rather than its inner experience and true substance.

Satan cultivates and promotes these lies as substitutes for our transformation (*metamorphoo*). As long as we concentrate on secondary matters, we will primarily be concerned with outward changes. He encourages this type of "Christian" change because that would essentially in principle get us into masquerades also. Christian practices of righteousness and light based on lies become a life of illusion. So, the distinction between inner change (*metamorphoo*) and outer change (*metaschematizo*) is crucial to how we define ourselves, do relationships and church.

When Christians, churches and Christian culture become entangled in Satan's lies, then it becomes problematic determining the roots or origins of our beliefs. Functionally, that makes it difficult to maintain substantive consistency in practicing our faith. We can't distinguish between illusion and reality. This happens because the distinction between truth and lie becomes blurred, making us highly vulnerable to compromises in our beliefs and integrity. This issue emerges in one of Satan's tests of Jesus that we will discuss shortly.

Keep clearly in mind Satan's objective in his counter-relational work: to distance or detach us from our heart and to interfere in our relationship with God. When we examine the impact of these lies on our focus on secondary matters, we can see how they effectively keep us from our heart. That in turn relationally prevents a deeper connection with God and thus reduces our opportunity to experience God intimately. This lack in the relationship also denies us the experience of *knowing* him as well as the truth of who/what we really are, and denies us the means to embrace God's truth instead of Satan's lies. The result of these lies is to occupy, to entangle, to enslave (control) us in patterns of living which may have the appearance of being righteous (as opposed to overtly sinful) but not the substance. This makes us vulnerable to playing a role, unintentionally acting out an identity different than our true identity, even putting on a false identity; this is the meaning of the word "hypocrisy" (Greek *hypokrisis*) which Jesus identified as "the yeast of the Pharisees" to avoid practicing in our lives (Lk.12:1).

Masquerading and hypocrisy may seem like strong terms to use to describe a lot of Christian practices—especially if done sincerely or with good intentions. Yet, these biblical descriptions are not used to indict us but to help us understand when we are substituting for or settling for less than all that Jesus makes available to us. That's why it's so vital for us to examine Satan's presence and counter-relational work, especially his lies, and its direct impact on the relational work Jesus defines for us. And the key indicator of all this—the crucial issue to concentrate on—is the distance or detachment we have from our heart and the absence of intimate connection with God. However you want to describe this and whatever you want to call it, this is Satan's goal in the lives of those who have a relationship with Christ. Unfortunately—and this is our challenge—so often churches and Christian culture are unintentionally in complicity with and reinforcing of his lies. Consequently, the more he is exposed in what he does and the more lies we can reveal, the less susceptible we are to continue.

Relational Tests

Jesus began his formal ministry specifically dealing with Satan's testing (temptations) and lies. (I've wondered, then, if this discussion also should have taken place at the beginning of this study.) The importance of the heart and its significance in our relationship with God are strongly brought out in Jesus' tests and exactly how Satan works. So, how Jesus dealt with him is of vital importance to help us contend with Satan, even throughout the course of this study. You've probably already had to struggle with his influence in some earlier content. But after examining Satan's tests of Jesus, I suggest a rereading of the previous sections of our study will be helpful.

The temptations of Jesus (review closely Lk.4:1-13) also represent summary tests for all persons with faith in Christ and how Satan will try to interfere, even intrude, in that relationship. Understanding Satan's tests of Jesus will also help us see the subtlety of his counter-relational work and influence. The three tests are interrelated and, in Luke's order (different order in Mt.), they are progressive.

The first test, which I subdivide into two, began with Satan's challenging words "If you are... " (Lk.4:3). They were challenging not because he questioned Jesus with the truth about his person and to demonstrate (or prove) it. Satan's words challenged that truth specifically by trying to confuse the basis on which Jesus defined his person. He presents this same challenge to all Christians.

Before we further examine his challenging words, however, we need to understand the context of this situation. Jesus was hungry from forty days and nights of fasting when Satan said this (cf. Mt.4:2). From the standpoint of his humanity Jesus was vulnerable in this situation because of his obvious need from hunger. It was an opportune time for Satan to test him. But the subtlety of Satan's temptation was not about Jesus' need for food. Satan used this moment, influenced by Jesus' circumstances, to get at something deeper and more consequential. Now, remember Satan's goal to distance us from our heart and prevent intimacy with God.

Reflect on: how is Satan trying to get Jesus to see his person—is it really as the son of God? On what specifically is he focusing Jesus—is it merely the food? The answer

is contained in Jesus' response: "a person does not live on bread alone" (Lk.4:4). Since we usually look at this statement apart from its context, our tendency is to interpret Jesus' words merely as the spiritual aspect of life being more important than the physical. Yet, that would be too simplistic and insufficient to meet the challenge of Satan's words.

Jesus was not dividing life or the *person* into different aspects, with the spiritual at the top of the list. That in fact was exactly how Satan was trying to get Jesus to see his person and focus on. Let's rephrase Jesus' words in order to show how he countered Satan: "A person is not defined by only a limited aspect of him or her." This is what Satan tried to do with Jesus and tries to do with us.

1a. Temptation: Satan tries to get us to define ourselves as anything less than the *total person* God made—also died for and is transforming.

As Satan pursues his goal to distance Christians from our heart, he uses a lie connected to this test very effectively among Christians. He uses the following lie to get us to define our person with such limits which constrain our heart. Then our heart is not free, and this creates barriers to intimate relational connection. The most effective and consequential way Satan accomplishes this is with the following lie.

1a. Lie: The need and importance to see ourselves and, therefore, to define our *person* by what we *do* or *have*.

When we define our self in this way, we also define others in the same way. Furthermore, the truth of God is nullified by this lie because in our Christian practice we live as if God also sees us and defines us in the same way. And then we do all of our relationships based on these criteria instead of the importance of the total person and the primacy of intimate relationships. Satan wants Christians to substitute any secondary thing for the *more* available from Jesus and he wants us to settle for less.

Based on the criteria Satan gets many Christians to substitute for more, the rest of Satan's challenging words add: "if you are ... *then do* .... " (Lk.4:3, italics mine). Here Satan tries to get us to act according to this subtle lie. But Jesus refused Satan's lie; he lived instead in the truth of *what* he was, without reducing his person or without constraints on his heart. To follow Jesus' lead, however, can be problematic for many Christians and can even be in contrast to what Christians think they should do. Understandably, our perception of a similar situation may be that there is a legitimate need calling for at least some action. How do we determine what to do?

Satan would say to us: "if you are a Christian, then *do* something based on your situation and circumstances." Seems like sound advice that we probably follow all the time, except that here it would be hard to reconcile since it's coming from Satan. Yet, given the above criteria that's how we may be actually living. That is, not only does Satan try to reduce our total person and distance us from our heart by defining ourselves by what we do and have, but he also reduces life and living to "situations and circumstances." When he gets us to focus on situations and circumstances, he effectively takes our focus away from the primacy of relationships. For example, with the focus on doing something to address a circumstance (problem-solving) or with the concern on

meeting a goal in a situation (goal-oriented), relationships are given less attention, and sensitivity to others (especially God) is diminished.

The ironic rationale for this course of behavior which Satan uses is brought out in the first clause of his challenging words "if you are ..." (v.3). Be it for the Son of God or a Christian, Satan twists around the truth of what we *are* in order to make substitutes in place of a better alternative, thus leaving us in the unexpected position of settling for less.

1b. Temptation: To use our identity or position (privilege, prestige or power) for what appears to be a legitimate personal gain—no matter how seemingly positive, harmless or neutral—over a better alternative.

Think of times when we've done something in a situation because we felt "it's OK"—or that we had a right (privilege) to do so and, thus, did it. But, in further reflection, we could also have done something better, or taken someone else into further consideration (particularly God) if we hadn't done it. You may think that it wasn't really a big deal to do it, that the issue doesn't have to be overblown. Furthermore, since you can almost always find a better alternative, you don't have to labor trying to do the best all the time. You don't want to become constrained in your actions and not be free, especially in "gray areas." After all, the Christian life is not about sacrifice.

While there is some truth in this, the issue here is substitutes we make for *more* and how we settle for less. And the lie Satan uses to distract us from the real issue goes as follows:

1b. Lie: If you are a real Christian, you are free. Don't be legalistic like a Pharisee. In your position, you can do it if you want. It's OK!

Yes, Satan says, we are free to work in that vocation, to have that relationship, to secure those commodities. But the truth is being twisted here. The irony in this lie is that Satan confuses us by using a caution against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees to get us to do, in essence, the same. By deluding us into thinking we're not being narrow-minded like a Pharisee, Satan is in fact constraining us and taking us from a deeper alternative of living better, that is, experiencing *more*.

What is the better alternative for which we substitute? What is this *more* that we don't experience because we settle for less? Jesus leads us into deeper understanding with the remaining words of his response to Satan's initial test: "but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (see account in Mt.4:4). Rather than focus on situations and circumstances and limit our person, Jesus tells us to *think relationally* by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. The original OT words were given to understand (Heb. *yada*, to know personally) that *less* in life is situations and circumstances (like food) and *more* involves the relational meaning of "on every word . . . ." Don't reduce these words to merely truths, beliefs or propositions, nor limit them to the "spiritual" realm. These are words "that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut.8:3). "Mouth" (Heb. *peh*) signifies direct communication from God, communication which is a relational process involving intimate connection.

If one is the Son of God or an authentic Christian, then you don't reduce life to situations and circumstances and live as anything less than your total person but by *intimate relationship with God*. Satan twists this truth and with a lie gets us to make substitutions. And the impact on our relationships (not only with God) reveals the extent of our substitutions.

So, consistent with Satan's goal for Christians, these temptations and lies interfere in our relationship with God, distance our hearts and distract us from intimacy with God. But, in conflict with how we relate to God with our misperceptions (e.g., that God defines us by what we do), our naive perceptions (e.g., God wants to control or constrain us) or our limited perceptions (e.g., God's main concern is for us not to sin), Jesus openly revealed God's person to us in order that his created design and purpose will be fulfilled in the experience of intimate life together with love.

This deeper life of love (*agape*) is not only an intimate life together with God. This exceptional relationship is also designed for us to have and to experience with all his people in loving life together as his family. This love is not the *idea* of love which is often displayed in various Christian cultural practices merely by substituting things. Rather, it is the substance of love made vulnerably visible by Jesus' person and words. Though *agape* love is sacrificial and practical, it is primarily relational and, therefore, defined by *being*, not *doing*. I will expand on this loving life together later in Chapter 8.

Satan exerts influence on us when we define ourselves in a limited way, and as our perceptions become constrained. As this happens we tend not to see beyond ourselves and the situation and circumstances. When we do appear to go beyond ourselves, it is more out of obligation or guilt rather than as a relational response of love. In either case it prevents us from being able to relate to God's *big picture* and diminishes our responsiveness to eternity-substance in our heart.

Through his person and words, Jesus consistently shows us that God calls us to an intimate life of love (*agape*). We can only experience this within the ongoing process of relationship in which we are willing to love (or sacrifice for) others. We are free indeed to love this way because—as Jesus knew during his temptation but Israel struggled to understand (cf. Deut.8:3)—we ongoingly trust God to care for us with *agape* and to relationally keep his promises ("every word") for our life also. To experience this with him and in relation to others is part of that eternity-substance which is truly satisfying – a satisfaction lasting beyond situation and circumstance. So, with increasing understanding we can say with Jesus in response to Satan's challenging words: "Yes indeed, there is more to life than . . . !"

* * *

Before moving on too quickly, reflect on these issues in your life with the help of the Holy Spirit. Ask him to help you to more fully understand your heart and to bring you into honest connection with the Father, *your* Father.

* * *

The next test for Jesus extends the process we see in the first set of temptations. As temptation progresses, so too will Jesus' response provide us with deeper understanding to deal with Satan. This is important for us to embrace because entanglement with Satan's lies blurs the distinction between truth and lie, making us

highly susceptible to compromise our beliefs and integrity.

Keep in mind the criteria Satan uses in the first test as you read his second test (Lk.4:5-7). While "encouraging" us, as he did with Jesus, to see ourselves in limited ways and to keep distance from (set up barriers to) our heart, Satan dangles "carrots" in front of us—esteemed and sought-after goals and ambitions which may have even impressed Jesus. What are your specific goals and ambitions today?

2. Temptation: To have more status, privileges, power, possessions, etc., with which to better define ourselves based on criteria Satan uses in the first test.

Scenarios for us today, which create the same situation faced by Jesus in this test, include areas of education, vocation, material security or relationships. Notice, however, the emphasis is on quantity over quality, as substitutes are made in place of *more*.

Now here is where our temptation may in effect be greater than Jesus' was. Satan told Jesus flat out in the open that it was all his "if you worship me" (Lk.4:7). But, the *cost* for us to gain these is usually not as apparent as Satan presented to Jesus. Nevertheless, the pursuit of these things based on the above criteria always comes with a cost that in some way compromises our beliefs and integrity. If the compromise is not clear, it's because Satan has an easier time fooling us than Jesus. So, he tweaks some truths with another major lie:

2. Lie: To have any of these will make me a better person, or enable me to do more (e.g., even to better serve God or others), or give me the most satisfaction and fulfillment.

Here we see the genius of Satan to blur the distinction between truth and lie.

If we live by this lie, then we are compromising our beliefs and integrity. This is not God's design and purpose for our life. Jesus countered this temptation with words (see Lk.4:8) which we either take too lightly in their significance or take for granted with their familiarity. Obviously, we would worship God over Satan, but this decision is not always that clear. Of course, we would serve God instead of Satan, but this choice is not straightforward in many situations and circumstances.

But when Jesus used "worship" and "serve," he wants us to think relationally about the context and ongoing process these words provide. "Worship" is not about going to church on Sunday; and "serve" is not about *doing* something for God. Jesus is exercising relational work here to negate Satan's counter-relational work. These aren't empty words. True purpose and meaning, as well as ultimate fulfillment, take place only with God and find complete experience within the relational context of the ongoing process of intimate connection with God. These words are not about *doing* something in relation to God called worship and serving; they are about *being* with him and sharing intimately in his life. This is the lasting satisfaction our heart needs and desires.

Yet, Satan will continue to disrupt this relational process. He really doesn't care if Christians practice the outward forms of Christian culture, even if our rhetoric is "spiritually correct." Those only help to perpetuate his lies and keep us from experiencing

God's truth. In fact, he and his servants will practice those same forms and express the same rhetoric (2 Cor.11:14,15)—whatever gets us Christians to reduce our person from the image of the God of heart by distancing our heart and to interfere with our intimacy with God.

When Satan succeeds with the second temptation and lie—when we pursue those goals and ambitions in order to better define ourselves based on criteria from the first set of temptations—we compromise the truth of *how* God sees us, *how* he defines us and *what* we are in Christ based on his grace. And, once again, the main indicators of this compromise are:

(1) a loss of heart (e.g., more emphasis on mind over heart)
(2) a deemphasis (usually more indirect) of the primacy of relationships (e.g., when *doing* is the focus)
(3) the absence of intimacy with God as well as with others (e.g., doing things *for* God more than being *with* him).

When we examine these dynamics between Satan and Jesus/us and reflect on what's happening, we see how Satan's efforts are clearly counter-relational work. Our understanding of him is vital for a healthy, growing relationship with God. I don't think in relation to Christians the main tension (not the only tension) between Satan's lies and God's truth is a theological one. For the most part, I think Satan is willing to give us our theology because he's more interested in minimizing the quality of our practice. In other words, **the main issue for him, as it needs to be for us, is a relational one**.

Jesus understood this and from the outset prepared to live this throughout his ministry. So, this relational focus is what we see in Jesus' responses to Satan's temptation and what repeatedly emerges from his person and words. Jesus brought God's truth not merely so we could have the correct belief system properly systematized in orthodox theology. He revealed the truth of God's person so we can have the right relationship and intimate experience with God. That's why he continuously refocuses us on his God person and relationship with God. When this root of our beliefs becomes detached in our practice, when this heart of our faith is obscured in our life, then Christians are ripe for compromise.

To understand this relational process is to understand Satan's presence. As we examine the third temptation, we will see that the three tests are interrelated and progressive (in Luke's account). This is more than a point to note but important to realize—important indeed because it further shows the process of Satan's counter-relational work and influence which he ongoingly seeks to exert on us.

Since Satan can't completely separate a Christian from God, he is always trying to minimize our relationship with God. When he can't keep us from making our relationship primary by substituting secondary things, when he can't distract us from the best alternative of relational involvement over situations and circumstances, when he can't "encourage" us to "improve" ourselves despite the cost—just like he tried to do with Jesus in the first two tests—then he will try to intrude *directly* in our relationship. This is where the process of Satan's testing brings us in the third temptation (read Lk.4:9-11).

As Satan directly intrudes in the relationship, he doesn't focus only on the individual as he did previously. This time he goes further, directly bringing in God and a promise God makes to us. Don't be distracted by the dramatics of this scene; we face this situation frequently. To help us understand this, consider a promise of particular interest to you. With that promise in mind, listen to these words spoken to you: "If you are God's son/daughter and he really loves you, then act on the basis of this promise and he will respond as you wish." Not only does this seem like good spiritual guidance but it also appears to be building trust in our relationship with God. Wouldn't this be practicing what Jesus said earlier about living "on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt.4:4)?

Sometimes the dynamics in relationships get complicated or confusing. As Jesus' response (Lk.4:12) not only counters Satan, it likely may also confront us: "Don't put God to the test" (GK. *ekpeirazo*, test to the limits, see how far it can go). We should not mistake the nature of this *testing* of God. This is not so much a test to see, for example, morally how much we can get away with before God will get angry and do something to us—although this kind of test should not be made of God either.

Well, if it's not a test like a child seeing what they could get away with, what is its nature? Go back to your promise. It is not wrong to ask God to fulfill this promise for you. There is nothing wrong with stepping out in faith on the basis of this promise. God wants us to do this and he wants to do this for us. So, what then is the problem here?

We have to focus deeply on our relationship with God and what Satan is trying to do to it. Since, at this stage, he hasn't been able to distance or distract Jesus/us from the relationship, he has to disrupt directly how that relationship functions. How does our relationship with God function? We know God wants to fulfill his promise to us; but what we don't always keep clearly in focus is that God does so *on his terms*. If Jesus, and we likewise, tried to evoke God's promise in the manner Satan suggested, then he/we would be determining the relationship on his/our terms. This is the real test Jesus refused to do and the subtle temptation Satan presents to all of us:

3. Temptation: To test the limits of God and how much you can control the relationship on your terms, not his.

But relationship with God is about him, not us; so, it functions on his terms, not ours. Satan tries to intrude on how our relationship functions by confusing us with this lie:

3. Lie: If God loves you, he will do what you ask; if he doesn't do it, then he must not really love you!

When God doesn't respond as requested, Satan may prompt us further to conclude: God doesn't love us because we're not good enough or even bad; and, so we revert back to the second temptation in order to make ourself a better person and more lovable to God. But God will not be manipulated or controlled no matter what we do in the relationship—however sincere we are or however good our intentions. This relationship is totally on his terms; that's why it functions by grace.

God wants our heart, our total person, all of *me*. For various reasons we may resist

or try to bargain the terms in order to maintain a sense of security and not be too vulnerable. Yet, whenever we try to define our relationship with God or control it on our terms, we essentially go into a comfort zone and put God in a box, resulting in distance in our relationship. When this happens, Satan is pleased with his success. He has subtly entangled the relational process and disrupted intimacy with God. And when he doesn't succeed, we can count on him to ongoingly seek opportune moments to interfere, disrupt and intrude in our relationship—just as he did with Jesus (Lk.4:13).

This is how we need to understand Satan's presence and to deal with him. Furthermore, it is vital for Christians to deal with his counter-relational work and influence not just with a Scripture verse but from within the context of that truth, which is an ongoing relationship with God. Engaging this intimate relational process is what Jesus reveals in his person and words—whether it's interacting with Satan, his disciples or his Father. This is the relational imperative.

As we continue to examine and further understand Jesus' relational work, realize that we must also contend with Satan's counter-relational work along the way. Nothing will complicate the relational process more. If we don't deal with it, then we will likely make substitutes for the *more* Jesus makes available to us and settle for less. Remember Satan's goal for Christians!

* * *

This is a critical juncture in our study of the person and words of Jesus. As I mentioned earlier, now that we've discussed Satan's work and influence, it might be helpful to reread the previous sections. Beyond that it is important to work with the Spirit to identify the lies which have affected you in your life. These may be in relation to you, to God and/or your relationship together. God wants us to live in the truth of *what* we are as a person, and he wants us to experience the truth of relationship with him in the intimate process of love. This was Jesus' purpose in coming to us and our purpose in studying his person and words.

So, take some time now, ask the Spirit to reach deeper into your life—if necessary to assist you out of a comfort zone—and give God further opportunity to be together with you.

Chapter 4 ...TO UNCOMMON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

Jesus said, "Make every effort ..."

Luke 13:24

While Satan does everything he can to minimize our intimacy with God, the persons of God (Father, Jesus and Spirit) do everything they can for optimal intimate experience in our relationship. Yet, the pursuit of intimacy with God is not smooth, and often it does not seem straightforward, though the relational process itself is. Intimacy can be elusive.

If the issue were just between God and Satan, then the outcome for us would be obvious. But we are not an observer in our relationship with God, although there are often times we may want him to do all the work—especially when it comes to relational work. Hearts don't come together automatically, simply over the course of time, nor even naturally, though as humans we're relational beings. So, we need to accept the responsibility for our part of the relationship. That doesn't necessarily mean we have to do more but it means for us to admit and own up to where our heart is and how we make intimacy with God difficult. In other words, we're going to have to change in order to experience intimacy with God.

The God of heart created us in his image as persons of heart into which he implanted eternity-substance. Yet, even though our heart needs and desires *more*, God understands that our heart is not automatically prepared to receive and experience more. That's why he extended his person vulnerably to us in his mercy, grace and love in order to provide the means for our heart to change, so that we experience intimacy with God.

The biggest change necessary is the transformation of our heart from sin. Obviously, Christ's death on the cross is the only means for our redemption and justification. But what is obvious to us has also lost some of its immediate meaning for us, similarly to the familiar idea of "eternal life." To understand redemption only in spiritual terms and limit its application primarily to the future is not sufficient for the change we need in order to experience intimacy with God now. We need to expand redemption to include the changes our heart must *(dei*, necessary by nature*)* undergo currently if we are to intimately experience the holy heart of God. Redemptive change is always relationally- specific to God and never remains focused only on us.

Let me reemphasize that not only was it important and necessary for Christ to go to the cross, it was also important and necessary for him to live his earthly life between the creche and the cross. It was in that part of his life that Jesus clearly made objective "what we are *saved from*"—that is, what salvation is about and how sin operates. And even further, how he lived during that period shows us up close "what we are *saved to*." *Saved to* is just as important and necessary as *saved from*. That's why Jesus doesn't limit redemption to the latter. In his relational work during various interactions with those wanting to follow him, he frequently revealed the need for *redemptive changes* now in their life. Later, we will see a summary of this in Jesus' telling interactions with Peter.

The Relational Imperative

On one occasion while Jesus made his way to Jerusalem someone asked him, "Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?" (Lk.13:23). He replied with "the narrow door" analogy, expanding on his words in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.7:13,14). This helps us understand the relational work he did in this analogy (read Lk.13:24-30).

Many will try to get in the door but "will not be able to" (Gk. *ischyo*, to have ability). As much as they tried (based on what they did) he didn't let them in. Why? Because he didn't *know* (think relationally about this word) them. But they argued that they had fellowshipped with him—eating and drinking together was culturally significant—and he had even taught them. Why, then, did he insist that he didn't know them? The difference is not understood from the activity but in the relationship.

Let's not focus here only on the future, as we usually do about salvation and eternal life. Jesus' response actually is emphasizing the present to them, not the future: "make every effort" (Gk. *agonizomai*, to fight, struggle, engage in strenuous endeavor, exert great effort). The Greek grammar (present tense, middle voice, imperative mood) Jesus used here shows that he wasn't making a suggestion or a request to them. Instead, Jesus was demanding (imperative mood) that they start taking direct responsibility now (present tense) and rigorously act on it.

But what are they supposed to act on? We can easily interpret this as further expectations which Jesus lays on us to *do*. Is he telling us how to qualify or better measure up? By his use of Greek middle voice, Jesus demands the direct involvement of the person in the action, not mechanically *doing* something. The middle voice further indicates that the person is seen as acting upon oneself; that is, the person is taking responsibility for oneself and acting on what is necessary about oneself. Since Jesus is engaged in relational work, he is focusing us on our part of the work. In other words, he demands that we take responsibility for where our heart is and rigorously address, for example, how we make intimacy with God difficult. *All this effort* involves only the relational process of developing intimate relationship with God. **This is *the relational imperative*; and it's all about relational work.**

God didn't relationally know "the many" trying to get in because they were not intimately involved with him—even though they were *doing* things with him. The narrow door is *relationally-specific*, which makes relational work on our part necessary and rigorous. It's not optional. What Jesus demands here is quite a contrast to how church membership is presented today.

Our perceptions of the narrow door (gate or road) often are limited to spiritual terms, moral grounds or even pharisaic expectations. But as we understand the narrow door as relationally-specific, we also need to look more closely at its broader implications. When Jesus ended his response with more familiar words (Lk.13:30), he addressed the current way persons defined themselves and their comparative position on the human totem pole. The relational work involved in the narrow door redefines the person and results in reordering the systems of inequality created by the old definitions. Yet, the presence and persistence among Christians of how we define ourselves by these criteria and thereby do our relationships, thus influencing how we do church, remains an ongoing issue about which we need to "make every effort."

That Which is Common

Our theology defines redemption as being set free from enslavement by payment of a ransom (Christ's death). The ultimate redemption necessary to be involved with God is spiritual. But there are other areas of life in which we need to experience being set free—for example, our common, everyday social context which we take for granted or readily accept. These other areas all influence our involvement with God and can make intimate relationship difficult. So, we have to factor them into the relational equation underlying all spiritual growth. That means Christians need to realize that functionally not everything in spiritual growth and spiritual formation is spiritual. Redemptive changes are needed ongoingly in all areas of our life. In fact, God would be pleased if we not only stopped spiritualizing the Christian life but also refrained from compartmentalizing our life. To cease can't be accomplished passively but will require "exerting great effort" on our part.

It is an illusion to think that involvement with the holy God is only a spiritual and moral matter. Satan would encourage us to think this way because that would leave the other areas in our life more vulnerable to his counter-relational work and influence. But we need to understand our God as more than pure and sinless.

When Jesus brought the holy God to us, he came vulnerably with that holiness; that will forever remain a mystery of God's love. et, "holy" (Gk. *hagios*) further means to be separated from ordinary or common usage—that which is not common. So, we need to embrace the fact and truth: Jesus brought that which was uncommon and, therefore, was in constant tension and conflict with that which is common. nd he came not only with the holy but also with the stuff of eternity.

Whether Christians are aware of it, the "uncommon" is an ongoing issue we have with Jesus' life and words. The common in life—the dominant, the majority, the popular, the conventional—influences how Christians think, feel, perceive things, develop mind sets, even form worldviews. **That which is common in our daily life is the most problematic issue affecting intimacy with the holy God and our spiritual growth.** This is compounded for us by Satan who simply emphasizes, encourages and promotes *the common*, the temporal—that is, that which distances us from our heart and interferes in our relationship with God.

Its Relational Consequences

It will be helpful for us to see the effects of the common and ordinary in the dynamics of some other interactions Jesus had. When Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth, we can see the tension and conflict between the common and the uncommon (read Mk.6:1-6). At first many were amazed at his teaching (v.2). But they went from being amazed to being offended by him (considered a stumbling block, v.3). How did this happen so quickly?

Examine their line of thought as they wondered where Jesus got these amazing teachings and how he even did miracles. The questions which follow reveal the reason for their quick turnaround. "Isn't this the carpenter?" defined Jesus as a common worker; and *seeing* Jesus by what he did made him no better than they. This biased their

perception of him against being able to be wise and powerful. "Isn't this Mary's son?" defined Jesus by his social standing in the community; he was not anyone special, just ordinary. This further biased them to reconsider their opinion. There was no way for someone with his low social standing to be given esteemed status in their midst. Since Nazareth was looked down upon in general, it's understandable to think this way. Remember, even Nathaniel said when told about Jesus: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (Jn.1:46).

Despite what they had heard with their ears and seen with their eyes, in their minds it was not possible for this to be valid. That's how stereotypes and other biases predispose us from reality (seeing it as it really is) and the truth. Even Jesus "was amazed at their lack of faith" (Mk.6:6) because there was no reason to distrust him, except for their biases. How does this happen for us? Think about limits we place on seeing Jesus' person and hearing his words, or barriers we have to more intimacy with God because of our perceptions.

Other interactions reflecting biases which predisposed persons to disbelieve Jesus include being predisposed: by circumstances (Jn. 6:42), by Jesus' lack of formal education (Jn.7:15), by his family roots (Jn.7:27), by his social status (Jn.7:41; 8:48). All of these show their biases against Jesus and being closed to him. Of course, even when they asked Jesus for a miraculous sign (after feeding 4000, Mk.8:11; Lk.11:16) or to "tell us plainly" (meaning exactness of speech, Jn.10:24) if he is the Christ, they would explain it away with their biases (cf. Lk.16:31).

A miraculous sign (Gk. *semeion*) is a miracle with a spiritual end and purpose. Jesus didn't do miracles to draw attention to such action because they were not valuable in and of themselves; when Jesus did a miracle, he was doing more relational work. His miracles pointed to the person behind them and indicated the grace and power of God. So, the peoples' requests for miraculous signs frustrated or disgusted Jesus. He did not give them what they wanted and didn't let them control the relationship on their terms (Mk.8:12; Lk.11:29). Don't we make similar requests of God?

Jesus' miraculous deeds and objective information about him are only secondarily related to the whole issue of *understanding* the person Jesus and the matter of *knowing* Christ. These were not the primary and direct areas which resulted in understanding and knowing Jesus. That's why Jesus was always engaged in relational work in order to establish the relational context for us in which relational connection is made through trust and intimacy. Biases and a closed mind prevent that connection. These are the effects of the common and ordinary.

Before you dismiss the above interactions as involving only the closed-minded, hardened-hearted Jews, we need also to examine Jesus' interactions with his disciples. Their biases also limited their connections, for example, to only a working relationship. Even an open mind, but without heart, will not yield the depth of relational connection necessary to understand and know Christ.

After feeding the 4000 and denying the Pharisees' request for a follow-up miraculous sign, Jesus continued this particular discussion with his disciples (read Mk.8:14-21). Just earlier Jesus had fed the 5000 (Mk.6:30ff), walked on water (Mk.6:45ff) and healed numerous persons—all before the disciples' eyes. As he continued, Jesus warned them of a vital issue (Mk.8:15). Since the disciples had forgotten

to bring enough food, they thought (notice, only to themselves) Jesus focused on the situation of not having bread to eat (8:14,16). Given all the miraculous events which the disciples had witnessed in recent days, what was the implication of their discussion about no bread? What do you think their perceptions of Jesus were at this point?

Not surprisingly, what Jesus warned them about (8:15) was the very thing they were doing here. In warning them (using Greek indicative mood), Jesus asserted the fact of an existing reality in life about which his disciples need to take ongoing action (Greek imperfect tense). "Be careful" (Gk. *horao*) means to perceive with the eyes, implying not the mere act of seeing but also the actual perception of some object. "Watch out" (Gk. *blepo*) involves the activity of the eyes and denotes fundamentally exercising our capacity of sight. *Horao* ("be careful") is broader in scope than *blepo* ("watch out"); it involves locking in on something in our perception—not just look at it—and, consequently, to recognize the significance of something, to experience something and thus to encounter the true nature of a thing. The perception from *horao*, therefore, stands in contrast to misperception and misconception. To lock in and achieve this result may require contemplation, deep reflection or scrutiny.

As a related note, it is also helpful for us to understand the cultural world of biblical times. In that culture, the connection of the eyes to the heart is very significant because they were both considered to have similar function. So, they were used interchangeably. Malina describes the eyes-heart as the zone for emotion-focused thought.[1]

Jesus was not merely engaging his disciples in a mental exercise. His warning cuts to the depths of all his disciples' heart because it involves important aspects of relational work. What, then, is this existing reality in life about which Jesus said to *horao* ("be careful") and *blepo* ("watch out")? Ostensibly it's the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod, whose behaviors and character few of us would intentionally practice. We've learned from Jesus that hypocrisy is the yeast of the Pharisees (Lk.12:1); that is, presenting a different or false identity of self than is true. The self-serving Herod was involved in political power and concerned about only his own gain and security. But, functionally this yeast focuses on appearances (e.g., how we present ourselves) and, therefore, emphasizes secondary matters (e.g., what we're doing), which Jesus just earlier explained and exposed (see Mk.7:1-23).

Now how did this yeast relate to the disciples in this situation? Did this yeast permeate their perceptions? When Jesus earlier had explained the importance of the heart and our total person, he also exposed the relational consequences of the yeast (Mk.7:6-13). To answer these questions about the disciples we have to look to their heart and how their relationship with Jesus was.

Let's look at how Jesus described them. In the previous discussion he said they were "dull" (Gk. *asynetos*, without insight, inability to "get it") and didn't "see" (Gk. *noeo*, comprehend, grasp mentally; Mk.7:18). In this discussion they still didn't "see" (*noeo*) or "understand" (Gk. *syniemi*, to perceive; Mk.8:17). *Syniemi* denotes putting

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[1] See John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina, *Biblical Social Values and their Meaning* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publ., 1993), pp.63-67.

together various individual features of an object into a whole, like putting together pieces of a puzzle. Jesus also said their hearts were "hardened" (Gk. *poroo*, to make hard like stone, make callous, insensitive to the touch) making it difficult for them to see and hear correctly (Mk.8:17,18, also Mk.6:52).

Was he putting his disciples in the same category as the Pharisees and others who rejected him? No, but Jesus is showing all of his disciples how we may function in a similar way that will have relational consequences on what we will experience in relationship with him. They didn't see Jesus' person and weren't making intimate relational connection with him. So, despite direct, firsthand experience with Jesus' miracles, barriers prevented them from really *knowing* him at this stage in their relationship. This is vital for us to understand because we may still experience similar consequences as the early disciples—in spite of the benefit of hindsight we enjoy.

What prevented the disciples from the ability "to get it" and put the pieces together? What was a major barrier that prevented more intimate knowledge of Jesus? It would be too simplistic to explain the cause merely as sin; that would also be an insufficient explanation given our usually limited perspectives of sin. We cannot doubt the commitment these disciples had to follow Jesus. Yet, their lives (past and present) and commitment didn't take place in a vacuum; we need to account for the broader context of any individual in order to understand its influence on one's focus and perceptions. This is the context of the common and ordinary.

* * *

The influences of this broader context from culture, society, family or other experiences develop predispositions in us which form our biases. We all have biases—good and bad, valid or invalid. Of course, even our Christian experiences, for example, in church, help form biases. Let's briefly expand on this process.

Whatever the source of our biases and however they developed, biases provide a highly selective screen (or shield) between us and the rest of the world outside of us. This screen acts like a filter to the real world, helping us to decide how to deal with it. Similar to the lens of the eye, such a filter either sharpens or distorts, clarifies or colors our perceptions and the extent to which we'll see something. In other words, **biases tell us what we should pay attention to and what we should ignore** (note this for the disciples and the Pharisees). Without this screening process to help us deal with our real world, we can easily be threatened or overwhelmed. Do you see this happening for either the Pharisees or the disciples?

So, as these biases become established in our thinking, they unify into our mindsets in which we construct "our own little world" of reality, again whether valid or invalid. It is important for us to understand that this screening function also provides structure for our lives and strongly influences how we perceive things. This is how we put God "in a box." In further development, mindsets formalize into worldviews which then dominate or control our perceptions and thinking. Thomas Kuhn showed how these form paradigms to shape our perceptions; and this influence is exerted upon everyone, even on those who formulate scientific theories and models.[1] That's why thinking

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[2] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970).

relationally may require a paradigm shift for many Christians.

The Pharisees certainly exercised a worldview in their interactions with Jesus. But they weren't honest about the predispositions underlying their biases, so Jesus refused to engage with them in futile discussion. I don't know if the disciples expressed a worldview but they definitely exercised a certain mindset which filtered how they saw Jesus, what they paid attention to and ignored about him. But, since they were willing to be open to Jesus, even in their limited ways, he had the opportunity to work with them relationally for redemptive change.

The effect of these predispositions—which includes lies promoted by Satan—is to get us further and further from the substance (not necessarily the forms) of life and the truths (not necessarily the theology) of God revealed in the person and words of Jesus. This effect is most evident in the distance created from our heart – in its deemphasis or even denial. To put this screen on our heart (which is created in his image) and filter his eternity-substance implanted in it results in daily practice which actually hardens (makes callous, insensitive to the touch) our hearts, as Jesus discussed with his disciples (Mk.6:52; 8:17).

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After carefully walking them back through their experiences with the miraculous feeding of first the 5000, then the 4000, Jesus said "Do you still not understand?" (Mk.8:19-21). Jesus was engaging them in relational work, but the disciples' biases and callousness or insensitivity at this point had a twofold effect on their relationship. First, their biases prevented them from the simple function of seeing what exists (*blepo*). They didn't process the two miraculous feedings, not to mention walking on water, and other miracles of healing. They didn't see these events objectively for what they were and, therefore, couldn't connect it to their situation of not having any bread. They didn't see clearly to be able to add them up together (*syniemi*).

But, more importantly, they did not "be careful" (*horao*), that is, recognize the significance of those miracles and understand who it was doing them. This led to the second effect on their relationship: the callousness or insensitivity formed in their heart (or distance or detachment from heart) prevented them from locking in (making deeper relational connection) on Jesus and thus experiencing *what* was happening and *who* made it happen. The sad result for now was a relational consequence in which the opportunity to encounter the true nature of Jesus—that is, have an intimate connection with God—was lost or squandered. Therefore, they didn't understand what was happening and, most of all, they didn't truly know Jesus.

Obviously, the disciples were not free from the influences which affected their perceptions—the impact from that which is common. Like the disciples, we need to understand the influences on our own perceptions because similar influences exist for us today. Despite our benefit of hindsight to view the events in Jesus' life, our perceptions of other areas of Jesus' person and words could just as easily screen out our ability "to get it" and put the pieces together, as well as filter away the experience of intimate connection with him. So, we need to learn for our life, as the disciples did for theirs, that these reflect and indicate the redemptive changes needed for relationship with God. For these Jesus came to save us *from* in order to save us *to*. In the tradition of the OT prophets, Jesus' person and words exposed the *old* in us to free us so that the *new* could be raised up.

Relationally Accountable No Matter What

Jesus went beyond the prophets to demand that we take responsibility for where our heart is and rigorously engage the relational process of developing intimate relationship with God (Lk.13:24). We cannot take this responsibility lightly or at our leisure because Jesus holds us responsible for the vulnerable revelation of his God person and the Father which he lovingly provided us. Therefore, **we are relationally accountable for all of God's revelation of himself**. We cannot plead unintentional misperceptions nor extenuating circumstances. This is seen powerfully in one interaction he had with his disciples after his resurrection.

In this familiar post-resurrection scene (read Luke 24:13-32), Jesus connected up with two of his disciples walking to Emmaus. But the disciples "were kept from recognizing him" (24:16). The verb "kept from" (Gk. *krateo*, to hold, restrain) is in the passive voice which is usually taken to mean the disciples were kept from recognizing (Gk. *epiginosko*, to know specifically) Jesus because of God's action. Yet how or why God would restrain the disciples has no good explanation in this situation; even to the contrary, why would God want to keep them from knowing specifically that this was Jesus who indeed rose from the dead?

The text seems to indicate this, although another reason might be that Jesus' post-resurrection body was slightly different, making his appearance harder to recognize from before. While this may have some basis, I would suggest a third alternative, that we see this in the same way that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. On the one hand, God is the one who hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex.4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8). On the other hand, Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex.7:13-14,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7,34-35); there is reflexive action here. As a result Pharaoh wouldn't listen (Ex.7:13), despite many miraculous signs (Ex.7:3).

Did God actually do something to Pharaoh's heart to harden it, or did God allow Pharaoh to live out his own hardened heart? Along with this, did God unilaterally determine Pharaoh's whole life, or did Pharaoh have freedom of choice which God used for his purpose? In God's sovereignty he fulfills his purpose and plan regardless of our choices—sometimes in spite of our choice and sometimes in cooperation with it—but he never eliminates our ability to choose. Therefore, he always holds us accountable for the choices we make, as he held Pharaoh accountable.

Getting back on the road to Emmaus, did God actually do something to keep the disciples from recognizing Jesus or merely allow them to stay within their own limited perceptions? Did God hold them accountable in this situation? We need to examine their reflexive action.

While the disciples solemnly reflected on the tragedy on the weekend and their bewilderment with this third day, notice the transition in Jesus' interaction with them. At first Jesus engaged them as if to be ignorant of what was happening (Lk.24:19). This gave the disciples the opportunity either to discuss events and information or to focus on the person of God and relationship with him. Being predisposed as they were, they talked about the events and information about Jesus of Nazareth. So, he intensified his relational work by confronting them with where they were: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe" (Lk. 24:25). These are strong words which clearly show how the disciples were accountable for where they were.

The word "foolish" (Gk. *anoetos*) also means ignorant, mindless, stupid; it emphasizes culpability of the subject person(s) and describes one as intellectually reckless or negligent, failing to think responsibly, having no sense and implying that one should have known better. It doesn't mean a lack of education or an inability to think but a failure to concentrate and think it through. Compare this to our earlier discussion on Jesus' words to this disciples: "be careful" (Gk. *horao*, Mk.8:15) and "understand" (Gk. *syniemi*, Mk.8:17,21).

The word "slow" (Gk. *bradys*) of heart stands in contrast to swift, quick in response. Therefore, slow of heart here means to be reluctant, dull, unresponsive. Their foolishness and slowness were not because of what God did to them. These were a result of what they did to themselves. Their hearts didn't respond to God's revelation of himself vulnerably presented to them in the person Jesus (Lk.24:25-27) because of their predispositions and biases. This resulted in their hearts being withdrawn from him in relational distance despite physical proximity, or insensitive to his touching presence and callous to his vulnerable person.

What appears to be a rather passive and somewhat innocent course by these two disciples was actually their willful negative choice to go in the opposite direction from Jesus—however unintentional it may have been. For the past three years Jesus openly shared his true self with them and gave them every opportunity to *know* him intimately. So, he indicted them for being functionally irresponsible and relationally rejecting him by their actions. Jesus held them responsible for all of God's revelation of himself and, therefore, they were relationally accountable to the God person, whether himself, the Father or soon-to-come Spirit.

But Jesus doesn't indict his disciples by exposing the *old* without also giving us the opportunity for the *new* to be raised up. After indicting them he pursued their heart further by breaking bread with them, so that in sharing together in this fellowship they would experience intimate connection with him (Lk.24:29-30). As Jesus concluded his relational work with them, their perceptions finally expanded to know specifically (Gk. *epiginosko)* who this person really was (v.31). Finally, after the past years and even while their hearts were burning with eternity-substance during his words to them on the road, they dropped relational distance from him to make intimate connection (v.32).

Let's reflect on this for our own life and note any similarities. The two disciples didn't *see* (relationally connect with) Jesus even as he was alongside them in their activity. They didn't *hear* (relationally understand) Jesus even as they talked *to* him and talked *about* him. They didn't *know* (have intimate connection with) Jesus even as they listened to his words and studied Scripture. Even when their hearts burned for *more* they didn't open their hearts in trust to intimately embrace him.

This is vital for us to understand about our relationship with God because too many Christians live on the road to Emmaus relationally going in the opposite direction from Jesus. We may not struggle with the resurrection in the same way that they did, but what other area of his Word do we have difficulty with due to the absence of hindsight and the lack of trust? God holds us relationally accountable for all his revelations as well as his ongoing vulnerable presence in our life, just as he did with the disciples.

Honest Relational Work

In the incarnation Jesus revealed the total person of God and openly shared God's glory—his being (as God of heart), his nature (as intimately relational), his presence (as ongoingly vulnerable)—for us to experience in intimate relationship. Our common tendency, however, is in effect to de-*person* the incarnation and relegate God's revelations of his *self* to beliefs, values, ways, principles or propositions. While these positions may include truth, they become substitutes for being involved with *the Truth*.

Apart from whom we see in the manger and whom (if not *what*) we see on the cross, our predisposition is to relate to Jesus in his teachings and by what he did (especially on the cross), but not to his person in a functioning relationship. This was problematic also for his early disciples. We have to realize that this is an easier way for us to relate to someone and to be involved in a relationship. It is always more demanding to be involved directly with the person than things about a person; it takes us out of our comfort zones and makes us more vulnerable—not only to the other person but also our own person.

Since God is who he is, everything he does is done with heart, and everything he does toward us he does relationally. Therefore, **to truly know this God and to experience him necessitates our being on his level**, so to speak—that is, **the level of the heart**. And what transpires on that level can only take place within the relational context of ongoing interaction with his person, not his teachings or his deeds. But when we are predisposed to defining a *person* by what one does or has, then this routinely results in reducing Jesus down to his teachings and deeds. So, ironically, the study of these areas of his life can actually become a substitute for direct relational involvement with him; and serious Christians frequently settle for this knowledge instead of the deeper experience of intimate relational connection. We can collect all the information about God possible and still not *know* him (cf. 2 Tim.3:7)—know things about him yes, but know him, his person, his being, no. Does that make such study wrong? There is a deeper question we have to address involving how we do relationships.

Because we're created in God's image as persons of heart, Jesus obviously knew what it takes for us to involve our total person in relationship with God: the honesty of our heart, as he told the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn.4:23,24). This is the bottom line for how to do relationship with God. *To know him* only takes place at the heart level within the intimate relational context of God's design and purpose. *To experience him* only happens when our heart receives the heart of God vulnerably extended to us in Jesus and is deeply touched by our hearts coming together intimately. So, Jesus' person and words are always engaged in this relational work of pursuing our heart—a heart not often ready, often unwilling and never able by itself.

One set of his words in particular helps us to distinguish conflicting ways to do relationship with God: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mt.15:8). **The distance our heart keeps in a relationship is the primary indicator of the quality of our involvement in that relationship**.

As we've been discussing, our heart is distracted, entangled or controlled in various ways, by various things from which we need to be freed—that is, redeemed. Without these redemptive changes, our relationship with God will not grow and develop.

But redemptive change is not merely a singular event or an initial moment in the relationship; and it certainly isn't something we alone have to accomplish in our heart as needed. True redemptive change involves an ongoing relational process.

Jesus told those who believed him that "the truth will set you free" (Jn.8:32). But the truth will only set us free when "you know the truth" (v.32). Yet, we will only know the Truth when "you are really my disciples," and we are only his disciples "if you hold to my teaching" (v.31). "Hold" (Gk. *meno*) means to remain, dwell, abide; and "teaching" (Gk. *logos*) involves his essence, his person, not merely teachings or principles. So, the ongoing relational process here is: *when we remain involved with his person, this will develop into intimate connection together resulting in the ongoing experience of knowing the truth of God's person and thus being set free, liberated (Gk.* eleutheroo*).*

Jesus is the one who sets us free indeed (v.36), but only within the relational context and process of our relationship with him. Perhaps there might be some confusion here in that redemptive change is needed in order to be involved with God and yet redemptive changes result from our involvement with him. But the fact that Jesus came to make the relationship possible indicates our need for God's mercy and loving favor as well as our inability to measure up or be adequate in ourselves. So, by honestly coming to him ongoingly with wherever our heart is at the time—which may mean acknowledging, admitting or confessing some uncomfortable areas—we give him the opportunity to know us, openly experience our heart and change us from the *old* in the process. This is relational work at its most fundamental expression of give-and-take with God. Here is where we advance from not only *thinking relationally* but now also ***acting relationally***.

What's the alternative to this honest relational work? For those who received these familiar words from Jesus, the reaction was denial or an unwillingness to at least admit where their heart was: "we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" (v.33). Essentially, isn't this a common response we make to "the truth will set you free"; how many Christians perceive themselves to be a slave of anything? It sure is a great promise to have, but unless you're controlled by some bad practices who really takes this to heart and uses it?

Other alternatives to honest relational work that Jesus identifies are predispositions from substitutes and settling for less because of following lies (vv.43-44); for example, common lies are having to measure up for God's approval or needing to justify his love—both nullifying grace and Jesus' person. "Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say" (v.43). Why couldn't they grasp Jesus' words?—because they were predisposed. Their self-perceptions of their status and deeds qualified them in their minds to be God's children, not slaves. How could they think this way?—because they followed lies and made substitutes for more available to them, settling for less (v.44). Such lies always counter the truth, distancing us from our heart and interfering in our relationship with God (v.45)—Satan's goal.

Lies are what Satan is all about (v.44c); it's "his native language" (Gk. *ek idios*, out of one's own, denotes inner property). Christians are not "*of* the lie" but we can function as if we are—thus not *live* "of the truth." Functionally, that means transformation (inner change) will not take place to truly free us from this *old* stuff, and any changes we do make will only be the outward type (*metaschematizo*). Transforming

redemptive change only takes place on the basis of truth. And the truth cannot emerge from a lie.

Sin's Relational Control

Have you honestly ever felt enslaved? Jesus said "everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (8:34). Sin is a clear indicator of being enslaved. Yet, aside from habitual sins or addictions, few Christians actually feel enslaved. The issue for us today is how we perceive sin. Since sin is disobedience to God, our perception may focus on only things we do against him. But what about not being involved directly with his person? When you examine the relational messages here, isn't this in effect doing something against him? Furthermore, since a sinful mind is hostile to God (Rom.8:7), we may perceive hostility as negativity to God. Yet, what about keeping distance in our relationship with him? The relational messages we send to him by this distance are clearly negative. *Sin takes on greater meaning when it's understood and therefore perceived relationally*: our greatest sin as Christians is relational distance with God.

With these expanded perceptions of sin we need to ask ourselves: Were the disciples engaged in sin on the road to Emmaus? Yes, because they didn't engage him directly in relationship, though this is a less obvious sin. Does merely studying Jesus' teachings and deeds involve sin? Yes, though with qualification, if it is a substitute for direct involvement with his person in their relationship and settling for less than the experience of intimate connection together. Remember how the successful young guy only related to Jesus as a student (Mk.10:17ff). Are other lies like having to measure up for God's approval and needing to justify the love he gives us also sin? Absolutely, even if followed with good intentions or reinforced by churches unintentionally; all such lies serve to interfere in our relationship with God in one subtle way or another because their origin can be traced back eventually to the father of lies. Do our predispositions, biases and mind sets express sin also? Unequivocally, when they diminish, distort or control our perceptions of the truth about our total person—constraining our heart—and the truth about God, thus putting God in a box and minimizing intimate relationship together.

When we consider the relational consequences of all the above in relationship with God, we can only conclude that the impact on God is sin and the impact on us is to be enslaved—that is, not being free in our heart, all of which needs to be redeemed.

Jesus helps us understand this further by giving us two indicators of being enslaved or not being free. First, such a person "has no permanent place in God's family" (Jn.8:35). "Permanent place" (Gk. *meno*) is the same word as "hold" ("to my teachings") in verse 31, which means to remain, dwell, abide. Don't look at the status of permanent place but at the relational process and consequences. This person cannot remain involved and dwell in God's family (v.35) because he/she does not remain involved in relationship with the person Jesus (v.31), thus is not intimately connected to him and therefore is not liberated, changed from within (v.32). Now, Christians may believe the spiritual truth that they have a permanent place in God's family but have not experienced this reality in their hearts to support this fact. That is, many Christians may not feel that they really have a permanent place; it's more like just being an employee of the family. This is the relational

consequence of not being free, which Jesus came to save us *from*.

The second indicator of not being free is even more critical. In contrast, Jesus said an authentic son or daughter "belongs to his family forever" (v.35). "Belong" (Gk. *meno*) is the same word again as "permanent place" and "hold." The relational implication is even stronger here. When we're not free, then we don't feel that we really *belong* in his family. Even though the fact may be there, the sense we may have is more like being a guest or even an observer. And the reason we don't feel that we really belong is because we don't have a real sense of being a son or daughter. Again, the fact is there, but the actual experience of being his son, his daughter often escapes us. In other words, living functionally as a slave or employee has relational consequences that hit deep in the heart. This ongoing intimate, relational involvement with our Father and living together with Jesus in his family eludes us as a consequence of our heart not being free. Being liberated from this condition and transformed to the experiential reality of son/daughter is what Jesus came to save us *to*.

The alternatives to honest relational work can subtly dominate our lives. That's all some Christians have known and how they have lived their whole lives. Yet, I think any Christian would like to experience more of God's love. Sometimes Christians talk about reading in the Bible that God loves them but they don't really experience it—that it just seems like words, however true those words may be. So, there isn't the assurance or deep satisfaction that they are loved—loved by God. Often the response to this situation is either to blame God as unresponsive to them or that they just have to have faith—and more faith at that. While there are certainly many moments in life when we have to exercise more faith, such commitment to our beliefs without the relational assurance and experience in our heart will eventually lead to a dry faith, to a desert of inner dissatisfaction. Such a faith is not relational and thus is not engaging a relational process.

Often we don't experience God's love for us because we are looking at his love "words" as merely teachings, separated from his person and outside the context of relationship with him. When we see the person in the words of the Bible, then we can start to make relational connection and hear his relational messages. This relational connection is necessary to experience God's love—or anyone's love—and to *know* therefore in our heart that we are loved.

But this gets us back to the issue of not being free in our heart, even if we blame God as unresponsive. It is vital for us to understand this in our relationship with God: **we cannot intimately experience God's love for us while we are functioning from a position in effect as a slave**—that is, as an employee, student, house guest, observer, etc. Such a relationship is the sole privilege of his daughters and sons—those ongoingly being redeemed and transformed.

Worth the Change

Undergoing change in our life is not easy, even when we are dissatisfied and want more. Change is even more difficult when we're comfortable in our established ways of doing things, especially if our church reinforces that. Many Christians don't welcome change; that's reasonable if such change is just fashion and merely an end in itself. But

here is where we need to chart the critical depths of the person and words of Jesus. To do so requires us to encounter the complexities of our everyday living which have profoundly affected the quality of life in general and our relationships in particular. We can't navigate around these personal issues and expect to understand (*syniemi*) Jesus (cf. Mk.8:17). As he made imperative for those with an authentic relationship with him, we must *(dei)* "make every effort" (Lk.13:24) for relational work.

With the incarnation of Jesus came the holy God, so in his person and words Jesus brought only that which is *not common* (*hagios*). Hopefully, our study has helped us to understand that we are all predisposed to the *common*. More so, we are biased by and have our mind set on the common. In accordance with our theology of the holy—arguably God's greatest characteristic—it is vital for us to realize in particular that *the uncommon* and *common* are incompatible for relationship.

Intimacy is not possible between these two conditions. Unlike in relationship counseling where both parties need to change, in this case only one of us needs to change in order for the relationship to work; it's not a matter of working out a compromise, although that's how many Christians try to work out their relationship with God. Rather, it has to be all one or the other for the relationship to work. Since by its nature *the uncommon* cannot practice that which is common and still be uncommon, it is obvious who has to change. But, then, that means we would have to change to that which is uncommon. his is the ongoing tension and conflict we have with God. This is why **that which is common in our daily life is the most problematic issue affecting intimacy with the holy God and the growth and development of our relationship.**

While change is not often welcomed into our life, change is exactly what the holy God person Jesus came for—to redeem us *from the old* and to transform us *to the new*. When we try to avoid these personal issues, then we essentially distance ourselves from his holy person and words and, in effect, don't welcome Jesus into our life. This can be done even while having activities with him and listening to his teachings (Lk.13:26), or while presenting a righteous or spiritual identity (Mk.8:15).

If we are going to "be careful" (*horao*, Mk.8:15), as opposed to living with our misperceptions and misconceptions, then we will need to honestly address with him the areas to change in our life in order to be freed from our current predispositions. That release may be experienced also by his comfort of a past relationship, his healing from a bad experience as well as his forgiveness and cleansing for sin. This is the relational work in which we need to be more rigorous.

But we also have to address seriously the relational consequences of our perceptions, how we define ourselves and how we do relationships. Since none of us live in a vacuum, we need to account for the broader contexts of our life in order to understand its influence, entanglement or control on our focus and perceptions. This influence develops our predispositions, which form our biases. And the filtering function this serves for us determines how we will see a person, what we will hear from that person and how we will do relationship with them.

So, for example, whenever we define ourselves by what we *do* or *have*, then that's what we focus on in our relationships. Some Christians only seem to define themselves and to see others by their spiritual gifts. In relationship with Jesus that translates to relating to him by focusing on his teachings, not his person, because he *has* truth, his

teachings *have* truth. It's what he *has*, not him. Furthermore, we relate primarily to what he *does*, again not his person. Think about how you pray, or even worship. I frequently have to make a conscious effort not to talk to him only about what he's doing, or what I'm doing. But Jesus always wants persons to *see him*, not his works—even if they were miracles. It's the person behind them who is important. He also says that *he* is the Truth (Jn.14:6), not only that he *has* truth. It's not that we can separate what he has and does from his person, but that his person is the most important focus for relationship. In contrast, the relational message we give to him is that what he has and does are more important than his person; and that's what the relationship revolves around.

Defining Jesus in these terms not only misses his *person* but it also puts him in a box. This box perceives him in some way other than he really is; so, Jesus isn't allowed to be his true self. Doing relationship with him in this way not only constrains the relationship but also exposes our subtle attempts to put the relationship on our terms—that is, to do it by that which is common and thus comfortable to us. God is more familiar to us in a box, more manageable; under these conditions there are less unknowns and mystery we have to live with. Our relationship with him is less vulnerable on our terms, less demanding of our person—especially our heart.

But the holy God person Jesus doesn't see us or do relationships by the common. He can't do it any other way except the uncommon. That's how he originally made us and his design and purpose for relationships; and that's what he came to restore. For us to want it our common way is, using Paul's metaphor (Rom.9:20), for the clay to tell the potter how it is and going to be. The common and the uncommon are incompatible for relationship and impossible for compromise.

It should not surprise us that the condition of interpersonal relationships today is probably worse than at any other period of history. We have all been critically affected by a modernist worldview which has compounded our distance from our heart. The relational consequence of this perspective emphasizing how much human endeavor can accomplish, especially through reason and science, has redefined relationships with the absence of intimacy. Given this relational climate it should also not surprise us that a postmodern reaction has been a search for deeper relational connection and meaningful experience. Christians can more than empathize with this desire, but we can further stir up authentic eternity-substance for *more* and lead the way truthfully *to* eternity while experiencing the relational reality of eternity now.

But for this to happen, Christians themselves will have to stop making substitutes for *more* and no longer settle for less in life in general and in relationships in particular. In order to turn from this it will not be sufficient to spiritualize or oversimplify the issues, nor keep the issues general without personal accountability. And we have to stop putting our spin on things. In our Christian culture today we depend so much on Christian vocabulary and the presence of so-called spiritually correct behavior that now we don't really know if those are attached to the heart. Is Jesus speaking also about us in Matthew 15:8? Are the churches he complained about in Revelations 2 and 3 also our churches?

I don't know if we can say that the practice of Christian culture has become an art form. But there are undeniable indications that our practice involves elements of forms without substance, appearance over reality, and presenting a less-than-authentic identity. Whether we want to admit it or not, this gets us into the area of practicing in principle the

deception of a masquerade (2 Cor.11:15) and in effect what Jesus called leaven (Lk.12:1). These are the masks we use to secure our person, and the filter of our mind to distance our heart. That's why Paul was also so emphatic about our need to "put off falsehood and speak truthfully to [each other]" (Eph.4:25). "Put off" (Gk. *apotithemi*) falsehood means get rid of it; that is, Paul (by using Greek middle voice) holds us accountable for this action on our self to reject all lies, dishonesty, deception and games in all our relationships. And "speak" (Gk. *laleo*) truthfully means to speak as an expression identifying our *person*. *Laleo* is not so much the content of our speech but what it says about our person and, therefore, the importance of presenting ourselves truthfully to others. This starts foremost in our relationship with God.

Obviously, there is a cost to come out of our comfort zones and step out of the box. Being vulnerable is never easy and being uncommon in the midst of what is common could be intimidating. That could even include being uncommon and therefore different than others at church. Yet, we have to add up the price we pay for substitutes and settling for less: the relational consequences are inevitable, the satisfaction of our heart unattainable.

The Truth is the holy God who vulnerably gives us direct access to intimate relationship with him. The ongoing experience of this relationship is the *stuff* of eternity—the taste of new wine that cannot be experienced in old wineskins (Lk.6:37,38). Let's not misplace our faith in the old wineskins, let's not be optimistic about the outcome of their practices and send the relational message back to him that our established ways are OK, good enough, or even better (Lk.6:39). If intimate relationship with God is to be the growing experience in our heart, then we've got relational work to exert with great effort ("make every effort"). It's *the relational imperative.*

I am stirred by Rita Springer's recent song entitled "Worth It All." Whether she shares it specifically as relational work, it has that quality. Part of it goes as follows:

> It's gonna be worth it ...
> It's gonna be worth it all.
> I believe—all my pain,
> It's gonna be worth it all, all my joy.
>
> Well, around ev'ry corner and up ev'ry mountain,
> I'm not looking for crowns [how she used to define herself]
> or the water from fountains [how she used to define God]
> I'm desp'rately seeking,
> I'm frantic believing
> that the sight of Your face, it's all that I'm needing
>
> You are all I'm needing Lord,
> You're all I'm needing
> I will lift my voice to You and say:
>
> You're gonna be worth it, You're gonna be worth it,
> You're gonna be worth it all
> I believe this. I know.

May this be the prayer of our heart.

Chapter 5 DEVELOPING THIS INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.
John 17:21

Once a love relationship gets established, it is natural to expect the experience of intimacy to continue. But that growth is not guaranteed; and when growth stops, we often try to do something to "feel" better. For example, romantic and married couples have a tendency to idealize each other after awhile in order to make the relationship last or seem better than it really is. This can be helpful to get couples through hard times or dry periods in their relationship but it also becomes a substitute for deeper relational work. Of course, since relationships involve mutual cooperation to grow, a person may have to idealize an uncooperative partner and put a good spin on them to make the relationship work.

Christians are not immune from this, idealizing their relationship with God. Certainly, this is motivated by pressure felt among themselves to describe their relationship as better than it really is. Idealization is another kind of bias that limits our connection to God, for example, to only a working relationship. When the relationship is not going as well as we'd like, it's always "more positive" to think of "my God" as answering our prayers more than he really is. When we're not experiencing much closeness in the relationship, it's always "better" to consider God as sharing himself with us instead of us not making connection. We then end up living more with the idea of relationship with God than its true substance. In other words, while putting God in a box constrains him from being his true self with us, *idealizing the relationship makes God into much more than he actually is to us*.

God is not flattered when we idealize him into "someone larger than real life." His created design and purpose for life is not "the idea" but the reality of intimate relationship. So, all of God's concern—from the individual to the outcome of human history—is for us to be intimately together with him, not about some ideal, sinless state. Obviously, sin creates a barrier in the relationship; because of that God doesn't want us to sin. But his concern for us about this is, again, not for some ideal to be sinless; his concern is for the deepest of reasons—the relational reason to be intimately together. Even though God hates our sin, he is not afraid of it. The holy God will not back off from us because of it; otherwise Jesus would never have come. He has grace to cover any of our sin, as often as necessary. He just wants us to be together—in ongoing intimate relationship.

This does not mean God idealizes us and doesn't hold us accountable. Grace is not a license to sin but only a relational means to come together, and to grow while together. So, grace is just as necessary to develop our intimacy with God as it was to establish it to begin with. *By it we know God doesn't idealize us but allows us to be our true self with*

him. At the same time grace doesn't allow us to idealize God but frees us to allow God to be his true self in the relationship.

Two Cautions in Relational Work

God doesn't idealize us because that would render all of Jesus' relational work as unnecessary. Likewise, whenever we idealize our relationship with God, we substitute this for further relational work and "make every effort" unnecessary. But developing our intimacy with God continues to be only a function of the relationship and, therefore, requires deeper relational work on our part.

The importance of understanding this stepwise process of relational work and embracing its ongoing need cannot be overemphasized. Yet, there are two cautions in its practice which we specifically need to be aware of.

One caution is that we not practice relational work only with a "medical model," which essentially focuses on what's wrong in the relationship and then takes action only to correct it. Certainly, there are times when the relationship needs this. But the concern of the medical model approach is not with ongoing action for the growth and development of the relationship. The attitude is like "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." When only problems occupy our attention, this is how, for example, our focus narrows and persons get overlooked or neglected in a relationship because these other pressing matters get the attention. This is particularly true for those who see themselves as problem solvers. This is how intimacy in a relationship is diminished because the relationship itself is only worked on in times of a problem or need. What do our prayers focus on? Consider, how often are we actually just *being* with God—just hanging out with no other agenda? *Cultivating intimacy is much more than working on problems or needs*.

This "medical model" mentality also affects our involvement with others. As Christians we try to help others, some go as far to think we have the answers to any given problem. So when someone shares a difficulty, need or problem, the immediate tendency is to offer advice and solve their problem. This conditioned response becomes a substitute for involvement with that *person* who may only want understanding and someone to be with them. Is this what we usually see in church?

The second caution involves those who are conditioned by overstimulation in their environment and predisposed by high energy experiences. Perhaps this includes to some degree all of us who live in Western cultures. This influence on our perceptions might have a tendency to look at relational work somewhat like a shot of adrenaline. Though the focus is not on problems in the relationship there is a desire for stimulating experiences together. Obviously, sex has become that primary stimulating experience for "intimacy" in many relationships. Yet, whatever provides that high, gives that quick-fix (almost like a drug) in the relationship is the main pursuit of this relational work, even though the high wears off.

Recent generations are more likely to have this mindset but I think all of us have been influenced by mountaintop experiences and quick solutions. There is a time for such high experiences in a relationship—even with God. But the ongoing need is for deeper relational work. What do we look for and depend on when we're hanging out with God? What turns us on in a worship service? *Let's not confuse intimacy with a sensory experience*. Intimacy is a relational experience which certainly includes our senses, but

more importantly must (*dei*) involve our total person. That's why there are no shortcuts in relational work.

As we are freed from such predispositions and barriers in our heart, our intimacy with God can keep developing with this further relational work. We also need to embrace in our heart the reality that in the relational process of such effort God is always engaged in relational work too. Unfortunately, this means for us to take seriously the fact that Satan is doing counter-relational work as well.

Redefining the Self

Since intimacy with God involves our hearts coming together, it is always our heart that needs to be like his heart for this connection to be experienced. The more this happens, the more intimacy with him we experience. This transition is the process of transformation necessary for us to go from the common to the uncommon, from the old to the new. Theologically, this ongoing process is called sanctification. The relational significance, however, of this term has usually not been in clear focus. Quite simply, **we need to change because God wants intimate relationship with us**. If we want growth and development of this intimate relationship, then we will welcome ongoing change—not necessarily always feel good about changes, nor always want it, but nevertheless welcome it because of its relational outcome. One of the major areas of this change involves how we define ourselves.

We know that Jesus made a specific effort to involve himself with tax collectors, the sexually promiscuous, other sinners, those deficient and undesirable to the majority. He received them exactly where they were. However you have processed this information about Jesus' life and ways, the relational implication here needs to find direct, personal meaning in our life. That is, we must (*dei*, unavoidable, not out of obligation) start seeing ourselves in the similar position as those above and embrace in our heart (like they experienced) the relational truth: Jesus receives *me*, God receives *me* where I am. God wants *me* for intimate relationship despite my dirt, crap, imperfections, inadequacies. All we have to do for him to have *me* is receive his grace.

Yet, this truth has been all too familiar for us. In one form or another we know it by heart. Then, why do we still want him to see us as better than we really are—even with some illusion or lie? The tenacious effects of how we define ourselves are resistant to change by any effort and means which does not involve the honesty of our whole heart. We may know this truth by heart but until we experience it *in* our heart, change will not take effect. This transformation requires dying to the old before the new can be raised up.

Let's examine how Jesus outlined the process of *re*defining the self:

(1) Matthew 20:1-16 - Parable of workers in the vineyard. On the one hand, the first set of workers defined themselves by what they did; in this situation they did twelve hours of work which they were paid for as agreed upon (Mt.20:2). They were not denied their rights as implied in their complaint (20:10-12)—the owner was "not being unfair" (v.13).

On the other hand, when we define ourselves by what we do, the process we get into inevitably is comparative in relation to others. This comparative process with others creates a hierarchy based on what we're able to do. That's why the first workers complained to the owner. Compared to the other workers who only worked one hour, they wanted more because they thought they were better. If we define ourselves in these terms, we would have the same conclusion. But the owner wanted to act differently (v.14). "Want" (Gk. *thelo*) involves active volition and purpose; in the NT it denotes a will that acts in love. He wanted to be "generous" (v.15, Gk. *agathos*, benevolent). This is how God is because of his grace. He gives us his favor not based on what we deserve; he doesn't define us by what we do. If he did, justice would demand consequences. Therefore, *in the process of* re*defining our self, we need to start with seeing ourselves as God sees us and thus by what we truly are—with no illusions or lies*. This includes the need also to stop comparing ourselves to others and defining our position on the human totem pole. Jesus has broken into systems of inequality ("you have made them equal to us") and reordered that which is common (v.16).

(2) Matthew 15:10-20 (Mk.7:14-23) - In his discussion about what's really important, Jesus showed us how to go about redefining ourselves: *look at the total person, from the inside first then outward, not from the outside*. The inner person (heart) is the most important part of us; and we cannot evaluate what a person *is* based on the outer person. Note that this builds on what Jesus just said prior to these passages (Mt.15:1-9; Mk.7:1-13) which addressed how we do relationships. Because of defining self in secondary ways, relationships done with the heart are not the primary priority. When this happens we don't understand what's important to God and his purpose in his commandments and the Law—that is, to love. A self defined from "the outside in" relates to others in a comparative process. The self defined from "the inside out" relates to others in the relational process of *agape*, as Jesus does relationships.

(3) Matthew 5:3-5 - When we work on redefining our self from the inside out, we encounter a major difficulty. What is it that I really see of my self when I look inside? This can become an issue we may rather dance around. I consider the beatitudes as interrelated characteristics of the Christian person. In these first three beatitudes Jesus provides us with the **critical steps** in the process of transformation. When we honestly look inside at our *self*, Jesus said we should be "poor in spirit" (Mt.5:3). "Poor" (Gk. *ptochos*) means abject poverty and utter helplessness, therefore, this person's only recourse is to beg. Just to be poor (Gk. *penes*) is different from *ptochos* because this person can still, for example, go out and work for bread. *Penes* may have little, but *ptochos* has nothing at all. This, Jesus said, is our true condition, our humanity. We are not only imperfect and sinful but inadequate and weak. *This is how God sees us; this is what we need to accept about our* self. We may be able to accept this spiritually but from a practical, everyday standpoint how can we live with this self-definition? There's a great deal at stake here and this definition wouldn't seem to work in the real world. But the alternative is to go back to the old definition based on lies and make more substitutes. For many that would be an easier alternative because it would not leave us so vulnerable. Yet, we will never be able to dance completely around the truth of our condition.
Jesus goes on that if we are *ptochos*, then our response will be to "mourn" (v.4, Gk.

pentheo, lament, grieve, deep sadness). If our condition truly is *ptochos*, not *penes*, then mourning would be the natural response of our heart. Too often, however, we insulate ourselves from such feelings. In terms of how we see and feel about ourselves, it is around *ptochos* that issues of self-worth revolve. We don't usually recognize this because our heart is not aware of feeling *pentheo* (grief, deep sadness), only feeling insecure. *Jesus said essentially that we need to open our heart and expose the* pentheo *by fully acknowledging, admitting, confessing our* ptochos. (This may include seeing the condition of humanity in general.) More specifically, this is not a person, for example, who tries to be strong. They come to God for comfort, healing, cleansing, forgiveness, whatever, so they can be together. God leaves himself vulnerable to our humanity and we must *(dei*) likewise. Intimacy with God requires that our heart live in its true humanity. These are the moments we let him truly see us the most and give him the best opportunity to be with us.

These two characteristics (beatitudes) are critical to redefining ourselves. Thankfully, God didn't let us remain in this state and fall into despair. Jesus didn't come in order for us to merely feel bad about our self. As with the tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners, he extended his favor to us in our helplessness, pursued us in our poverty, took us (the common) back to his special family, then cleaned us up from all our dirt, restored our hearts to intimate connection with the Father and legally granted us the relational position as his own child. This total process can best be defined as *family love*—a process based on God's mercy and grace that continues for us to experience *more*.

Since God proved that we can trust him intimately, the initial experiences of his family love rightfully conclude with only one perception of our *self*. This perception forms **the foundational characteristic** of the redefined self, the new person in Christ. As Jesus revealed this is "the meek" (Gk. *praus*), which means gentle—that is, not hard or resistant to live as one really is. The word involves *the inner attitude and outer behavior of one who demonstrates what he/she truly is*. Contrary to most images of "meek," this is not timid weakness but humble power, truth of character based on one's real condition. How exactly this may be expressed or displayed can be described best by the variety of Jesus' behaviors. Whatever the form, the important matter is that *there is no lie or illusion in being* meek. We experience difficulty when lies or illusions keep us from facing our *ptochos* or feeling our *pentheo*. This may involve a major area in our life or other problems and needs along the way which we deal with by ourselves instead of trusting intimately in God. Therefore, we make substitutes and act out some lie; we settle for less and live some illusion. In strong contrast, the meek is "blessed" (Gk. *makarioi*), which means to be fully satisfied because God is present and intimately involved in their life. This blessed experience is not about happiness with one's situation or circumstances; life is not reduced to our situations and circumstances. In this redefinition of self, the importance of our total person (from the inside out) and the primacy of intimate relationship become the focus. So, the full satisfaction of being blessed has purely a relational meaning which our heart experiences about the joy of intimate relationship with God. This is the ongoing relational outcome of these beatitudes and redefining our self in this process.

Let's go back to the parable of the vineyard workers. Haven't we all felt at times that we deserve more from God, that he's not being fair or doesn't really care? Or at least

had the hope or expectation that God would honor us for our service? Such perceptions (e.g., of entitlement) are not based on the truth of our condition but on the lies or illusions of defining ourselves by what we do. The good intentions of trying to measure up to God, striving to be a better Christian or making sacrifices as a means to serve him (cf. Mt.9:13), all fall into this category of lies and illusions.

Most Christians wouldn't dispute Paul in Ephesians 2:8,9, that we have no basis to give credit to ourselves, that we are saved only because of God's grace. Yet, most Christians have a tendency to apply this only to salvation in the future while engaging in a different practice for daily life in the present based on what we do or have. We need to understand that this disrupts trusting God from our heart and interferes with our intimacy together. *If we don't dance around our* ptochos *and* pentheo*, our heart responds with greater trust and intimacy*. It is only when we deny or bury this part of our *self* that we effectively keep relational distance from God. No matter what Christian activity we participate in during those times, there is no functioning relational trust and intimacy experienced in our heart.

Lies and illusions keep us from the truth about our self, with the relational consequence of not living intimately connected to God in relationship. Remember Satan's counter-relational work and his goal for Christians: to distance us from our heart and to interfere in our relationship with God. These are the lies and illusions in which Satan would want us involved. These are what we need to expose, reject and turn from (repent) in ourselves, in our relationships and in our churches.

This process opens our heart to the redefinition of self which Jesus brought, freed us to live, and established us in by his earthly life (person and words), death and resurrection. In this process, he is the one who redeems us *from the old* and transforms us *to the new*. This redefinition provides us not only with authentic humility, from which to exercise more trust and intimacy, but also the relational basis for heart level thanksgiving and love. No wonder this person is *blessed*, fully satisfied.

> Take some time to look inside your *self*. Be vulnerable to him who makes himself vulnerable to you and whatever is inside.

***Saved to* What?**

Thinking relationally and increasingly *acting relationally* are critical for our spiritual growth and development, authentic spirituality and spiritual formation. Since none of these practices or disciplines are ends in themselves, this relational perspective maintains our focus that they only serve as a means to make intimate connection with God and build this relationship with him. Furthermore, this relational perspective helps us understand the relational purpose and outcome of the process of sanctification.

Whenever we are redeemed, freed and transformed during the course of our Christian life, we are not just saved *from*, freed *from*, changed *from* something to nothing in particular. We always go *from the old* in us *to the new*. This is fundamental. Too often Christians think, for example, about dying to something old in them without also embracing the new to be raised up in its place. This is understandable if *the new* is abstract or only seen as spiritual. But what *the new* involves specifically is totally

relational. What we are saved *to*, freed *to*, transformed *to* is **intimate connection with God and growing in relationship with him—plus his design and purpose for all relationships.**

This relational purpose and outcome are obscured, or even lost, in many of our attempts to become more like Jesus. Part of any confusion about this comes from a limited view of two of Paul's statements. The first is "being transformed into his [Christ's] likeness" (2 Cor.3:18). In this context Paul is describing the change necessary for authentic faith; all other expressions have a veil hanging over their heart (3:14,15). His second statement is similar: "to be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Rom.8:29). So, with this goal in mind we start emulating Christ's life but without always understanding Jesus' person and words.

"Transformed" (Gk. *metamorphoo*) means to undergo fundamental change of one's total form—that is, in substance also, in contrast to changing only one's outward form as in masquerade (Gk. *metaschematizo*, cf. 2 Cor.11:13-15). This distinction is crucial in our time and culture where emphases are given more to form than substance. If we are indeed freed from a veil influencing, distorting or controlling our perceptions, like a screen and filter, then that freedom is directly a result of intimate relationship with God, as Jesus described in John 8:31,32. To understand Jesus' person and words is to *look* at this relationship. To emulate his substance, not merely his outward form, is to involve ourselves in this same relationship.

What exactly was this relationship for Jesus? Paul actually gave us partial understanding of this in the context of his second statement (read all of Rom.8:29). From the very beginning God always wanted and planned for his creation "to be conformed" (Gk. *symmorphos*, together with in form) "to the likeness" (Gk. *eikon*, similarity of substance) "*of his Son*." *Son* is our first relational clue which Paul builds on "that he might be the firstborn" (Gk. *prototokos*, preeminent, first in order of importance, not that the Son was originally born) and adds "among many brothers and sisters." This is not a conformity to mere forms of outward behavior or principles but *together with* in his substance (*eikon*) and his relationship. When you make the relational connections here and draw the relational picture, what emerges is *family*—to share together in family as the Father's sons and daughters and in a sense as Jesus' brothers and sisters.

If we focus only on doing *what Jesus did in order to become more like him, we miss his* being*, which is what the Father really wants us to be conformed to*. How do we know what the Son is like in order to be conformed to him? Mainly from Jesus' earthly life in the flesh, which objectified it for us in his person and words. That's why it's so critical for us to fully understand him between the manger and the cross.

When we ask "who is Jesus, who was this Word who became flesh?," the two most defining aspects of Jesus are: (1) he is God, (2) he is the Son. The former is ontological and the latter is relational. We need to keep these two distinctly separate in the process of conforming to Jesus and becoming more like him. If we don't, we are setting ourselves up for failure.

From the description of the Word in John 1:14,18, "one and only" (Gk. *monogenes*) shows the very unique relationship of God the Son to God the Father. Ontologically Jesus is "one of a kind" and no one else can ever achieve or assume his position. This is how we often try to be more like Jesus. His ontological position, however, needs to be distinguished from his relational position as Son. Though we can

never achieve his ontological position as God, the Father wants all of us to be relationally like Jesus, to be conformed to the same relational position as son or daughter and as siblings in God's family. *Conforming to his likeness is about relational work*.

Heart Merger: The Son Doing Relationship With the Father

Other than being unique and special, how is the relationship between the Son and the Father? An overview of how this relationship was as Jesus openly functioned in it on earth gives us a concrete picture. Because of what he practiced in the flesh, we can understand his likeness that the Father wants us to conform to.

Looking at how Jesus lived and functioned on earth, we can clearly observe how involved he was with his Father, how intimate they were with each other. To be like Jesus is first and foremost to be involved with the Father as he was; that was his order of priority. Nothing was more important to him. This intimacy with his Father has dimensions both of quantity and quality which interrelate but are helpful to distinguish.

From a **quantitative viewpoint** Jesus spent a lot of time with his Father. For example, it was characteristic of Jesus to be alone with his Father, especially during the night (Lk.5:16; 6:12). Have you ever wondered what they talked about during all that time? I can't fully imagine. Was it all "business"? We know the Father has affection for his Son (Jn.5:20), so I wonder if they laughed together—especially about our foolish ways (cf. Ps.2:4). I don't want to anthropomorphize God, but I think they had fun together, enjoying a range of interaction.

In those times Jesus both shared his *self* with his Father as well as received from his Father. The fact that Jesus received from his Father is no surprise; but what he received may be a source of tension for those wanting to do relationship their way, or it could be an issue for anyone with a bias, for example, from their past experience with parental dominance or a child's overdependence. Jesus said: "the Father loves [Gk. *phileo*, affectionate love] the Son and shows him all he does" (Jn.5:20); that his Father is his model and he follows his Father's lead (Jn.5:19); that the Father taught him everything (Jn.8:28); that the Father validates the Son and corroborates his work (Jn.5:31,36-37; 8:17-18); that the Father is always with him (Jn.8:16,29; 16:32); that "all that belongs to the Father is mine" (Jn.16:15). The Father is not detached, passive or unresponsive; the transcendent God is a directly hands-on God. Because the Father loves (*agape*, sacrificial love and *phileo*, affectionate love) his children, this is the relational outcome of intimate involvement with him. Of course, for those mentioned above, this may be more intimacy than they want or too much to trust him in.

By the way, did you know that the Father loves the Son with affectionate love (*phileo*)? This is important to grasp about God because our perceptions of him don't always include his warmth. Yet, a vital relationship with our Father requires the intimate experience of his tender affection. That's part of the relational work we're seeing between the Father and Jesus. To receive from the Father also involves the willingness to learn (Gk. *didasko*) from him, which inherently includes increasing our understanding of the Father by learning and assimilating, not merely for information but for shaping the will of his child. This is not mind control to constrain the person but *heart merger* of *the common* taken to the higher level of *the Uncommon* (holy). The relational outcome is that

he keeps drawing us closer to himself. We cannot be intimate with God without being involved with the Holy and the Eternal. Relationship with God without this involvement is more illusion than reality. God doesn't do relationships by the common and temporal.

Jesus always had heart merger with his Father. So, the Son "knows him" (Jn.8:55, Gk. *oida*), that is, intuitively knows, not by learning (Gk. *ginosko*) as we have to but because of intimate relational knowledge as his Son. In his response to his Father, Jesus wants all of us to learn that he loves (*agape*) the Father; so he willingly obeys what his Father commands (Jn.14:31). Obedience is also warranted since the Father is greater (relationally, not ontologically) than he (Jn.14:28) and, thus, justifies deferring to the Father's will—plus it leads to eternal life (Jn.12:50). This includes what to say and how to share himself (Jn.12:49). His sole purpose for making himself vulnerable in the flesh was to reveal the Father (Jn.17:6)—so that we can have intimate relationship with him (Jn.17:2-3)—and to do what was necessary to establish this relationship (Jn.12:27-28) despite his personal sacrifice (Mt.26:38-39; 27:46). This quantitative relational work reflected Jesus' intimate response not to pursue his own desires (Jn.5:30) but to please his Father (Jn.8:29).

The above quantity is always guided and controlled by specific **qualitative aspects** which determine the extent of relational interaction possible with God. This quality is necessary to experience ongoing relational outcomes of intimacy and growth in the relationship.

The first qualitative aspect involves what Jesus said the Father seeks from those deeply involved with him: "spirit and truth" (Jn.4:23,24). From our previous discussion this is interpreted as "heart and honesty." God's glory as the God of heart can only properly be expressed and revealed in the relational context of intimate relationship. That's what Jesus did in the incarnation. What he revealed to us was the Father (Jn.17:6,26). Yet, he revealed more than information about the Father but also his experiential presence because they were united as one (Jn.10:38; 14:20; 17:21-22). Bonded together such that: if we *see* Jesus, we see the Father (Jn.14:9), if you know one you know the other (Lk.10:22); Jesus describes their intimate bond as "the Father living in me" (Jn.14:10), "living" (Gk. *meno*) is the same word we discussed in John 8:31-36 and its relational meaning.

Their intimate bond is both ontological and relational. We can only understand the relational bond of their hearts intimately connected. Because Jesus openly revealed to us his relational bond with his Father, we know what it is and how it functions. Furthermore, that same relational bond on the heart level is also ours to have and experience: relationally bonded to each other (Jn.14:20; 17:21); their intimate love relationship extended to those who conform to his likeness (Jn.14:21); loved by the Father just as he loves (*agape*) Jesus (Jn.17:23,26), which also includes being loved affectionately (*phileo*, Jn.16:27), the same as the Son (Jn.5:20).

The qualitative presence of our heart vulnerably extended to the Father opens the way to this relational outcome—to experience him as Jesus does. The potential for these outcomes in our ongoing experience of God is not determined by the limits of our heart but by the unlimited, eternal heart of God. At the same time, the quality of our heart also demands honesty. Without it our heart is not vulnerably extended to God.

Honesty of the heart is not a matter we normally think about for Jesus. Yet, it's a quality present in his intimacy with his Father. Honesty is an interesting quality. On the

one hand, we are either honest or dishonest; there is no in-between where we can be partially dishonest and still be honest. Honesty, on the other hand, can have degrees; we simply may not, for example, express everything. Jesus was not dishonest when he did not share all his feelings with some of the Jews, or when he talked in parables so others couldn't understand. As we've been discussing, he seemed very honest with his disciples in what he shared—though I suspect he didn't express all his frustration and disappointment.

Honesty, however, in his relationship with his Father is the next level of relationship—the ultimate level. We don't know all he shared in those evening interactions with his Father; yet we can readily assume he shared everything with total honesty. I say this because the key here is the relational issue of intimacy. We know that Jesus experienced a lot of rejection. We can't look at this merely as information because these are the relational consequences Jesus let himself be affected by in being vulnerably present. We have to look at this relationally, then we will understand his experience of hurt in certain relationships, particularly with his disciples. He must have shared a lot of that with his Father.

What Jesus shared with his Father (that is recorded for us to learn from) reflects his total honesty and their deepest intimacy. As the time of his crucifixion came closer, he shared his troubled heart with his Father (Jn.12:27). As it was imminent, he shared his deep distress and pain—so strong that he asked not to die (Mt.26:38-44). The only time his Father could not be with him, he cried out to his Father with the ultimate pain and hurt: his Father's rejection (Mt.27:46). As the Son, Jesus showed us how much our Father wants to hold our heart in his hands. Christ as Son is so beautiful for us to see. And as we take in the Son, we are directly exposed to the Father.

What we can learn from this is: ***intimacy with God depends on the qualitative presence of the honesty of our heart*; *the degree of honesty determines the amount of intimacy experienced in our relationship***.

By openly living the ultimate level of relationship vulnerably in the flesh, Jesus revealed it and extended it to us. Everything he accomplished on this earth makes this level of relationship possible for us to experience now. The eternity implanted in our hearts can be realized here as well, because Jesus brought the *more* to us to have here and now. This leads us to **the last qualitative dimension** of this level of relationship.

As mentioned earlier, to be intimate with God is to be involved with the Holy as well as the Eternal. This means that God doesn't do relationships by the common and temporal. Holy (Gk. *hagios*) means to be separated from ordinary and common usage. That's what Jesus said of himself in not being of the world (Jn.8:23; 17:14,16). That's why he was able to clearly reflect the Father and express light in the context of the common (Jn.12:45-46). Jesus maintained his sinless integrity throughout his earthly life as exemplified in his temptations (Lk.4:1-13). But, as we discussed about his temptations, this went beyond our usual perceptions of sin.

Inherent in *holy* is to be different. Essentially, what is usually considered to be the consensus, the norm, is a contrary perspective or position from the holy. The common is the majority or dominant way of doing things—the common way we define ourselves, the way we do relationships and thus also do church. To be holy is to separate ourselves from these. Jesus not only identified himself as uncommon but he also said that of his true followers (Jn.17:14,16). But he knew that just as he was tempted to the common, his

followers would constantly be vulnerable to Satan's lies, so he prayed for help for us (Jn.17:15). This help was to neutralize Satan's counter-relational work and for our relational work with the Father so we can be transformed to his truth (Jn.17:17). ***Establishing and maintaining our integrity in the quality of holiness is absolutely critical and necessary to be intimately involved with the Father at the ultimate level of relationship***.

Honesty of our heart requires us to be who we truly are before God in who he truly is. Because he is holy we cannot remain where we are, though he initially receives us there. That means, for example, the lies we've embraced and lived by—no matter their consensus or dominance, even among Christians—have to be rejected and "died to" and the truth (of us and him) embraced. As Paul quotes God (read 2 Cor.6:17,18), when we separate ourselves from the common "established way of doing things," God will receive us intimately and be a Father to us, and we will be his sons and daughters. This is the relational outcome of not being common, of becoming uncommon, holy like God.

These are the quantitative and qualitative dimensions Jesus revealed to us of the intimacy in his relationship with his Father. This is not for our information but for us to experience with our Father also. This is the relational purpose for which the Father wants us to be conformed (together in form) to Jesus' likeness (substance). To practice these dimensions as Jesus lived on earth is to make real the relational outcome of our same position as his son or daughter and of experiencing similar intimacy with the Father. From the very beginning this has been our Father's desire for us to experience together with him and his Son.

The Only Relationship That Works

Even as we read this about Jesus and what the Father wants, we have to be aware of what our predispositions are, including the influence of Satan's counter-relational work. If we don't think relationally, we're probably not going to act relationally. When we think of Jesus, his person, how he was and being *like* him, we can easily look at all this in our *old* way. That is, we can approach it, for example, from a *doing* perspective and think about all we have to do to be like Jesus. Likewise, when we think about taking our place in God's family, the first thing that usually comes to our mind is: what should we do? What spiritual gift should I exercise? Essentially, this attempts to be like Jesus ontologically—trying to be perfect or measure up. That expectation would either put a great burden on us or freak us out. However it affects us, the result is we won't be free. Functionally, then, we live in our relationship with God in effect like a slave.

Obviously, that's not the approach God wants us to take. Contrary to what we often practice—emotionally, if not intellectually—the Father doesn't expect "ontological conformity" but wants "relational conformity." When Jesus instructed about the Sabbath, he restated from the O.T. "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Mt.12:7). When he was challenged for associating with sinners, he repeated the same words and instructed us to learn what they mean (Mt.9:13). In each of these situations, as well as the O.T. situations, Jesus sharply brings our focus back to the importance of the total *person* and the primacy of relationships—foremost the person of God and our relationship with him—not about *doing* the "right thing." We may still need to go back and learn what those words mean, if

we don't understand how this underlies God's law, his commands, his design and purpose for our life and how Jesus lived.

In the relational process Christians are going to relate to God in actual practice either from a position as a slave or freely as his son/daughter. We need the Spirit's help to understand and acknowledge when we live like a slave, in order to be freed from such practices. This is crucial for our relationship, so that we're not misled by a serious pursuit for *more* like the successful, young guy discussed earlier (Mk.10:17ff), so that we're not laboring under any illusions about our experience in his family (Jn.8:34ff).

As Jesus demonstrates in his own life, there is only one relationship that works with the Father. This is the relationship which is the basis for everything in relation to God and the Christian life. This is what eternity is about: where we're going on our journey *to* eternity and where we need to be now to journey *in* eternity. Consequently, what's most important to understand in the Father's plan for us to be like Jesus are the relational messages our Father is saying to us in Romans 8:29. Take the time to grasp his vital relational messages to you in this truth:

(1) how does he see you and feel about you?
(2) what is he saying about your relationship together?
(3) how does he see himself and what does he want to be?

Jesus revealed further relational messages from the Father in the rigorous Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6 there are ten references to "your Father." These are further vital relational messages which God is giving to us about his feelings for us and the nature of our relationship with him. From what appears to be a litany of prescriptions and injunctions emerges clearly the *intimacy* as his son or daughter that we can have with our Father. When we receive his relational messages, what a beautiful picture of intimate relationship we have in this passage.

All his relational messages communicate how strongly God feels about us and about our relationship with him. They are essential for *knowing* him. When we embrace his relational messages in our heart, we'll experience what Jesus prayed for us in John 17.

My Father wants me to experience *being* his son—that's what he made me. For many years, however, "Father" was only a title for God that I used, not a relational experience. The main reason for that was I wasn't really functioning as his son. What does he want for you? He wants the opportunities to *be* our Father, just as he is with Jesus. No "sibling rivalry" from the Son; Jesus wants all that he experiences with his Father to be ours also. This includes all the benefits: most of all love (*agape*, Jn.17:23,26) and affection (*phileo*, Jn.16:27), intimate sharing, and being taught by the Father with all that is his.

This is all because the Father-child relationship we have with him is more important to our Father than anything else. If we haven't gotten **his message** yet, this is it: **he wants *me*, not what we do for him or give to him; and he wants this experience for me as more than just an individual; we are to enjoy this relationship within the context of a permanent place in his family, belonging intimately together with him (as our Father), his Son and his other children as family forever**. These are the relational messages from our Father in Romans 8:29, which the Spirit will help us deeply experience as stated earlier in this passage (Rom.8:15-16). These are the messages we

need to receive (*lambano*, Jn.1:12) and hold (*meno*, Jn.8:31) in our heart. When we do, there really isn't anything more we would want to be in life than to be like Jesus.

This is the glory of God which Jesus incarnated for us to "view attentively and deeply contemplate" (*theaomai*, Jn.1:14). He willfully made his inner decision (Gk. *boulema*, Lk.10:22) to reveal the Father specifically to us. Don't take lightly the privilege he has given us, which many have missed out on (Lk.10:24). Those who embrace his revelation are "blessed" (Gk. *makarios*, Lk.10:23), meaning the deep satisfaction that comes from God's presence and involvement such that one is sharing in the life of God. Jesus holds us accountable for his revelation as he did with those on the road to Emmaus.

This is the glory Jesus gave to us in order "that they may be one as we are one" (Jn.17:22). His glory is pure relational work. Jesus' farewell prayer (read all of John 17) brings this all together. As we live in actual practice as his sons and daughters and ongoingly embrace him as our Father, this will be an experiential reality.

This intimate experience of his love, family love, will not only be for our own peace and enjoyment. It is also for the world to see God in us, as the Father is in his Son (Jn.17:21-23). This helps the world to know the relational significance of God's love, as the world becomes the object of this family love.

Thank you Jesus for bringing the Father to us. Thank you for taking us to the Father. And thank you for all you lovingly accomplished, so that we could be together with him—together as family.

* * *

Intimacy with God is relationally significant and specific to our relationship with the Father. Spiritual growth and development finds its deepest meaning in this relationship. Just as everything Jesus lived was for his relationship with his Father, so must (*dei*) everything in our life involve our Father.

- *Where do you stand with your Father at this point in your life?*
- *How well do you relate to God as Father?*

This relationship could be problematic for us. No more significant predisposition or bias develops in our life than what results from our experience with our earthly parents or those who raised us. We could discuss this matter for years. What's crucial now is understanding, acknowledging and being freed from these predispositions which invariably get imposed on God also and, thus, affect our relationship with God *as Father*. There is no more urgent area in our Christian life than to sort this out with him. It's a stepwise process; take the time to start now if you haven't seriously started already.

- *Related to this, how well do you relate to your Father as his son or daughter?*

What's critical about this for all of us is the issue of vulnerability. I don't think we are more vulnerable in our life than when we reveal our self in the intimate needs as son or daughter. Think of the ways we substitute for these needs and the above relationship. Compare Jesus' words in Matthew 18:3.

Honesty of our heart is absolutely necessary in the relational process of intimacy with the Father. When you are stuck and aren't sure what's in your heart about these matters, then claim the Spirit's promise to help you (read Rom.8:26,27).

"Make every effort" (Lk.13:24) in this relational work!

* * *

Being Relationally Loved

As we get more established in the process of going from merely *thinking relationally* to also *acting relationally*, our transformation increasingly results in *being relational*. This transition is not usually a direct progression—often going back and forth—besides not being smooth. We will vividly see this in Peter's life.

Whenever tension exists in a relationship—for example, being afraid to go deeper or a lack of self-confidence to get more involved—there is a tendency to turn to substitutes in place of deeper relational involvement. Idealizing our relationship with God is one such substitute. Doing something for God instead of deeper involvement is another substitute. As we discussed about the issue of honesty and how much we should tell God, the key here also is the matter of intimacy and how much we really want to be with God. Substitutes are always easier and involve less risk for us than intimacy. Many times we make the easier choice, even though the substitutes are less satisfying.

Whether our tension with intimacy involves the thought of being disappointed by God (maybe because of hurtful experiences with our earthly fathers) or of "messing up" the relationship (possibly due to feeling inadequate), this is a very real concern which we often don't acknowledge. Instead, it's a risk we try to minimize with substitutes. The implicit thinking behind this is similar to the rationale that "something is better than nothing." Christians are settling for less in their relationship with God because of such thinking. But this is critical for us because it is also a myth for relationships. "Something" as a substitute is not better than the honesty of "nothing." "Something" will not lead us to more with God; it has substituted for the *more*, even with good intentions. "Nothing," at least, doesn't create any illusions. We can compare these efforts to the relational implications of Jesus' words to his disciples during a critical interaction with Peter, which we will discuss in a moment (see Mt.16:25). *To minimize risk in relationship with God is to believe a lie*.

While intimacy with others usually involves our exposure with uncertain results, intimacy with God involves deeper relational connection with the experience of love. We can never expose any part of our self to God which he doesn't fully realize already. Regardless of what he sees in us or knows about our past, he has consistently demonstrated his deep desire to be involved with us (e.g., Rom.5:8). If we want to have an ongoing deep relationship with God, then we have to let God love us. Letting God

love us seems so basic that I think we take it for granted and assume that we let him. But from the relational perspective, for example, many times we focus on "loving God" as a substitute for intimately letting God love us. We do this not because we don't want God to love us. We do this because there is a part of us we don't want to expose to him.

God certainly wants us to love him also; and he expects that. But he knows that's not going to happen until we first let him love us (1 John 4:10,19). All of us have some degree of uncertainty about how lovable we are. No matter what our theological convictions about God's love, the actual function of those truths in relationship with God is not a routine practice. Presenting our self to him as we truly are is usually the more difficult choice because we are focused on being exposed, not loved. Yet that is the only choice possible that gives God the opportunity to love us. It all started with his initiative of grace because of our sin, inadequacy, weakness, imperfection. That's why our experience of letting God love us has to start with the experience of his forgiveness.

If we have trouble with asking for forgiveness—relationally, not theologically—we have trouble with letting God love us. Obviously, then, this also means we have trouble with love in general. To minimize forgiveness is to minimize the intimacy of Love—first, his love, then our love, eventually others' love.

The prostitute who anointed Jesus learned and experienced that (read Lk.7:36-50). When Jesus said "her many sins have been forgiven" (v.47), it wasn't because of her great act of love. Jesus said the word "forgiven" in the Greek perfect tense which accentuates the fact of an existing condition and stresses the prevailing effects of an action. Because she let God love her first through forgiveness, she was loved, and now risked further rejection in order to be involved with Jesus in this difficult and beautiful expression of love. The cultural and traditional influences at work here made this a very difficult situation, even for Jesus. He was vulnerably open to intimacy with this woman and letting himself be loved, despite others' perceptions. She wouldn't let the past and the *old* control her. Being vulnerable to others' criticism, and even possibly Jesus' rejection, she stepped out in love to creatively express her heart. For her, such intimacy was not about exposing herself as she really was and to any repercussions but about the relational outcome of deeper connection with Christ. She wanted *more*, pursued him and experienced the deep satisfaction of *being together* in love. And forgiveness is the key to this experience of love. "But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love" (Lk.7:47, NLT).

Jesus told her "your faith has saved you, go in peace" (v.50). "Save" (Gk. *sozo*) includes being made whole. Was the prostitute just saved from her past? As we've discussed, Jesus saves us *from* and also saves us *to*. The latter is important and must be understood here. If she were merely *saved from* her past, how could this reformed prostitute have peace (Gk. *eirene*, well-being) while still needing to contend for her place in a hostile community and to worry about what the future had for her? Jesus also beautifully lived out with her what she was *saved to*. He had made her whole again and before the astonished eyes of that rejecting community he intimately received her. He restored her to the well-being of their intimate relationship and her place in his family.

What we are *saved from* by its nature must (*dei*) be accompanied by what we are *saved to*. It is not sufficient merely to be freed from the *old* or simply to want the *new*. We can't experience what "Christ saved us *to*" before we embrace what "Christ saved us *from*." And if we are not embracing what "he saved us *to*," it reflects that we are not fully experiencing what "he saved us *from*."

Forgiveness is fundamental to the relational process of intimate relationship with God and the experience of his love. This vital relational process is seen clearly in summary during Jesus' ongoing interactions with Peter. In examining these interactions we will see the difficulty this key representative of the disciples had with this relational process. Peter lived primarily in the common perception of what we are *saved from* while Jesus also kept calling him and pursuing him to what we are *saved to*.

Being Relational: the Pursuit of Peter

The relational study of Peter will show us that the process of transformation is not simple or smooth, even for the most committed Christian. It will also help us to understand more fully what needs to change in us in order to grow in relationship with Christ and be like him in intimate relationship with our Father. What we will see further is his grace powerfully underlying their interactions. In love and mercy, with patience Jesus pursued Peter.

It has been my emphasis that to truly *know* someone is a relational process. This knowledge of a person is not mere information gained from observation; it is the experience of that person which could only result from direct relational involvement—specifically in intimate relationship. Such experience is the function only of that kind of relationship, not of any other activity, amount of time or mutual purpose together. This relational process requires the openness of the heart in order to *see* and to *hear* the other person, as well as to share honestly with each other. As we examine Peter's interactions with Jesus, think about "when is he open?" and ask yourself "what prevents his openness?"

Luke 5:1-11 - In the beginning of their relationship, Peter had a profound experience with Jesus which should have set the tone for the relationship. Was Peter's heart open to Jesus? We don't know what Jesus taught from the boat that day. Whatever Jesus said earlier, Peter was willing to comply with what seemed like his unreasonable request (v.4), even though they had worked hard all night (v.5). This willingness resulted in Peter's profound realization of the difference between him and Jesus (v.8). This experience shows us that Peter not only listened to Jesus' words, but he *saw* Jesus the *person* and, therefore, saw his own person as he truly is. This should have set the tone for their relationship. In Peter's initial openness here, he saw the qualitative difference between him and Jesus. But this is not merely a spiritual difference considered, for example, in limited moral grounds. It also involves the depth of the uncommon with the breadth of the common. The full reality of *what* Peter was and *how* he defined himself needed to be understood and addressed in very specific areas of his life. As we will see, those areas also needed to be redeemed, transformed and restored to God's design and purpose.

John 6:60-69 - At this pivotal stage, many of Jesus' so-called disciples stopped following him because of the relational demands he had just placed on them (Jn.6:29-58). When Jesus asks the twelve disciples if they want to leave him also, speaking for them as he often did, Peter makes this profound confession (v.68). Peter wanted the *more* (eternal

life) and rightly goes to the source for it. Yet, his focus on "the words (Gk. *rhema*) of eternal life" seems to emphasize Jesus' words, statements, more than his person—for example, as the other term for "word," *logos*, emphasizes his essence (cf. Jn.1:14). Though Peter acknowledges that they know who Jesus is, the relational experience necessary for this level of knowledge still seems to be missing. Jesus responded that he had "chosen" (Gk. *eklegomai*, chosen for oneself) them, that is, they were chosen for this intimate relationship. Though Judas would miss out altogether on this relationship, the others struggled with it—especially Peter.

The gap between our confession and the reality of our experience with God can get wide. The difference between what we believe from what we practice may not always be apparent to us. Hopefully, Peter's life will help us in our inconsistencies and encourage us in our relationship with Jesus.

Matthew 14:25-33 - Peter had seen Jesus heal various persons, including his mother-in-law, and had just witnessed the miraculous feeding of the 5000. He knew what Jesus could do. Then, what was he thinking when he essentially asked Jesus to prove it was he (v.28)? What was he focused on? This remarkable request demonstrates that Peter *sees* Jesus for who he is, at least in terms of what he does, and initially trusts him. In the process, however, Peter is distracted from the *person* by the situation. The resulting fear constrained Peter's faith. Fear does that to us. The relational consequences of fear is that it causes us to pull inward and seek control. Relationally, Peter was not open to Jesus in that moment. Peter pulled back his trust and relationally distanced himself from the person Jesus, even though he asked Jesus to save him from the situation. His cry to be saved should not be confused with trust and relational involvement. In one moment he enjoyed intimate and unique connection with Christ walking on the water together. In the next, he was disconnected relationally from Jesus' person even as he hung on to his hand in the situation. It is important for us to understand this distinction in our relationship with Christ because we could be praying for similar results while distant relationally from God. *Anything in the relationship that causes us to pull inward and seek control is in contrast to our trust which extends outward to God and lets go*.

Mark 10:28 - Remember from our previous discussion how Peter contrasts the disciples with the successful young guy (v.17ff). Based on what they did compared to what the young guy wasn't willing to, I think Peter implied they were better. At the same time I think he is expressing a self-concern because of what they did. Jesus didn't dismiss his concern and gave them the beautiful promise for both now and the future (vv.29-30). Yet, he also warned them about defining themselves in that way and seeking a higher position on the human totem pole (v.31). This issue remained problematic for them (cf. Mt.20:24; Lk.22:24), as we will see particularly in Peter's life. Nevertheless, Jesus kept extending his person vulnerably in love and was establishing a new order of life.

Matthew 16:13-20 - This passage and the one immediately following reflect the ups and downs for Peter. We need to compare and contrast these two interactions Jesus had with Peter. When Jesus asked the disciples for their personal view apart from others' opinion of who he was, Peter responded directly and clearly (v.16). This moment is one of his highlights. Jesus called him "blessed" (Gk. *makarios*, same as in Beatitudes) not

because he gave the correct answer. Peter didn't deduce this view from human thought, but from the Father's revelation (v.17, Gk. *apokalypto*, removed a veil, exposing to open view what was before hidden). Because God was present and involved in Peter's life, he was "blessed." This is not the same as "happy"—an inadequate translation of *makarios*—which tends to suggest merely a positive state of mind or pleasant circumstances. *Blessed* is sharing in the life of God and the give-and-take of that intimate relationship. Though Peter so far didn't seem very relationally intimate with Jesus, he did engage this relational process. The Father's revelation here should not be considered a unilateral act from which Peter benefited merely by being in the right place at the right time. God engages the relational process also. So, this reflected God's involvement with Peter as well as Peter's openness to and involvement with God, however imperfectly or inconsistently he practiced it.

But the following interaction gives us another side of Peter. He will go from the above highlight immediately to one of the lowlights in his career as a disciple.

Matthew 16:21-25 - From here on Jesus told his disciples what's going to happen to him—a reality that is a "must" (Gk. *dei*, necessary by the nature of things, unavoidable, in contrast to obligated, for example, morally or due to personal obligation). So, the gloomy events ahead for him are not optional in this sense. This scenario was too much for Peter to take; to his credit he didn't just sit there passively with his contrary feelings. Taking Jesus aside as if to counsel him, Peter responded strongly "to rebuke him" (v.22). The Greek word "rebuke" (*epitimao*) means to censure, rebuke; it is an abrupt and biting charge sharply expressing disapproval, harshly taking someone to task for a fault. The word implies that Peter expressed a warning as he confronted Jesus on his ludicrous plans. "Never, Lord!"—this Greek word (*hileos*) functions in such phrases as an invocation for overturning evil. In our vernacular we might say "God forbid!" or "Absolutely no way!" We have to appreciate Peter's honesty here in sharing his feelings with Jesus; even though he was off-base about God's will, without the benefit of hindsight we might have felt the same way, and maybe we do about some other situation for today. It's important to share these feelings with God. Yet, despite Peter's honesty with these feelings, was he really completely open with Jesus? Why did Peter have these feelings?

Jesus' response helps us understand. He responded back even more strongly to Peter by identifying him as the enemy (v.23); contrast this with verse 17. Why was he now considered the enemy? Because he was a "stumbling block" to Jesus; the word (Gk. *skandalon*) always denotes enticing or trapping its victim in a course of behavior which could ruin the person. Exactly what was Peter trying to trap Jesus in which would lead to his ruin? Compared to verse 17 when Peter was influenced by the Father's revelation over human reason, Peter reversed himself to function on the basis of human thought. "Have in mind" (Gk. *phroneo*) means to think, have a mindset. This is more than a predisposition or bias. This activity also involves the will, affections, conscience, therefore to be mindful of and devoted to that perspective. Even at this stage of Peter's discipleship and immediately after his highlight experience, Peter's perception of Jesus' plans was based on his mindset controlled by human influence. In other words, Peter put Jesus in his box; and those plans not only didn't fit into his box, they were in conflict with how Peter perceived God, not to mention how he perceived himself. This couldn't happen

to Peter's God—absolutely no way. He honestly shared those feelings but he was not completely open about where he was coming from, about why he felt so strongly. This prevented his understanding of God's will and effectively made him God's enemy.

These were areas in Peter's life which needed redemption, transformation and restoration. Furthermore, I'm sure we can safely assume that fear was involved for Peter as he sought to maintain control and have God on his terms. Jesus also spoke to these issues and what's involved (vv.24-25). We will discuss the further implications of this interaction after looking at Peter's other interactions with Jesus.

Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-13 - Shortly after this came Jesus' transfiguration (Gk. *metamorphoo*, to transform, to alter fundamentally). This marks an important stage of Jesus revealing God's glory. In this amazing experiential moment, everything is brought together: the past (represented by Moses and Elijah), the present (with the Messiah in supernatural form and substance) and the future (the reality of God's kingdom/family)—all with the presence of the Father relationally speaking in their midst. This summarizes all that God relationally shared, promised and experienced with his people, now being unfolded and fulfilled for these disciples to experience directly. Imagine yourself being present also, not for a mountain-top experience but for this total relational connection.

When Peter experienced Jesus' transformation and the presence of Moses and Elijah, he proposed setting up three tents. Why do you think he suggested this? Remember Moses' experiences with God, remember the conversation with the Samaritan woman (Jn.4:19ff). In this awesome moment Peter was stuck in the past. His old mindset quickly expressed itself again when he tried to constrain God's glory to a place—just like the O.T. ways of relating to God. Mark's account tells us Peter suggested this because he was afraid (Mk.9:6); he didn't know what to say. We can empathize, because seeing Jesus transformed must have had a similar effect that transformations in science fiction movies may have on us. Once again fear leads to restraint as Peter reacted merely on the basis of the old. Rather than step out in trust to experience the *more* of eternity right before him, he backed away from making himself vulnerable to intimate relational connection with God and his family. Instead, Peter turned to what was familiar and comfortable to him, that is, to the "established ways of doing things," to substitutes.

Since God doesn't define himself or do relationships this way, the Father intimately spoke directly to Peter and the others to pay attention to his Son (Mt.17:5). Rightly and necessarily so, for all of us, to pay attention not merely to his words and his actions, but to his person. For the glory of God was before us in the flesh: the visible heart of God, intimately relational, vulnerably present and involved. In his transformed state, Jesus extended his glory to them to experience further. As they lay face down terrified by the presence of the Father speaking to them, Jesus pursued them and tenderly reached down to touch them (Mt.17:6-7). It's important for us to understand Jesus' relational action here and not just look at his words. The word for "touch" (Gk. *hapto*) involves not just physical contact but touch with involvement and purpose in order to influence, affect. Reflect on the relational messages here. Jesus wanted this awesome experience to translate for them into the total intimate experience of connection with God: *"Relationship with God is like this. It's OK, you can enjoy him wherever you are."* Do we pause long enough in our times with God for him to have the opportunity to

"touch" us?

The relational context of God's glory is clearly established in this experience; the Gospel of John seems to indicate the relational glory of God reflected throughout the earthly life of Jesus. Peter missed, initially at least, the point of God's glory now being revealed in Jesus. *The God of heart can only properly be expressed and fully revealed in the relational context of intimate relationship*. That's *where* our response to him needs to be and *how* we engage God. If Moses and Elijah were to counsel Peter after his suggestion, what would they have told Peter?

To follow Jesus is to be together with his *person* where he is. To *know* him is to make heart connection with him. Do you think Peter is learning this yet and growing as Christ's disciple? Predispositions will have to be changed if we're going to be free from the barriers to intimate connection with God. Feelings we have in our heart need to be attended to in order to vulnerably extend our trust to God ongoingly in relationship. Peter continued to struggle with this relational process.

Matthew 18:21-22 - Peter later raises this interesting question about forgiveness. I think there are two ways to consider this question: what are the limits of our obligation in what we should do?, or, what is the extent of involvement we should have with others, especially those who wrong us or who are needy? Since Peter was more into what he did than relationships, it seems that he asked the former in terms of the quantity of doing something. Presumably, Peter wanted to fulfill his obligation, which seemed reasonable. Jesus, however, refocused Peter on what's really important, while helping him to understand Peter's own person. The numbers aren't important here but relationships and the quality of relational love. This wasn't about what Peter does but about what the other person needs. The parable Jesus relates to illuminate this is about giving mercy (Gk. *eleeo*), expressing compassion to relieve the other person's misery, affliction, need. If Peter had been ongoingly experiencing God's mercy and grace in this way, he would have understood what's important here. It involves redefining ourselves according to the reality of our own poverty (*ptochos*), being vulnerable with these feelings (*pentheo*) in our heart before God and humbly (*praus*) living this truth and relational experience with others, as we discussed earlier about the Beatitudes. Peter's focus suggests, in my opinion, that he had trouble with forgiveness and, therefore, with love—both loving others and himself. Persons who define themselves primarily by what they do and have tend to have this problem, asking God similar questions. Do you think the prostitute who anointed Jesus would have asked the same question as Peter?

On the same subject of forgiveness Jesus reiterated in similar words the importance of relational quality (Lk.17:3-4). After hearing this, the apostles (including Peter) asked Jesus to increase their faith (v.5) to which he responded with the famed mustard seed (v.6). What prompted this request? Based on what Jesus told them (vv.1-4) prior to their request, they must have felt inadequate to measure up to his expectations. So, they asked for greater quantity of faith to fulfill what they needed to do. There's a place for such a request, but not as an expression of this kind of perspective and concern. Jesus' focus on the mustard seed shows us that it's not about quantity of faith for us to better do something. It's about exercising what faith we do have; it's about exercising the quality of trust in our relationship with God and extending the resulting experience of love to relationship with others. This is not about what we can *do* with just a small

quantity of faith. This is what we will experience and what we will *be* as we exercise trust and intimacy with God.

Faith is not a means to highlight ourselves. Faith as intimate trust is the relational means for deeper involvement with God and our privilege to serve him. This seems to be Jesus' point in the illustration he adds (vv.7-10): just be who/what you truly are and do what you've been told—no more, no less; since you're not worthy to fulfill it on your own, God will help you to be/do that which he desires; the results will be because of his grace, therefore it is the servant who should be thankful, not the master.

There is no limit to God's grace because he doesn't do relationships under obligation. And the extent of his loving involvement with us is eternity, the potential for our heart's experience is the heart of God. As Jesus revealed, our God is full of grace and truth, that is, our Father's unfailing love and faithfulness (Jn.1:14). Peter and his colleagues needed a *new way*: feed off God's grace and grow in experiencing his love.

John 13:1-10 - Jesus was to show them this new way in an experience Peter could have never imagined. In that upper room prior to his death, "he now showed them the full extent of his love" (v.1). "The full extent" (Gk. *eis telos*) means the complete, continuous, perpetual, eternal action of God's love as he covenanted and now fulfills in Jesus, his Son. As he washed his disciples' feet and came to Peter, try to put yourself in Peter's place. From our discussion of Peter, what do you think Peter's tone was in the question he raised to Jesus (v.6)? What was going on for Peter in this moment? Jesus responded (v.7) that at the moment "you do not realize" (Gk. *oida*, intuitively know, understand, recognize already) "but later you will understand" (Gk. *ginosko*, know by learning or experience). You would think that this was sufficient to pacify Peter in his indirect question. Can you imagine what Peter is feeling at this point? Peter did more than object to Jesus' footwashing. His words (v.8), in the Greek aorist subjunctive mood with the double negative, were the strongest expression of categorical denial and refusal to let Jesus do it. Does this remind you of their interaction earlier in Mt.16:21-23? Peter struggled deeply in these moments for him to feel so strongly. Reflect on the issues for Peter and what was involved that made their relationship difficult.

Once again Peter is controlled by predispositions in his thinking and biased by his feelings. Because he defined himself primarily by what he did, he defined Jesus this way also. There was absolutely no way in Peter's perceptions of his Lord and his God that Jesus could do this. Jesus couldn't be his own *person*; he had to be the person Peter wanted him to be. But Peter undoubtedly had mixed feelings here. Based on how he defined himself, that's how he did relationships. He essentially compared people on a human totem pole. This process of stratification placed Jesus at the top and Peter below, if not the bottom. He was unworthy to have his Lord, Messiah, King, God wash his feet. Therefore, he relationally rejected Jesus in his act of love. He was not open to such intimacy. As you've placed yourself in Peter's position, consider if there are ways you are not open to intimacy with Jesus.

Characteristic of God, Jesus lovingly pursued Peter. "Unless ... you have no part *with* me" (v.8). This was necessary, but not for Peter to have a relationship with Christ, because he had that; this was necessary for their communion together. This footwashing should not be oversimplified as symbolic of merely spiritual cleansing or servanthood. We also have to understand the relational significance of this because that's the ultimate

purpose that cleansing, forgiveness, faith, spiritual formation and other such practices have. Peter needed to let Jesus wash his feet in order to be *with* Jesus, that is, to be sharing intimately together with him in their relationship. When Peter realized the relational consequences, he finally said OK, but then directed Jesus not to stop at his feet but wash other parts (v.9). Interpret Peter's response. Where was his focus? Did he really *see* the *person* Jesus here? What kind of relational connection would they have had if Jesus also washed those other parts?

Ever since Adam and Eve struggled in their relationships, distance in relationships to varying degrees has been the norm. Intimacy does not develop naturally anymore. It certainly doesn't develop easily, even though we need it and even when we want it. Today, we experience the absence of intimacy in our relationships more than in any other historical period. Yet, we seem to accept this condition or resign ourselves to its loss. The influences of society, culture and family establish us in certain ways which need to be redeemed, transformed and restored to God's design and purpose; this can be true even of the practices of a church. Without such changes, we will do our relationship with God on our terms as Peter continued to struggle in. We will return to his footwashing later.

As Jesus neared the end of his earthly life, there were a series of moments in their relationship which we need to compare and contrast. Look at Peter in the following:

Matthew 26:33	"Even if all fall away ... I will never."
Luke 22:33	"I am ready to go with you to prison and to death."
John 13:37	"I will lay down my life for you."

Before you mentally jump ahead to the outcome of his bold declarations, there are some important areas to reflect on. Peter did back up some of his words with action. In the garden of Gethsemane, Peter took the initiative with his sword (Jn.18:10) without waiting for Jesus to answer the other disciples' question (Lk.22:49). Though he acts on his own, you've got to like Peter as a person of action. He acted while the others questioned; unfortunately he acted in his bias. He was still trying to determine for Jesus what should happen and how God's will should work. Beyond this one moment, Peter's life seemed to reflect good intentions, incomplete commitments, misguided actions. Yet, in these closing moments of Jesus' life where was Peter focused? Did he *see* Jesus' person? His main focus was on doing something because he depended on that to define himself. Consequently, his intentions were focused on what he could do—like promises we often make to God.

Peter didn't, however, take into account: first, how circumstances/situations influence him (which includes the influence of culture) and, secondly, his limitations, weaknesses and sin which reflected his true humanity and what he was. Avoiding the second area is characteristic of those who define themselves by what they do. Both of these matters affected Peter and kept him from following through on his intentions. That happened because he didn't focus on his total person, only on what he did. That is, he wasn't aware of his heart and didn't attend to his heart in those situations. What do you think he was feeling when he whipped out his sword?

Therefore, Peter relationally was often missing Jesus' person and not really connecting with him. In the same way that many of us get into while serving, doing something for Jesus was more important to Peter than being with Jesus relationally. The

contrast in the garden of Gethsemane demonstrates this. The intensity of his sword-wielding is the opposite of his sleeping state in the moments immediately preceding. The reality is that those preceding moments were actually tenser because of the depth and intensity of Jesus' heart pouring out to Peter and the two sons of Zebedee (Mt.26:36-46). Yet, they couldn't stay awake to support Jesus in his most critical time of need. Peter had to be completely blind and deaf not to know his Lord was in pain. What did he feel when he saw Jesus in his anguish? Forget about physical tiredness here; Peter had the intensity with the sword, if only due to adrenaline. Relational intimacy with Jesus in his overwhelming feelings poised more of a threat to Peter than the physical confrontation later.

We can empathize with his discomfort when a situation becomes too intimate or starts to make us feel out of control. For example, how comfortable are you in the presence of someone crying? The common reaction is to try to get that person to stop crying. Is that for the benefit of the person crying or for our sake? When doing something is our main focus and we don't know what to do, we get very uncomfortable. We feel it's not enough to just *be* there (however we are), to *be with* the other person—even if that's the most important thing to that person and what he or she needs the most from us. This is not adequate to justify our self when we depend on what we do to establish our worth. When we are threatened in our comfort zones, we tend to try to "fix" the situation (e.g., get the person to stop crying), to make substitutes (e.g., give that person a box of tissue instead of a long hug) or withdraw (e.g., keeping relational distance can be spatial, emotional or mental; even praying for the crying person could be a way to avoid direct contact).

Jesus asked them only to "keep watch with me" (Mt.26:38,40). "Keep watch" (Gk. *gregoreuo*) involves being alert and aware. With all that was transpiring in these moments as the most significant point in history was reaching its climax, I don't believe Jesus was acutely focusing them on the situation. What danger existed in that moment? Jesus was going to be crucified and he was overwhelmed by that certainty. What could be worse than that? Obviously, Satan was present and active, but limited. He wasn't able to stop God and his will; he could only try to distance the disciples from their hearts and interfere in their intimate relationship with God. This was a struggle that Jesus certainly was well experienced with, and also encouraged them in (v.41). As this dramatic redemptive scenario unfolds, Jesus was profoundly concentrating on the relationship. It wasn't the situation he called them to in this intense moment, it was to his person. He was going to be vulnerably involved with his Father and he asked them to be vulnerably involved with him. "Intimately be with me."

What an invitation, what a privilege they received. What an opportunity! How do you think you would have responded to Jesus? When what we *do* becomes more functionally important than what we *are*, then the total person—especially the heart—is given a lower priority, even ignored, noticeably in situations like this. When this is our predisposition, intimate relationships become another lower priority as we attend to what we perceive as more urgent matters. Peter demonstrated this for us. I hope you get a better sense of Satan's counter-relational work and grasp the influence of his lies on Peter and on us.

Jesus already indicated to Peter that he would fail in his ways (Lk.22:32). The ultimate relational distance he had with Jesus (and still have a relationship) was when he

made those denials (Mt.26:69-75). He denied identification with Jesus (v.70), association with him (v.72), involvement as one of his (v.74). This wasn't merely the failure of Peter to do something to support his bold declarations. These are relational acts with relational consequences. As Jesus predicted, Peter would "disown me" (vv.34,75). "Disown" (Gk. *aparneomai*) is a relational word in the N.T. and means to withdraw from fellowship and remove oneself, as from Jesus. So, we should realize that this relational consequence both deeply pained Peter (v.75) and also intimately affected Jesus, even though he knew it was going to happen. His heart always remained vulnerable to the hurt and pain of Peter's relational action, especially here and in the garden. That's how God is and what Jesus brought to us. *Don't underestimate God's heart to feel and be affected; and don't overestimate his nature as a way to insulate himself from us*. He remains intimately vulnerable to the relational consequences of how we are with him, even when he knows beforehand. He pursues us anyway, he receives us regardless. And he does relationships in quality distinctly from how we commonly do them. Reflect on his relational messages to us.

John 21:15-22 - That's what Jesus continued to extend to Peter. Apparently, in the interim Peter is forgiven for his denials and is able to move on with God's grace. Yet something seems to be missing as they interact here. Do you think they're making relational connection? Put yourself in Peter's position and see what you feel or would say.

- *"Do you love (*agape*) me with self-sacrifice?"* (v.15)
- *"Yes, Lord, you know that I love (*phileo*) you affectionately"* (v.15).
- *"Nurture (*bosko*) my little ones"* (v.15; *bosko* only involves the basic task of leading the lambs to pasture, nothing more).

  *"Do you love (*agape*) me by letting go of your self-concerns, self-interests, particularly trying to establish your self-worth*?" (v.16)
- *"You, more than anyone should know that I love (*phileo*) you affectionately" (*v.16).
- *"Then take care of (*poimaino*) my followers*" (v.16; *poimaino* involves much more than *bosko*; it implies the total task of shepherding, guiding and guarding the flock as well as leading them to food).

  *"Do you love (*phileo*) me as you say?"* (v.17)
- *"Absolutely, you know everything there is to know—especially about me. You obviously know that I love (*phileo*) you with all my affection. So, you don't need to keep asking me"* (v.17).
- *"You don't understand, but feed* (basko*) my followers. There'll be changes ahead for you, so concentrate on following me and devote yourself to our relationship"* (v.17-19).

Where do you think Peter's focus was in this interaction? What kind of connection do you think they had? In all three responses Peter focused on Jesus "knowing" (Gk. *oida*) and his ability to know intimately, not by learning. While Jesus certainly has this ability and knowledge, he was not seeking information here from Peter. If not information, what was Jesus seeking? In spite of the painful relational consequences of his recent actions, Peter still didn't seem to focus on Jesus' person and their relationship.

Consequently, deep relational connection still was missing as they interacted. He didn't really *hear* Jesus here, nor truly *see* his person—though he recognized Jesus as God in his ability to know (*oida*). This was an opportunity for intimate and tender connection after some acutely painful days, but Peter relationally missed his Lord Jesus in this moment.

Jesus wasn't asking Peter to prove his love (*agape* or *phileo*). What happened before was past and forgiven. Yes, Jesus knew (*oida*) that Peter loved him. Why he switched to *phileo* in his third pursuit of Peter (v.17) is not clear; he also went back to only *basko*. I suggest he was reaching out to Peter where he was. Though Peter had *phileo*, he was not ready for the self-sacrifice of *agape*. He wasn't at that level because he still wasn't freed from his self-focus, self-concerns and interests. Rather than prove his love, Jesus wanted Peter to release the *phileo* constrained in his heart and express it relationally. This wasn't about information. It never is about information as far as God is concerned; we need to remember this in how we pray. It's only and always about the relationship and our intimate relational involvement. This relational response is what Jesus was seeking from Peter because his love didn't translate into the relational process and transmit in their relationship.

So, Jesus once again had to refocus Peter on what's important: "follow me" (v.19), that is, concentrate on *being with me* and devote your *person* to our relationship. Even when he told him to feed and take care of his followers, he was not focusing Peter on what to do (his *doing*) but on who Peter was (his *being* as one of God's own children) and on the joint relational responsibility of building his family. There is an ongoing tension and conflict between such Christian *doing* and this relational *being* in Christ for those who define themselves by their service and subtly depend on that to establish their value to God. But, remember what Jesus told Peter earlier, that after he fails in his old ways, then to help build up God's family (Lk.22:32). Serving God is based on receiving his grace in intimate relationship, not on what we can *do*.

Did this put Peter in the right perspective and in the proper relational context? Just then he noticed John behind them (v.20) and inquired "Lord, what about him?" (v.21) Where do you think Peter was focused at that point? Transformation was not smooth in his life. This seemingly innocent question demonstrates in this context that Peter was still not focused on Jesus' person but on secondary, situational things. This problem is common in how we do relationships when the total person (significantly the heart) is given a lower priority than what we *do*. The relational consequence is that we easily overlook each other, functioning in the relationship with substitutes, thus diminishing our experience of satisfying connection. Jesus was not only dissatisfied with their connection here, he was displeased. Peter tried his loving patience. "... what is that to you?" (v.22) expressed rebuke from Jesus which Peter needed; in our vernacular the words might be "That's none of your business." Then, he emphatically made it imperative to him: "You must *follow me*"—the only imperative that Peter needed to hear and focus on. This was only about relational work.

Peter's difficulties with changing didn't end with this post-resurrection period or even with Pentecost. He assumed relational responsibility and took the early lead in the church. But his *old* "established ways of doing things" persisted and later was both challenged by Christ (see Acts 10:9-16, 34-35) and rebuked by Paul for his hypocrisy (see Gal.2:11-14). Beginning in Acts 8 we see the early church forced out of its provincialism by circumstances of persecution. But the gospel was also constrained by

their mindset and worldview. Therefore, Christ spoke to Peter during this vision. As a result, Peter realized, at least intellectually, how predisposed he was and how this had the relational consequence of discrimination, excluding a whole category of people from God. Peter's way of doing relationships was hurtful. Yet, what he gained in theology here did not change his practice in relationships. So, Paul exposed him for not "acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal.2:14). Peter needed to be transformed from both how he defined himself and how he did relationships. He is not alone in this. We need to ask ourselves how we do relationships.

Relationship with Jesus Christ is not a belief, a theological position, nor even a religious identity. It is an ongoing, dynamic relationship with God's *person*—not only Jesus' person but also the Father and the Spirit. All that transpires and is experienced between us and God is a function of relationship, not a result of what we do, of what God alone does, nor a function of any other activity, done separately or together. This is only a function of relationship—a relationship operating on intimate trust unlike anything we're used to. We have to sort this out in our theology and understand this in our practice.

Peter strained in his relationship with Jesus because of how he did relationships and wanted their relationship on his terms. He learned the hard way that God doesn't do relationships on our terms, specifically by the common and the temporal. When we reflect on this, do we really want him only on our terms? Peter's perception of God was a great deal smaller than who God actually is and the plans he has for us; so Peter didn't really want much. He made substitutes for the *more* and settled for less.

Paul described God as he who goes beyond what we can ask or even imagine (Eph.3:20). This is the God that Jesus incarnated; this is the uncommon and eternal Father he intimately connected us to. We keep trying to make the uncommon God more ordinary, more to our common taste. Jesus came in order to take us to the realm of the uncommon so that we can experience even now the *more* of eternity—beyond what we can imagine. There's a popular song from the group MercyMe entitled "I Can Only Imagine" written by Bart Millard. It's a great song that stirs my heart. But I change the words to "I can't really imagine" because our God takes us beyond. And I want to experience all of him and what he has for us. I don't want to settle for less, which Peter struggled with in constraining Jesus and their relationship.

This makes it important for us to go back to two of Jesus' interactions with Peter. Jesus told Peter that unless he washed his feet Peter had no intimate connection with him (Jn.13:8). What is it about this act that he seems to make fundamental, as the ***basis and base*** for our relationship with him? Before we answer this, we need to look at a previous interaction. When Peter went ballistic over Jesus' plan to be crucified, where exactly was he coming from (Mt.16:22), and what was the specific mindset Jesus was exposing (v.23)? The answers to these questions involve how we view God, how we define ourselves and therefore, what becomes the nature of our relationship with him. These areas are not mutually exclusive; they strongly interact, exerting influence on us regardless of our theology.

As we discussed earlier, Peter had his own predisposed views of God and how his Master should be, and what his Messiah should do (v.22). Of course, these were in conflict with what God had already revealed of himself to Peter (cf. v.17). This

inconsistency by Peter is the same as any disparity between what we believe and what we actually practice. Like Peter, for example, sometimes we don't like the plans God reveals, and thus we directly or indirectly reject them; this includes ignoring uncomfortable parts of his Word, especially certain words from Jesus. Peter was usually direct in expressing his position, which was more helpful in the relationship than being indirect. Yet, what compounds things for him is how he defined himself.

When Peter rejects God's plans as defined by Jesus (v.21), in effect he rejects God's provisions for his redemption. Then, what was he implying? Either that he didn't need personal redemption—though maybe Israel needed it as a nation—or that he would provide his own means for redemption. By his actions here Peter begs the question: if Jesus is prevented from going to the cross, then who will go to the cross for Peter? Of course, the answer is not directly articulated by Peter; nevertheless it is communicated by how he lived while with Jesus. Think about the relational messages in his actions. As we reflect back on other situations with Peter, we can see how much he defined himself by what he did, or at least said he was going to do. This demonstrated what he depended on to establish himself, particularly as Jesus' disciple.

The flip side of his efforts, however, is Peter's rejection of Jesus' love in his footwashing (Jn.13:8). Why? Partially because Peter didn't feel worthy of such love from his Master, Messiah, that is, from God (cf. Lk.5:8). How can he be worthy of this relationship?

Peter's relationship with Jesus in the Gospels shows him vacillating between, on the one hand, trying to establish himself by his own efforts and, on the other hand, not being able to measure up and thus feeling bad about himself. This is characteristic of those who define themselves by what they do or have. These deep-seated feelings may not be apparent, but they remain an underlying condition no matter how successful we are in establishing ourselves by these means. Jesus clearly identifies this thinking, this mindset and constraining approach to life as the established, common ways of everyday human life (Mt.16:24; 15:8-9) and its source ultimately as the lies of Satan (Jn.8:44).

How does this way of thinking, these views, this mindset, these predispositions affect our relationship with God? As Peter demonstrated in his life:

(1) It keeps us from *seeing* God as he truly *is*.
(2) It prevents us from connecting with God intimately in our relationship, even though we may be doing things with him or for him.
(3) It makes it difficult or impossible for us to fully receive him in his love and care for us in our total person, that is, significantly in our heart.
(4) The result is the relational consequence that we don't experience him intimately and thus don't *know* him, despite the fact that our belief system may reflect the knowledge or information of such a God.

What, then, functionally becomes the *nature* of our relationship with God? We need to make the often subtle distinction between what we firmly believe and how we actually function in the relationship. The latter is not readily apparent to us if we don't *think relationally*. Given what is actually going on in the relational process above, the nature of our relationship with God is based on *me* and what *I* can do in order to evoke and justify God's response in the relationship. This wasn't Peter's beliefs or theology but

this was what he practiced relationally. He kept living in the *old* and Jesus kept calling him to the *new*, to his person, to intimate relationship together. This prevented Peter from intimate connection with Jesus and thus from experiencing love freely in their relationship—both receiving and giving love.

Let's go back to the question related to footwashing. What, indeed, does Jesus make the **basis and base** for our relationship with him? Remember, with Peter's predisposition and bias, his God wouldn't wash feet; and if his God did manage to do it anyway, Peter would not feel worthy. *Worthy*—this is the key issue! How worthy are we and how can we be more worthy? Our mindset and established ways of doing things predispose and bias us in this critical issue of self-worth. Either we feel worthy or we don't. If we aren't worthy, we have two alternatives. Either we try to become worthy, or we realize we can't establish our worth and accept that. While Peter rightfully and genuinely felt unworthy in relation to Jesus at different times, he continued the efforts to prove he was worthy in his life and relationship with Jesus. Jesus didn't want this kind of effort from his disciples.

Given how Peter saw himself and how he saw Jesus, footwashing was not possible—either for Jesus to give or for Peter to receive. Can you identify the lie in such thinking? Jesus says this is the truth as revealed by God: "I, the holy and eternal God, wash your feet *even though you are not worthy*." Given what Peter depended on to establish his worth, Jesus' death on the cross was unthinkable and unnecessary. Peter essentially would do it himself. Feeling that we need to measure up is one lie. Thinking that we *can* measure up is a compound lie. With the truth Jesus says: "I, the holy and eternal God, die on the cross *because you can't make yourself worthy*." The fact is **grace allows only this one conclusion about our self-worth**.

These truths from Jesus, however, are not mere truths of fact. They are relational truths exercised by God solely for one relational purpose: *"You need my favor because there's no other way possible for you to connect with me and be with me ongoingly."* At this stage for us it's not the initial connection that concerns us; it's this specific purpose of ongoing intimate relationship with the holy and eternal God in the growing experience of love. Yet, after becoming a Christian "by grace," we usually tend to see grace as situational, only when we need it, for example, for forgiveness. But *grace is purely relational*. When we make it situational, we lose its ongoing relational significance.

Life Faster Than Grace

Grace—this is the whole issue! This unwarranted, unmerited intimate response from God determines the **basis and base** for relationship with him. But we may have to set aside temporarily our theology of grace in order to grasp this relational significance. Take the time to look at his relational messages in grace. When we fully define his messages to us, *grace tells us two absolutely vital relational truths: (1) how God consistently functions in the relationship ongoingly, and (2) how we need to function in the relationship ongoingly*.

This is the ongoing difficulty Peter had with Jesus. This created the tension and conflict with how Peter defined himself and did relationships. This is the underlying reason why he didn't want Jesus to wash his feet and to die on the cross for him. Contrary

to the nature of Peter's relationship with God based on himself and what he could do, grace establishes the new nature of relationship with God based on the person of Jesus and what he does: to justify God's complete, ongoing, perpetual, eternal response of God's covenant love and faithfulness.

Grace is the relational expression from God which initiates and motivates all relationships with him. **Faith is the relational response back to his relational act of grace.** Faith does not precede grace, nor is faith the stimulus for grace. Neither is faith something we have or do. When our faith functions like any of these other things, we revert back to the old nature of relationship with God based on *me* and what *I* do. We, therefore, must (*dei*) never live our life faster than grace. That is, if our faith overtakes grace, it is no longer the relational act of trust but our attempt to impress God and "be worthy." Grace does not allow us to define ourselves by what we do or have. Life faster than grace is trying to do that. But grace and any pursuit of self-worth are incompatible for relationship.

This reflects the ups and downs of Peter's faith. The only faith Jesus expects and demands from his followers is the ongoing intimate relational trust we extend back to God in response to his ongoing grace. For such faith we need to let Jesus wash our feet and to die on the cross for us, ongoingly. Grace doesn't allow any other conclusion. Therefore, his grace is not only the ***basis*** for relationship with him but also the ongoing ***base*** for developing the experience of intimate relationship with the uncommon God *in* eternity now.

Our theology may state "by grace you have been saved" but our everyday perceptions seem to filter out what we are *saved to*, only leaving us the situation of *saved from*. There are relational consequences for this. As he did with Peter and the disciples, Jesus also asks us today, "Who do you say I am?" We need to examine if we are also giving him two answers as Peter did. On the one hand, we may give the theologically or spiritually correct answer while, on the other, our predispositions (like Peter) won't allow Jesus/God to be all he truly is. Whether it's putting God in a box, constraining him by defining the relationship on our terms or denying his plans for us, "who we say he is" often is not compatible with the God of our everyday practice. So, like Peter, many of us, in effect, relationally won't let Jesus wash our feet at times or go to the cross for us as needed. We have to understand the actual perceptions of God we're using in practice and examine honestly how we function in our relationship with him.

Furthermore, he calls us out of our comfort zones to join him in what he saved us *to*. This new way to define ourselves and God, and to do relationships requires that we are ongoingly redeemed (liberated), cleansed and healed *from* predispositions, perceptions and established ways of doing things which are rooted in subtle lies from Satan and operate in relational conflict with the truths of God. As it was for Peter, transformation for us remains rocky when we don't recognize and acknowledge what we need to be changed *from*: it is prevented when we don't confess what we need redemption or cleansing from; it is impeded when we don't open areas of our heart that need healing.

In the relational imperative, Jesus tells us to "make every effort" (*agonizomai*), struggle with deep concentration and intensity in this relational process (Lk.13:24). This is the effort he wants from us. His Spirit is here to help us complete the process. Intimacy with God and the growing experience of his unfailing love are the relational outcomes we

can expect as we openly extend our trust to him in this relational process—outcomes beyond what we can imagine.

- *"Do you love me?"*
  Not if we are unwilling to function ongoingly in our relationship by his grace.
- *"Do you truly love me?"*
  Not if we aren't experiencing forgiveness along the way.
- *"Do you love me as you say?"*
  Not if we don't release the love in our heart and express it relationally.
- *"You must* follow me*!"*
  Not if we get distracted from his *person* and maintain substitutes in our relationship.

Chapter 6 THE RELATIONSHIP OF FOLLOWING

Whoever serves me must follow me

John 12:26

Too bad we don't have the narratives for the rest of Peter's transformation. Peter's epistles reflect the transformation as one in whom grace prevailed (1 Pet.1:3; 5:5b-7; 2 Pet.1:9) and from whom love emerged (1 Pet.1:22; 4:8-10; 2 Pet.1:5-8). God certainly fulfilled his desires for Peter's life; and Peter served and glorified God. He must have "made every effort" in the relational work facing him. We can be encouraged that Peter, the main representative of the first disciples, had so much difficulty in his relationship with Christ and with transformation as we do. But more than that, we have to learn from Peter's difficulties in order to more intimately follow Christ. The imperative Jesus gave to him, "Follow me" (Jn.21:19,22), is for all of us—concentrate on *being with him* and devote our total person to our relationship.

In any examination of the person and words of Jesus, we will always be faced with his words "Follow me." "To follow" (Gk. *akoloutheo*) means to accompany, go with. To follow Christ involves ongoing fellowship (intimate connection) with him, not occasional and temporary following. It is more than selective involvement and beyond situational but engages an intimate relationship, not just for the sake of learning as a student from his teacher—e.g., as the successful young guy did (Mk.10:17ff). *The relational process of this fellowship is characterized by intimate trust, not by deeds, by sharing together in intimate relationship, not in activities*. This is the fundamental way Jesus wants us to relate to him and the working paradigm by which to be involved with him.

Being his disciple was not for a select few. It is the top priority for all of us in relationship with Christ. Discipleship, in its rigorous process, is what our earthly life is about. These are words from Jesus that tend to make us uncomfortable—whether we correctly perceive them or not. Whenever his words do, we often interpret them on our terms or selectively ignore them. That's why it's vital for us to address these words now; the further development and quality of our relationship with Christ depend on it.

Obviously, Peter learned that God didn't define him by what he did or had. We should be thankful God doesn't define any of us in those terms either. If he did, who but those in the top tier, if anyone, would measure up. It's not that God doesn't consider what we do or have, particularly in our response to him; but that's not his priority in how he sees us, that's not what's important to him. The psalmist described God as one whose pleasure is not in what we have, nor whose delight is in what we can do (Ps.147:10). God's strong attraction is not for some*thing* but for some*one*, that is, relationally for *me*. The Lord is pleased with, takes pleasure and delight in those who intimately trust him and who live by his grace (v.11). We have to embrace this truth in our heart and ongoingly counter any lies which creep into our practice. A Christian occupational hazard is to look

at our response to God from the perspective of our deeds, the roles we serve and titles or spiritual gifts we have. That is, we conceive our Christian identity from the outer parts of us to the inner, rather than from the inside first.

Clarifying the Terms

This outer-to-inner approach also impedes the progress of our transformation. By focusing on secondary areas, the primary areas may not get attended to. For example, we may work on changes in how we present ourselves or in what we're doing, and not work on areas in our heart as more important. A further relational consequence of this approach is defining "Follow me" on our terms rather than Jesus'. Christians have various ideas of the meaning of following Christ. Even when discipleship is the objective today, its focus is often unclear and would receive mixed reviews by Jesus.

We already discussed one type of follower (in Jn.6:14-27). When these "followers" inquired how they could essentially be worthy of the *more* (v.28), Jesus told them that only one thing is important to God: the relational work of intimate trust (v.29). Later, he told them that his flesh was the bread of life and they had to eat it and drink his blood to be his disciple (vv.48-58). After hearing this, many of his disciples no longer followed him (vv.60,66). What was their point of conflict with Jesus, what was the issue? It certainly wasn't cannibalism, which they seemed to imply (v.52). The metaphor of bread involves intimate relational connection with God—a connection modeled from the relationship between the Father and Son (v.57). The reason that his flesh and blood were tough words to swallow (v.60) was because to "eat" them meant *transformation*. They might have been willing to make outer changes to follow Jesus but changing from the *inside out* was another issue. They wanted the *more* on their terms. Jesus confronted them in their comfort zone and stipulated the need for transformation in order to follow him. To be his follower is a relationship and necessitates involvement in this relational process on his terms. Much of transformation has to do with this relational work. This is what Peter had difficulty with in following Jesus, in spite of his deep profession of faith at this time (vv.68-69).

What these followers wanted was less than what Jesus wanted to give them. What they wanted didn't attend to the needs of their total person and created distance in relationships by focusing on secondary matters. Essentially, they wanted things on their terms, to control the relationship with God. Jesus didn't try to please them or give them what they wanted—important issues for Christian leaders. If we did church today the way Jesus did things, how many would be in church? If we demanded that every churchgoer change and be a disciple of Christ, how many would remain? Yet, does Jesus give us any option? He does ask each of us on the heart level the same relational question as his first disciples: "You do not want to leave too, do you?" (Jn.6:37).

We are usually guilty of oversimplifying what's involved in being a Christian. I doubt if it's ever been more comfortable and convenient to be a Christian in the U.S. than today. Our efforts in evangelism have made it easier to profess faith in Christ. For example, we use a verse like John 1:12 as a simple formula for conversion. Yet, to "receive" (Gk. *lambano*) Christ involves to take in hand, embrace, listen to, trust and follow as a teacher. Therefore, this word means to be a disciple.

A disciple (Gk. *mathetes*) is a follower, an adherent who studies under the instruction of a teacher, a master (Gk. *didaskolos*). Since the term is only used in the Gospels and Acts, this may make it easier for us to ignore it or to define discipleship apart from the more rigorous words of Jesus and the intensity of his person. But a disciple in the NT meant more than a student or a learner. It denotes an adherent who embraces the instruction given to him/her and makes it his/her way to live. The specific terms for adherence are determined solely by the teacher.[1] The person and words of Jesus defined those terms for us and we have to get back to his terms for our relationship.

We've gotten away from his words in the Great Commission (Mt.28:19). The only imperative he gave us here is to "make disciples" (Gk. *matheteuo*). This verb describes a deeper action than merely the intellectual sharing of information. To make a disciple involves more than, for example, simply instructing a student in a particular study area or helping a student develop a certain occupational skill. Beyond this, in religious contexts—and certainly exercised by Jesus—the word implies the deep development of the *person* and the cultivation of a mindset, worldview, way of life through the process of intimate relationship between disciple (*mathetes*) and the teacher (*didaskolos*). As this interaction deepens and the teacher's person influences the disciples, they are able to participate, share in the teacher's life. By willfully allowing their lives to be vulnerable to the influence of their teacher, disciples have the opportunity to know (Gk. *epignosis*) firsthand, experience directly and even partake of the life of their master. Making disciples (*matheteuo*), therefore, must be distinguished from the verb "to learn" (*matheo*) which simply means to learn without any attachment to the teacher. Remember, the rich young guy only wanted *matheo* (Mk.10:17ff). This is how we often do Bible study. And we have to wonder if our seminaries have stopped here and become merely conduits of information.

All of the above about disciples can only take place within the *relational context* of which Jesus determines the **extent** and **nature**. Discipleship is only a function of this relationship. The **extent** of the relationship involves deeper and deeper connection which goes beyond the mind and necessitates the heart, the total person. But, the outcome from discipleship is a relational outcome involving the willful cooperation and vulnerability of both parties. The **nature** of this intimate relationship involves the vulnerable heart of Jesus (*didaskolos*) and the open heart of disciple (*mathetes*). It wasn't sufficient for God to just come in the flesh in order for me to be able to be a disciple as described above. It was also necessary for Jesus to open his heart further and make it vulnerable to me in order for me to be touched by him, affected and therefore changed as his true disciple. Jesus never maintained relational distance from his true followers. He didn't keep relational distance, for example, on intellectual terms as most teachers do, but openly shared his deepest feelings with them, even at the cost of their rejection. He didn't maintain a distance above them as their superior but instead washed their feet. Reflect on and take in all these relational messages Jesus shares specifically only with those who follow him and become his disciples.

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[1] See Michael J. Wilkens, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995) for a more in-depth study of *mathetes*.

Clarifying What We Follow

This intimate relationship of following Jesus as his disciple is available for us to experience today despite his bodily absence. Maybe you've thought about how much easier it would be to follow Christ if he were here. In some ways it might be, but don't rely on it. The first disciples showed that just following Jesus didn't mean they really *knew* him. I think many today follow Christ without really knowing him from relational experience. Information about him may be there, but not the intimate relational connection to partake in his life and truly know him. This is exclusively a relational outcome, and we've gotten away from this relational process. I've wondered if part of the reason is that we've replaced "following him" and "being his disciple" with the concept of "conforming to his likeness" (Rom.8:29), "transformed to his likeness" (2 Cor.3:18) and being like Christ in the future (1 Cor.15:49; Phil.3:21; 1 Jn.3:2). If we have, this was not Paul's intent, even with Christ's bodily absence.

Focusing on his likeness has less relational meaning and function. It usually involves emulating a model, pattern or form more than engaging a person in a relational process. Peter, himself, talks about following Christ's example but qualifies it with "in his steps" (1 Pet.2:21). This is more specific to Jesus' person and makes a relational connection which is often absent if it's just emulating a model. A focus on his likeness puts less emphasis on Jesus' person and words and more on the image of what he did in general. That means we would rely more on our perceptions of him than his actual person and objective life. In turn, that makes Jesus subject to our predispositions. That is, as it is for ourselves, it's easier to define Jesus merely by what he did and, thus, have the relationship on our terms. Consequently, Christ's likeness has come to have a variety of definitions—usually selective, sometimes distorted but almost always more comfortable or convenient for the practitioner.

At the same time, maybe we don't focus acutely on following Jesus, being his disciple and discipleship also because of our misconceptions of his demands and expectations. Wouldn't Christian living be a lot easier if all we had to do was work on our relationship with God? Well, in God's design and purpose for life, relational work *is* the sum and substance of how he wants us to live and what he wants us to do. That's the basis of his covenant, the purpose for his law, the reason the person Jesus came and the meaning of his words, plus the purpose of the Holy Spirit. We're the ones who make it more complex, or distort it, with our substitutes and lies.

We need to keep clearly in focus that the Christian's goal is not to follow the *model* of Christ, to be more Christ-like (e.g., compassionate) and to act out his teachings or values. *Discipleship is not trying to do what Christ did as much as we possibly can*. The Father's plan and desires (Rom.8:29) all along have been for us to conform (together with in substance or function) to the likeness (how Christ is and lives) of his Son. This is not a symbolic replication of Christ nor an ontological duplication of him (which would be impossible). God is heart and relational; Jesus is heart and relational. This is distinguished in his involvement with his Father. It is this relational way Jesus was, lived and functioned that the Father wants us to live out also: relationally to be his son or daughter, relationally as Christ's "brother" or "sister," relationally to be his family.

These relational functions go well beyond merely the outer-to-inner approach, replicating ways which are "Christ-like." *It's relationally being involved with the*

person of Christ, relationally being involved with the Father in the way Jesus is, relationally being involved with each other as his family—which includes extending his family love also to the world. This goes beyond living in Christ's likeness. It's all a function of real, live, dynamic relationships in which we need to grow.

This is all about *whom* we follow in relationship, not *what* we follow.

Contingencies and Conflicts

But in the words of Christ's commands, demands and expectations, aren't there contingencies he wants us to fulfill beyond just relational work? That depends on how we look at it or what our perceptions are. The devoted, successful young guy seeking *more* (Mk.10:17ff) certainly thought Jesus was asking too much. Some of us think at times that God asks too much of us. Yet, Jesus lovingly asked the guy for relational work to follow him, not for more deeds. What, then, do we say about giving up everything to follow Christ? This guy wanted the *more* of eternity but pursued it based on what he did and had. Jesus informed him that eternal life is a relationship, not something to possess or do. More specifically, this relational work involves the intimate relationship between disciple (*mathetes*) and teacher (*didaskolos*).

Following Jesus denotes only this deep relational process of discipleship. It is a process which initially "receives" (take hold of, embrace, follow as a teacher, Jn.1:12) Christ with intimate trust. This deep fellowship of sharing intimately together goes beyond being only a disciple to sharing everything together as friends (Jn.15:15). This intimate relationship extends further by the transmission of the Father's family love to his Son and from Son to his followers (Jn.17:23,26), which has the relational outcome of being adopted into his family as his sons and daughters. All this is already a spiritual fact of relationship with Christ but not necessarily an experiential reality of the relationship. This is the ultimate relational outcome of the relational process of discipleship.

Following Jesus is the relational work that results in this present experience of the *more* of eternity. Jesus connected being a disciple with eternity-substance and promised his disciples the experience of this *more* now (Mk.10:30).

The successful young guy wasn't looking for a relationship. He only wanted to know what he must do to qualify for more (Mk.10:17). He only wanted more of what he had and did because that's how he defined himself. That's also how he defined Jesus, as only a teacher to give him information. He was only there as a student simply to learn (*matheo*); he didn't want the intimate relationship of a disciple (*mathetes*). He had successfully practiced the *letter* of God's law (v.20), which reinforced what he depended on to establish his worth. He didn't seem to understand the importance of the *spirit* of the law and its deeper purpose involving the heart and connecting persons in relationships of love. He didn't seem to account for his total person (except the desire for more), only his outer behavior. What he *did* was his focus and priority. When that happens, relationships are no longer primary, and suffer in the limited connection experienced. As devoted as he was in his religious practice, he lacked relational connection with God and the experience and enjoyment of intimate involvement together—as disciple, as friend, as son. No wonder he wanted the *more* of eternity. In spite of his accomplishments, he still didn't *belong* to God and his family (Jn.8:35). He was relationally distant because he wasn't

free. With all his success in what he did and had, he functioned in effect as a slave, not as God's son. As long as he stayed in that position, he couldn't inherit anything. That was the relational consequence of how he lived. Jesus' loving response redefined him and pointed him to the relational work which was more important, as he tried to free him from his enslavement (Mk.10:21). But he was unwilling to change.

It is hard not only for the rich to enter into this type of relationship with God (Mk.10:23). It is difficult for any Christian to be intimately relational when we define ourselves by what we do or have, and then do relationships accordingly. *There is a direct correlation between how we define ourselves and how we do relationships*. That influence extends further to how we do church. We have to take more seriously how we unknowingly let the influences on our daily practice control us, thus putting us into the functional category of slaves. We must grasp the functional distinction between a slave and a son/daughter—not theologically in our beliefs, but in our practice—because if we don't, we labor under limits on our relationship with God and what we can experience with him. Satan relishes our failure to distinguish the position from which we function with God.

As long as we don't think anything enslaves us, we don't recognize the need to be freed. Change is not necessary. Unlike the successful guy who seemed unwilling to change, we would be like other believers who didn't see a need to change (Jn.8:33). In this latter interaction, Jesus laid out the process of discipleship and its relational outcome (Jn.8:31ff). From our previous discussion of this passage (see p.75ff), the process here clearly involves an ongoing intimate relational involvement ("hold") with the essence of Jesus ("teachings") and his person. A disciple in this relational process increasingly experiences truly *knowing* Jesus as well as being liberated. It is important for us to understand the relational outcome of this process because the end result doesn't stop at the intimacy of knowing Jesus and liberation.

Disciple to Friend to Family

The progression of following Jesus involves the process of intimate relationship which develops from being a disciple to friend to family member. As the disciples' intimacy with Jesus grows, a change takes place in the status of the relationship. It becomes a relationship between friends (Jn.15:15). Obviously, there are different types of friends. In the world of biblical times, the main ideals of friendship included: (1) loyalty, (2) equality, (3) mutual sharing of all possessions, (4) an intimacy in which a friend could share everything in confidence. What kind of friend is Jesus? He fulfills the first ideal (Jn.15:13), the third (Jn.15:9,11; 16:14-15) and the fourth (Jn.15:15; 16:12-13). Why does he call his disciples friends instead of servants (Gk. *doulos*, indentured servant, slave)? A servant might be loyal (1) but would never experience intimate sharing (4).

In the process of discipleship, the functional change from servant to friend is not automatic. The experiential transition to friend is not easy, though it is straightforward. Jesus does his part of the relational work necessary to be friend. He vulnerably shared his person and extended his heart; he did all of the above except equality (2)—yet defined a deeper meaning to inequality. Jesus gives us every opportunity to *know* him and be changed. Now we need to address our part of the relational work.

What does it mean to be a friend in today's world? Using the above ideals, a friend tends to mean either (1) or (2); if it's a good friend, then both. It would be a truly fortunate friendship to have (3); but it's rare today to have (4). Modern perspectives devalue (4) and magnify (1) and (2). So, it's very difficult to be a friend today according to these ideals. Yet, Christ gives us (1), (3) and (4). We can give him (1) or maybe (1) and (3) as a servant. We could also give him (1) and (3) as a limited friend. But we need to give (1), (3) and (4) to be a true and complete friend.

What are the implications of not practicing (4) with Christ? Intimacy doesn't grow unless we're sharing more and more of our true selves. Such sharing can't avoid or mask our humanity: our weaknesses, inadequacies, mistakes, sins. To keep this from him prevents the intimate connection of experiencing each other, *knowing* him and being healed, liberated and changed. If we try subtly or unintentionally to impose (2) onto him, then we can never experience being friends because we are trying to redefine our relationship with him on our terms. Those terms would not readily allow for our humanity, therefore we would never give (4) in the relationship. But the relational consequences don't stop here.

In the process of discipleship the ultimate relational outcome emerges from friend to full family member as son/daughter. This is the greatest difference and change in status from slave/servant that could only result from redemption (Jn.8:34-36). To experience the reality of this position in the relationship—its spiritual fact already exists—is the outcome of liberation through intimate involvement with Christ (Jn.8:32). Without this liberation, we function only in the position of an indentured servant. This ongoing development of intimate relationship with Christ is a vital indicator to distinguish a family member (son/daughter) from a servant/slave. Consequently, any practice—for example, casual, intellectual or selective involvement, following his teachings without his person, defining relationship on our terms—which keeps us from a fuller, deeper involvement with Christ will limit our experience of *knowing* him, which in turn will put constraints on being freed, that is, changed into the new person and enjoying our place with him in his family as his child.

This experiential difference from servant to friend to family member is a qualitative and quantitative relational outcome. The difference in quantity may not always be apparent to us in what we experience serving him as a servant; that's because what we do takes on so much importance that our heart subtly becomes more distant. But there is a distinct difference between having satisfaction in what we *do* from being satisfied by what we *are* being together with Christ. This is the experience of the blessed (*makarios*) who are sharing in the life of God. The deep satisfaction of the core of our being (heart, soul) from intimate involvement with God's ongoing presence is unmistakable and unequaled—increasing unimaginably in the quantity of the eternal and the quality of the uncommon. As Peter discovered, this experience is reserved for those disciples who function as his family members.

Serving Is Not Our Vocation

Developing intimacy with Christ in the ongoing fellowship of following him also helps us make a further important distinction in the process of discipleship. This

distinction involves the actual practice of serving and helps us understand how to carry out this function in the Christian life. Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant [*diakonos*] also will be" (Jn.12:26). In these words he said a necessary condition to serve him is to follow him and be where he is. "To serve" (Gk. *diakoneo*) comes from the word for minister, deacon, servant (*diakonos*) and has the emphasis on the work to be done, not on the relationship between a lord and servant. In other words Jesus is telling us that in order to serve him it's not sufficient for Christians to focus "on the work to be done," or on situations, circumstances, no matter how dedicated we are or how good our intentions. It is also necessary to be involved in the ongoing deep relational process of discipleship, that is, the intimate relationship of *being with him*. **This is the true vocation of his disciple.**

"Whoever serves me" includes any Christian work or worker. Any service for God distanced from this relational context and process becomes merely the work (*diakoneo*) of an indentured servant. As Jesus said (Jn.8:31,32), such a person is not freed from their bias, condition and position in life, no matter how good their intentions. They will not experience the reality of *belonging* to God's own family (8:35) and will not be transformed from their condition (8:34) until they truly follow his person in the process of discipleship.

This consistently brings us back to how we define ourselves and do relationships. To relate to Christ indirectly through the work, situations and circumstances keeps us in a mind-to-mind interaction mode in contrast to direct relational interaction person-to-person, heart-to-heart. This shows us in practice what we think is important and who we think is important.

But when Christ said "Whoever serves me must follow me," he redefines these for us, telling us *what* is more important to him, *who* is more important and *how* to do relationships. That is, Jesus shows us that he gives greater priority to our *person* over what we're doing, that our relationship is more important than the work. Contemplate these relational messages. We must (*dei*) fully receive (*lambano*, embrace, hold to) his relational messages to us in order to hold (*meno*, abide, dwell) to his *person* (*logos*, essence) and to truly know him and experience his intimate feelings of love for us.

This distinction, along with the earlier one between slave and son/daughter, is vital for the practice of those who take serving Christ seriously. We really have to resist the notion that discipleship is about *doing* something for God. A disciple is engaged foremost in relational work of developing intimate relationship with Christ which increasingly results in the experiential reality of becoming friends and being family members, all the while experiencing more and more of his person and the love he shares. **It is *being with him* like this *where he is*—on his terms within the context of eternity on the level of the Uncommon—that defines what following Jesus is all about.**

This is one of the important areas we can learn about from Peter's difficulties. He saw himself as a disciple and presumably as a servant. But he had obvious difficulty with the intimate experience of friend and son because of the relational work and liberation needed in his life. This difficulty may be even more acute today. One of the reasons could be the use of the traditional "servant model." When Christ suffered for our atonement, was he "the Suffering Servant" or "the Son of God who suffered in serving" (Isa. 53)? When he took on the nature of a slave (Phil.2:7), did he become a slave and stop being God? Jesus served, but he was Son first and foremost. In whatever he did he was always

in the relational position and function as Son (Jn.12:49-50; 14:31). This is *what* Jesus incarnated: the persons of God and their relationship together. This is *whom* Jesus takes us to: the Father and intimate relationship with him like they have. This is *how* Jesus wants us to follow him: as he is with his Father. This is the Father's desire for us to conform to: Jesus as Son—relationally, not ontologically.

For these reasons I think we seriously need to reconsider, even dispute, the servant model. It definitely has some useful perspectives to guide our actions; and it certainly sounds spiritual and seems righteous. Yet, I seriously question how well it functions in relationship with God, especially if it reinforces relational distance. This relationship is the end reason to serve; it's our only vocation. Too many Christians practice serving in the capacity as a servant without *being* son/daughter relationally with him. This has relational consequences for which we need to "make every effort."

How Relational Consequences and Outcomes Happen

Another significant example of involvement with Christ that helps us understand how such relational consequences or outcomes happen is really a set of interactions Jesus had with two persons he was close to: the sisters, Martha and Mary.

The first interaction was the well-known scene which took place in their home (Lk.10:38-42). Since we can assume the disciples were present also, there was a relatively large group to prepare for, not just the three of them. As was customary in those settings, disciples usually sat at the feet of their teacher to listen to his words—a place traditionally reserved for males. The rest of the scene plays out with Martha concentrating on the preparations and Mary taking a place among the disciples. Nothing is mentioned about their brother Lazarus.

Consider first, what was Martha doing and what was Mary doing? Martha worked on all the preparations (Gk. *diakonia*, service, ministry involving compassionate labor benefiting others) necessary for hospitality—work (*diakoneo*) which, on the one hand, was culturally hers to do while, on the other, was an opportunity for her to serve Jesus (v.40). Mary seemed to ignore the work (*diakoneo*) which was also culturally hers to do and chose instead to engage with Jesus in a manner not customarily available to her. For the moment, let's focus on what they were doing about serving (*diakoneo*). What do we know about *diakoneo* from our recent discussion (regarding Jn.12:26)? Martha was engaged in important service—even ministry if you wish—but where was her focus? Mary didn't participate in serving (*diakoneo*), so where was her focus? Martha had the opportunity to serve Jesus but what happened? Mary had the same opportunity but what did she choose instead?

Diakoneo emphasizes the work to be done, not the relationship. Though her good intentions were to fulfill this service, Martha "was distracted" (Lk.10:40) by it. The use of the Greek passive voice indicates that Martha brought this on herself, not that she was a "victim" in this situation. Her complaint about being left alone to do the work (*diakoneo*) reveals that her focus is not on Jesus, his desires and their relationship, but on herself and what she had to do. Martha was so locked into serving that she lost focus of the *purpose* for serving. *Doing* something called serving became an end in itself; relational connection with Jesus was absent. She was alone in her *diakoneo* because she didn't

practice relationship with Jesus by involving herself with him in the relational process. She was left alone to serve because she engaged the work, not the person and the relationship. And she wanted Mary to function as she did. Martha indeed brought this upon herself, not because of Mary's choice. *Diakoneo* can do this to us when what we do becomes the main focus, predisposing us to overlook the person and relationships.

In strong contrast to Martha we have Mary's focus and choice. Mary didn't participate with Martha in serving. Was this a convenient way for her to get around the cultural roles and traditional functions assigned to her gender? Her choice was not an easy or simple one to make, it was only *better* (v.42) in Jesus' assessment. No work of service is ever more important than the person of Jesus, our relationship with him and being with him. Mary grasped this. Even before Jesus said it, she was acting on the importance of John 12:26. But the potential repercussions from culture and tradition made it a difficult decision to involve herself with Jesus as his disciple. I wonder what the other disciples thought when she sat next to them. Nevertheless, Mary wanted more and was willing to risk ridicule and rejection by going beyond any cultural constraints in order to pursue the person Jesus. She didn't do what was convenient and comfortable but what was important and necessary. Did this reflect a difference in personality from Martha, or contrasting perspectives? Maybe a little about personality, but mainly perspective.

The fact that Jesus openly received her is a statement against the constraints of culture and tradition which prevent any of us from deeper involvement with God. Even more important is his statement about the vocation of the Christian life. With all the various matters in Christian living, or life in general, which concern us, Jesus says "but only one thing is needed" (v.42). The Greek word for "need" (*chreia*) means act of using, employment, that in which one is employed. Jesus seems to tell us that only one life activity or vocation is really important. And Mary had "chosen" it (Gk. *eklegomai*, choose for oneself what is desired and thus expressing favor to object chosen). Mary chose "what is better" (Gk. *agathos*, profitable, useful, underscoring the beneficial properties of an object and its being advantageous to chooser, promoting their welfare); that is, she chose to be involved with Jesus and follow him as his disciple. Her choice also was in contrast to the successful young guy, who only saw Jesus as useful (*agathos*) for information, not relationship as his disciple (Mk.10:21).

The life activity and vocation of being his disciple in the ongoing relational process of discipleship subordinates all other life activities and occupations. We may do different occupations, but we have only one vocation in life. This is the only one that really matters, that's really important; all else is secondary. This is the calling of every Christian. The relational outcome of that choice for Mary, as it will for any of us, would "not be taken away for her" because it is intimately connected to the person of Christ, bonded in the unfailing love of the Uncommon for eternity.

A second interaction between Jesus and these sisters took place at the time of Lazarus' death (Jn.11). Jesus clearly loved (both *phileo* and *agape*) this family (vv.3,5) but purposely stayed away upon hearing Lazarus was sick until after he died (v.6). When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she took the initiative to meet him on the road (v.20)—a good relational step for her. Her first words (v.21) were the exact words Mary said when she saw Jesus moments later (v.32). We're not sure how Martha said it, but she immediately followed it with a curious statement (v.22). What do you think her intent

was in the last statement? Whatever she seemed to be asking or hoping for, she was probably acting true to cultural form and not sharing her feelings by asking Jesus (Master, Teacher) for a favor directly. Her indirectness evoked from Jesus a simple yet personal statement of fact about what will happen (v.23). Since he had already taught about the future resurrection from the dead (Jn.5:28,29; 6:39,40), Martha must have heard about that before and seems to make reference to it here (v.24). When we look at her words in this verse, I get the sense that there was a "but..." at the end which she never expressed. Martha was reluctant or constrained to express what was really in her heart. On the surface Jesus then seemed to take her on a short theological exercise, yet he really tried to make relational connection with her (vv.25-26). Martha responded with a beautiful confession of faith (v.27). We have to wonder, though, how much of this was an expression of her heart because there wasn't any sense of her heart expressed in this interaction up to then. Her confession was later tested (vv.39-40), similarly to Peter's confession and subsequent experience (Mt.16:13-23).

If you were Martha, would you have been satisfied with your time with Jesus prior to Lazarus being raised? If not, what more would you have wanted to experience and how do you think you could have experienced it?

When Jesus asked for Mary, she quickly went to meet him (vv.28-29). Mary said the same first words as Martha (vv.32,21). These were her only spoken words, but not all that she shared (v.33a). How did she express herself? How did this affect Jesus? Because Mary opened her heart to him, Jesus was touched and moved in his heart (vv.33b,35,38). In those moments, she experienced her Teacher (*didaskolos*) more deeply and came to *know* him as never before. Their intimate connection was distinct from the connection between Martha and Jesus. What do you think was significant in order to experience this relational outcome?

The last interaction was during a dinner at their house soon before Jesus' triumphal entry (Jn.12:1-8). Martha served (*diakoneo*) again but didn't complain (v.2). How would you interpret this? Did she learn from the earlier dinner? Has she changed? Assuming she did the work herself, she must have learned more about *diakoneo*. How much she changed is debatable. Obviously, at some point somebody had to serve, and Lazarus took his traditional place among the men (v.2b). We have to credit Martha for her willingness to serve, though we don't know if she also practiced what was more important.

Mary distinctly stepped up to the next level in her relationship with Jesus. Whether she followed the lead of the prostitute (Lk.7:36ff) or acted spontaneously from her own creative heart, Mary made another costly choice (v.3). With the cost of the perfume (a year's wages, v.5) also added to this decision, she once again went against cultural form and practice to literally let her hair down to intimately connect with Jesus and humbly with love attend to his needs. Mary was engaged in the deepest relational work of a disciple; see Jesus' words (Mt.26:10) describing this as "a beautiful (Gk. *kalos*, in quality and character) thing (Gk.*ergon*, work of her vocation) to me." This was an ultimate expression of *diakoneo* in which she served Jesus while intimately enjoying his person more than ever before. Mary grew and experienced more of this relational outcome because she seized with unrestrained heart the opportunity of Jesus' intimate presence (v.8). Love acts this way, it always makes the person and the relationship most important. That's how Jesus is with us and how he wants us *to follow him*. What would

you like to be experiencing in your relationship with Christ?

Some additional observations are worth noting. Mary and Martha differed not only in perspective and how they practiced relationship with Christ. Mary was significantly freer to express her heart. Martha seemed constrained and remained within the boundaries of her comfort zone. She played it safe with what was familiar to her. If not content to do so, she was unwilling to step out and open her heart to experience more with Jesus. Personality differences notwithstanding, Martha needed to be liberated further in her heart.

We learn from these interactions that it is important to be free in order to love. We know that it's necessary to experience being loved before we can truly love. But being loved does not automatically guarantee one will express love also. It's also necessary to be freed, which includes being cleansed, comforted, healed. This is indicated in our sisters. Since Jesus loved them (Jn.11:3,5), we know they were loved. I think there's no question that Martha loved Jesus. Yet, she didn't appear free to express her love to Jesus. We can argue that she did it with her *diakoneo*. But love is relational, it is not *doing* something. That's why Jesus wants us to "Follow me." To show our love to someone by doing something for them is not only indirect relationally but ambiguous in the message it communicates. We have to *assume* for Martha that she felt love for Jesus and acted in love. For Mary, we can clearly see how she freely shared her heart and expressed love to him.

The issue of being free involves both affectionate love (*phileo*) and sacrificial love (*agape*). If we have *phileo*, we need to be free to express it relationally. This was important for Martha and, as you recall, for Peter. If it's *agape*, we need to be freed from our *self* (in its interests, concerns, absorption) in order to love sacrificially for the sake of another's well-being. Martha didn't have *agape*, or she wouldn't have been so constrained. Peter wasn't at the *agape* level yet during that post-resurrection interaction (Jn.21:15ff). Mary seemed to express *phileo* as well as *agape*—a*gape* for certain. The prostitute also expressed both (Lk.7:36ff). Because she was forgiven (Gk. *aphiemi*, to send away, let go from oneself, dismiss, pardon), she was loved (v.47). Since her sins were dismissed, it's important to understand that this prostitute also was able to let go of them in defining herself. Her difficult act of *agape* and beautiful act of *phileo* reflected her *new* self-definition and, more importantly, the freedom to love Jesus and to experience intimacy with him as never before.

These relational outcomes don't happen unintentionally. *They are the relational experiences which result from intimately engaging him in the relational process*. Missing out on more in our relationship with God is one thing if we don't want more or don't want to change to get it. Missing out on greater intimacy with God and experiencing less even when we want more is a totally unnecessary relational condition. Again this is basic to the truth of the incarnation and to our predispositions and perceptions of Jesus, his person and his words. I know that though they don't articulate it, some Christians tend to feel that Jesus constrains their lives or burdens them with great expectations. The successful young guy certainly felt this way. Yet, as is clear from Jesus' pursuit of Peter, he only cultivated relational work. **His imperative was only relational.** His person and his words vulnerably and intimately revealed the Father's awesome desire for us: to *know* him fully, to experience him wholly, to enjoy him endlessly. Mary was a clear example of a person who did relational work: to know him more fully (Lk.10:39), to experience him

more wholly (Jn.11:32ff), to enjoy him more and more (Jn.12:3).

Relational Responsibility, Not Contingencies

Though relational work is not easy, it is straightforward, except when we complicate it with our substitutes and lies. But do some thoughts still linger about whether Jesus has contingencies for us to fulfill beyond just relational work? After all, didn't Jesus say that we have to obey him to experience his love (Jn.15:10) and to be his friend (Jn.15:14)? Aren't these conditional statements; isn't his love contingent on our doing what he wants? It would be easy to take these statements that way, particularly if that's been a major experience in human relationships. Yet, in a crucial way these really aren't conditional statements but relational statements. That is, if you look at what comes first, you'll see it's his love, not our obedience (Jn.15:9).

God's love is purely relational, something that only takes place in the relational context. Love is not some substance he gives us and thus we possess it; love is what we experience from him in how he involves himself with us and treats us. Love is not a feeling; it is what we relationally experience in our heart that increasingly permeates it and conducts it. Love is not something we do; it is what we ongoingly share together in intimate relationship. And God delights in those who intimately count on him and always put on him the expectation to love them without failing and without limits (Ps.147:11).

Unless we want a unilateral relationship with God without any responsibility, we can't expect to only receive, receive, receive all the time. Love comes with a relational responsibility to respond back as one can, to give as well as receive (not necessarily in equal quantity), that is, to share love also. One distinct way to share love is to please the other person in their legitimate desires (see Christ's words, Jn.14:15). Obedience is that sincere response of love back to God which also extends the relationship and deepens the experience of love between him and us, as Jesus has been saying. So, he holds us to that relational responsibility because he so intensely wants us to experience the eternal depth of God's love and the same uncommon bond he has with the Father (read his complete prayer in Jn.17). The relational acts of obedience and love will be more fully examined in the next chapter.

Such accountability does not make his love conditional but further reflects the intimately relational nature of God's heart so vulnerably revealed by Jesus' person and ongoingly present in his Spirit. When we stop to define the relational messages in these relational statements, we understand him and *know* him even more. Reflect on these messages:

(1) What is he saying about me?
That I'm important to him and I am able to love also.

(2) What is he saying about our relationship?
Relationship is two-way. He expects love because my response is important to him. He values my love back.

(3) What is he saying about himself?

He is relational; and as the God of heart, he has desires also which he wants us to be considerate of. So, for example, he too wants to be appreciated. Thank offerings in the OT reflected that appreciation (cf. Ps.50:14). How can we express that appreciation today? How can we be considerate of his other desires?

Let the person and words of Jesus touch you deeply in your heart.

Chapter 7

THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF OUR INVOLVEMENT: Vital Relational Acts

This is the first and greatest commandment.
Matthew 22:38

The relational process of spiritual growth involved in following Jesus and knowing Christ is ongoing, always developing further and more deeply, though not usually in a linear manner. Yet, don't confuse the relationship with an evolutionary process. The relationship is not in a process of *becoming*, it already exists even though transformation is necessary. It's the growing experience of this relational reality that is emphasized here. These intimate relational outcomes don't happen inexplicably or arbitrarily but result from intense relational work. This is what Jesus wants us to keep cultivating with his Spirit by "making every effort," to concentrate on "with great exertion."

His person and words, however, have revealed to us two efforts which are exercises in futility:

(1) trying to combine the common and ordinary of our ways with the uncommon (holy) ways of God.
(2) defining the eternal and the *more* of eternity on the basis of the temporal and what is familiar to us.

Both of these efforts essentially maintain relationship with God within the limits of our terms and our comfort zones. They try to experience *more* in the relationship on the basis of *less*, thus end up substituting quantity for quality. Both contradict the vital issues of our intimate trust of God and our need to be transformed. This tendency is a constant tension in our relationship. *If it is unaddressed by relational work, the relationship is rendered increasingly to compromise*—not necessarily moral compromise but unequivocal relational compromise of the quality of the relationship.

The relational consequences of our compromises are not readily apparent to us, particularly when we're not *thinking relationally*. The two areas of greatest consequence in the relationship are the vital relational acts of worshipping God and loving him. In the context of the temporal and the course of the common, how have we defined and practiced worshipping God and loving him?

When we reduce love to something we possess, to a feeling or to what we're doing, then we take away its substance and minimize its relational experience—both receiving and giving. When we reduce the practice of worship to a time we have (or go to), to an emotional high or to what we do, then we take away its heart and lose its intimate relational experience.

These acts have always been basic and vital to relationship with God as reflected in the first commandment given to Moses (Deut. 5) and the greatest commandment repeated by Jesus (Mt.22:37). To what extent these were perceived relationally when originally received is questionable but their function for the relationship is unmistakable.

I. Worshipping God and Others

Basic to any meaningful relationship is to be treated with the integrity and dignity of what one truly *is* as a person. We are inconsistent in how much we require this from others in our relationships. God demands it from us; there is no hesitation, flexibility or compromise on his part.

In the OT two Hebrew words denote treating God for what he truly is: *hawah*, to prostrate oneself, an act of respect before one superior in position and essentially signifies submission; and *abad*, to serve, minister, worship (Deut.6:13). When Satan tried to interfere in Jesus' relationship with his Father and to get him to compromise, Jesus rebuffed him with these words from Deuteronomy (Mt.4:10). Worship and service can only be reserved for and rightfully demanded by the Lord God alone.

The relational act of worship cannot be reduced to a time or place (as Jesus told the Samaritan woman, Jn.4:21-24), nor limited to what we do (as he told the followers of the law, Mt.15:8,9). *Worship is the natural relational treatment of one who is superior*. Though human stratification ascribes that position to various persons, only God can rightfully demand such treatment. Though we sing with the psalmists that no god compares to the Lord God, the fact is there are no other Gods, period. Worship is the relational act reserved only for God; and he has strong feelings about this (Deut.5:9; 6:15).

Worship is the relational treatment of God any time in any place. This treatment is not reserved for a particular time nor limited to a special place. God expects to be treated like this all the time. In this sense worshipping God is not special or unique; and we are not treating him accordingly when we assign worship to only certain moments in the relationship. Of course, corporate worship is a further dimension. Yet, we have to grow out of this false distinction such that increasingly we don't separate worshipping him from our prayers, our service, our play, when we eat, even when we sleep. Everything we do includes an act of worship, that is, the natural treatment of and expression to him alone who is worthy. My wife and I even find ourselves spontaneously expressing worship to him in various moments while we're having sex.

Is this hyperbole or is it realistic to practice? Does God really expect, even demand this treatment all the time? If we believe that the transcendent God is also relationally present, then how do we practice his continuous presence? Do we merely acknowledge that God is present with us or do we also involve ourselves with him ongoingly? Whether we involve ourselves directly with him or not, we are always communicating relational messages about how we are treating him—specifically, how we see him and what we think about our relationship. Do these messages reflect the treatment rightfully due the Lord God? We must address this and account for our actions.

Throughout our history as relational beings, humankind constantly has deferred to superiors and expressed loyalty to them one way or another, either in place of or along with God. The objects of such treatment have become more and more impersonal, like things or ideas, thus they are increasingly obscure as idols in the practice of our faith. We are not always aware of these attachments. When the impact on our relationship with God is examined, however, the substitutes we practice in place of the relational act of worship are exposed and the conflicts we have (even unintentionally) due to divided relational

attachments start to surface. This can be the case even though the outward appearances indicate worship (cf. Mt.15:8,9). When it comes to the functional posture in our everyday life of what is denoted as *worship*, we have to ask ourselves: in actuality what/whom do we defer to and what/whom are we loyal to with greater attachment and priority than God?

Compromise in our worship of God is not easy to acknowledge, especially if such compromise is not obvious to us. If we faithfully attend worship service and participate in it to the extent available to us, we tend to feel that we worship God. And in these brief moments we may in fact have worshipped. Yet, it's always easier to fulfill our perceived duties and obligations when we define an area like worship in such a limited way and maintain this false distinction from the rest of our life. But how we practice the worship of God overall often reveals our ambivalence or our conflicting attachments, sometimes expressed in a "dual personality." On one side, we may generally have greater interest (on the mind level) in God and show him greater respect. On the other, we may have stronger attachment (on the heart level) elsewhere and thus give a higher priority to something else. That is, we end up essentially giving ourselves over (bow down) to something other than personally and directly to God; and this posture may never surface on Sunday morning.

To understand worship as a relational act helps us to see the presence of compromise and its consequence on the relationship. When Jesus rebuffed Satan, was he just applying the truth to a tense situation or was he exercising what is basic and vital to relationship with God (Mt.4:10)? True worship functionally signifies *submission* which then would involve *service* to the superior. *To submit is to serve*; the two go together naturally and should not be separated. Jesus wouldn't even entertain such a compromise. This relational act, which includes service, clarifies for us when the relationship is rendered to compromise. For example, to only respect God as the expression of our worship doesn't guarantee submission, and thus service to him. How we treat him ongoingly the rest of the week reveals the extent of our worship. Likewise, to only serve God doesn't guarantee submission either if it doesn't include worship. Such service could merely be how we define ourselves or establish our worth.

Worship is relationship-specific and its presence or absence tells us a lot about the relationship. **The functional posture of worship serves as the primary determinant for what a relationship means to us.** It distinguishes what we have attachment to (in our heart) from that which only has our interest (primarily in our mind) or our sensory experience. Based on our attachment it determines our priorities; interest alone is not sufficient to establish priority. Just as the worshipper Jesus lived for us to follow, worship is the benchmark for relationship with God because it expresses who is important to us and what the relationship means to us.

The Nature of Involvement: Attachment and Priority

When Jesus challenged two persons to follow him, one of them replied "first let me go and bury my father" (Lk.9:59). Jesus said essentially that there are two realities here: (1) the social reality of the world which includes the family of those who are spiritually dead; while a definite reality in which we all participate, he is telling us not to

be controlled by it nor let it define us; (2) in contrast, he brings forth the reality of the kingdom of God, that is, the family of those who are *alive*, new in Christ, free from the control and definition of lies which dominate the social reality of the world; this new reality needs to be "proclaimed" (Gk. *diangello*, declare fully and throughout) because people need this family of the living and God wants all to be in his family (Lk.9:60). This is about more than interest but about attachment and priority.
The second guy responded affirmatively to Jesus' challenge but first wanted to "go back and say good-bye to my family" (Lk.9:61). Seems reasonable but this was really an excuse because saying good-bye (Gk. *apotasso*) in their cultural context connotes a lengthy process (maybe many years) and a number of duties to perform before leaving. This guy may have had a stronger interest to follow Jesus than in his family. But he obviously had a stronger attachment to his family; emotional attachment would always be greater than intellectual interest, no matter how strong. His first priority was still with his family over Christ.

The same word for good-bye was used by Jesus for the need to "give up" (*apotasso*) everything to be his disciple (Lk.14:33). Christ demands that in terms of our interests, attachments and priorities, everything else must be subordinated to him. This is not about relinquishing all else and detaching ourselves from them, particularly the relationships he described earlier (Lk.14:26). This is about the relational issue of worship and what/who will determine our lives. That's why Jesus kept emphasizing in this context and to the successful young guy before (Mk.10:21), as well as to the second guy here (Lk.9:62) that anything less is a compromise, that it's not "fit for service" (Gk. *euthetos*, usable, suitable), that is, relationally meaningful in God's family. To defer with ambivalence and to have conflicting loyalties do not establish our worship of God as the benchmark for relational work in the relationship. **Only wholehearted worship puts us in rightful relationship with God**.

This is God's will. This is how he expects to be treated, this is what he demands in relationship with him. This is what is rightfully only his to receive—all the time, in all our places, in all that we do. So, Jesus' question is urgent for us: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord' and don't do what I say?" (Lk.6:46). For Christians, in other words, what exactly is the relational work we are engaged in? The significance of *Lord* is not an honorific title we confer on him or a role we ascribe to him to fulfill. *Lord* is who he *is* and relationally signifies only worship, submission and service. Anything less is to not be truly involved with him in rightful relationship, though the appearance of our practice may seem so (Lk.6:47-49).

Appearance can be deceiving, especially for those who define themselves by what they do and engage in so-called relational work by how they do relationships. Jesus said those who live under the illusion that appearances create have no relational significance to the Lord. There is no substance to their relationship, even though they broke bread together and learned from him (Lk.13:26) and served in his name (Mt.7:22). Based on this kind of relational involvement, the simple fact and truth is that the Lord does not *know* them (Mt.7:23; Lk.13:27). Anyone with such involvement would also not *know* him through intimate experience, no matter how much information about him is known. That's why Jesus made it imperative for us to "make every effort" (*agonizomai*), fight, struggle, battle, exert great effort, whatever it takes, for authentic relational work (Lk.12:24). No substitutes or settling for less.

Broader Issues of Relational Work

When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God and having a place in it (Mt.7:21; Lk.13:28,29), he didn't mean merely a status to possess. Nor is participation in his kingdom merely a privilege to enjoy. This status and privilege are the relational outcome of owning up to our relational responsibility of "the will of my Father" (Mt.7:21). Because of some theological views about the kingdom of God, many Christians tend to be predisposed about not being able to experience it until Christ returns again to establish it. Yet, whatever our theological position on the issue there is a more urgent relational matter to experience now.

When Jesus' earthly family of origin tried to constrain him in his ministry (Mk.3:21), he raised the issue of "who is my family?" (Mk.3:33) Family was very important to Jesus, but not as we commonly see it or feel obligated by it. Pointing specifically to his disciples (Mt.12:49), he amazingly proclaimed that these were his family—"whoever does the will of my Father" is his family (Mt.12:50; Mk.3:35). As he identified members of *God's kingdom* as those engaged in the relational work of the will of his Father, now he defines *his family* as those involved in the same relational process. In terms of attachments, priorities and the issue of worship, his amazing words here help us to clearly put in perspective his difficult words later about family relationships (Lk.14:26). In terms of the relational process, the relational work involved in relationship with the Lord God is the same for his kingdom and his family. In other words God's kingdom and family are one in the same.

Regardless of our theological position on the kingdom, this *is* available for us to experience now. His kingdom is not about a belief system and following certain ways. The functional reality of it is better understood as family; and it is better experienced as relationally being family (though not in our common ways of doing family relationships) and building his family. Because God is the God of heart and intimately relational, his kingdom is about relationships. These relationships with him and with each other exist now, not for the future. *Family* focuses his followers on this relational process. This is what the Father planned for us from the very beginning (Rom.8:29): not to try to conform to Christ ontologically, but to rightfully worship him as Lord; not to emulate Jesus' ways and values but to conform to his Son in substance relationally as his children in his family together.

This is the Father's will. In Jesus' words, what characterizes the Father's will is that it "leads to eternal life" (Jn.12:50). From our previous discussion of this familiar concept, eternal life is not about some future state, condition or way of life. Eternal life is about relationship, about specific relationship with the Father and with Jesus Christ in which the intimate experience of *knowing* them begins now (Jn.17:3). The commandments of God all lead to this relational outcome. The promises of God all serve this relational purpose. As we will continue to see, all of God's efforts, his words, his person(s) converge on this intimate relationship and its growing experience of love (Jn.17:26). He keeps transforming us from the temporal and common and leads us into the eternal and the Uncommon; that is, he keeps drawing us intimately closer to himself. This is the *more* which satisfies the eternity planted in our hearts (Ecc.3:11).

God is always doing his part in the relationship. We have to work together with

him to experience this relational outcome. Our social, cultural, even religious contexts, however, make it difficult for us to practice authentic relational work. Unless we understand these divergent influences on our life and are undergoing transformation from them, we can unintentionally render the relationship to compromise.

If we can shift to Paul for a moment, that's why he was so emphatic in his charge to Timothy (read 1 Tim.6:11ff). We could easily misinterpret Paul's charge as *doing, doing, doing*, which includes "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (v.12). The word for "take hold" (Gk. *epilambanomai*) slightly intensifies the word "to receive" (*lambano* Jesus as in Jn.1:12). It means to take serious interest in, with concern and become involved in, that is, to experience it and not merely possess it. We can miss what we need to intently take hold of if we don't see eternal life as the relationship. Maybe we would even be a little confused (like Thomas asking Jesus about the way, Jn.14:5) and wonder how we can take hold of something if we don't really have a concrete grasp of it to begin with. When Paul said "Fight the good fight" (v.12), he used the same word (*agonizomai*) Jesus used for "make every effort" (Lk.13:24). Paul wasn't talking merely about spiritual warfare but about the intense relational work necessary for the relationship of eternal life. Paul charged Timothy not to compromise this relationship. He couldn't afford to—neither can we.

II. Loving God and Others

While only complete worship puts us in right relationship with God, *only the relational act of love deepens this relationship*. They are not mutually exclusive but love is a distinct relational act which, like worship, needs even greater distinction in today's Christian contexts. Besides worship, no area produces greater relational consequences from its lacks than the vital relational act of loving God. Yet, can we find an action in our relationship that has been subject to more loose definition and compromise than the act of love?

I suggest two reasons this condition exists today. First, God's love is hard for us to truly understand. There is a lot of mystery about his love—beyond the comforts of our *reason* and the safety of our minds. We know his love "endures forever" and his is "unfailing love." Everything else about his love seems to be beyond us (Ps.17:7) and too great for our finite minds to understand (Ps.33:5; 57:10). This becomes the problem with the overuse of the mind and overdependence on reason. When we don't understand something important like love, we tend to fill in the blanks with our biases and according to how we commonly do relationships. We talk, for example, about John 3:16 and the cross but often act according to our own ideas about love. In our minds we think "we get it," yet more often than not this only reflects our notions, not our relational experience with God's love. Do our actions demonstrate a gap in understanding his love?

Paul tells us we can "grasp" (Gk. *katalambano*, to comprehend, intensive of *lambano* in Jn.1:12) the fullness of Christ's love and to *know* this love which is beyond knowledge (Eph.3:18,19). How can we comprehend something beyond us, *know* what is beyond all knowledge? This is only possible through the work of the Spirit in our hearts (vv.16,17). In other words, *we can't comprehend God's love simply with knowledge in our minds*. This only happens from the relational experience in our hearts. This is a

relational outcome only from intimate experience with God, especially through forgiveness. As long as we remain within the comfort zone of our mind and don't make our heart vulnerable to him in the relationship, his love will be beyond our experiential grasp.

A second reason (already alluded to) suggested for this condition interrelates to the first. We don't love very much or very well when we haven't been loved enough in the relational experience of forgiveness. Recall Jesus' words to Simon when the prostitute anointed him: "But the person who has been forgiven little loves little" (Lk.7:47). In these words Christ gives us **the basic propositional truth about love** (*agape*). Deeds of love neither result in forgiveness nor establish our worth. Rather, forgiveness precipitates love. *Forgiveness is a present existing condition the effects of which move the person forgiven to act in love*. The simple truth is we who are forgiven little *agape* little—affectionate love, passion, romantic love notwithstanding.

As we discussed previously (in Chapter 5) God knows we're not going to love him until we first let him love us (as John said in 1 Jn.4:10,19). Our experience of his love, not our knowledge, that is, our experience of letting God love us has to start (and to continue) with the experience of his forgiveness. With our track record about love we have to wonder how well we're letting God love us. Christians speak of God's love routinely in various contexts with glittering words. But have our hearts actually experienced his love relationally in forgiveness enough to have the effect in our lives of translating love into relational action—both to God and others?

Either our love is deficient or our experience of being loved is insufficient. Whatever the reason, the act of love is vital for us to better distinguish in our heart and to distinctly express relationally in our actions.

From Appearance to Substance

We know that the first and greatest commandment is to love God; the second is to love others as our self (Mt.22:37-39). If we obey his commands (Jn.14:15,21), obey his words (Jn.14:23), we love Christ. Paul adds in relation to others that love is the fulfillment of the commandments, the law (Rom.13:8-10). God's commandments are not ends in themselves for us to perform; they are a means for us to love. Everything that God has always wanted from us throughout the Scriptures (the Law and the prophets) is based on his desires for us *to love*. All that he says and does serve to lead us to love. *But this love is defined by God, not by our loose definitions and compromise*. Let's examine this further, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5-7) where Jesus takes us from the *appearance* of a new life in Christ to the *substance* behind this reality.

As we've studied Jesus' person and words, he has consistently demonstrated the importance of the heart by how he lived and interacted with persons. He vulnerably revealed the God of heart in distinct relational terms. In his teachings the heart emerges as more important than the mind, though certainly not at the exclusion of the mind. This is not an anti-intellectual position but a life process countering the reductionism of the total person and intellectualizing important aspects of our life, and against the subtle dependence on rationalism to establish our life. Such contrary tendencies in Christians are reflected, for example, in what we depend on to define ourselves and in what we pay

attention to in how we do relationships. In thankful contrast, Jesus openly showed us what's important and how God is by connecting us with the intimate relational nature of God's heart.

Through teaching the substantive meaning of the Law and the prophets (in Mt.5) Jesus opens to us the heart of God's desires for his people—the primary purpose behind all of God's directives. He does this by addressing two of the overriding and far-reaching effects of the common and dominant ways of doing things: (1) they give more emphasis to secondary aspects of life than to the primary aspects, and (2) as a result, they do not give top priority to interpersonal relationships and their intimate nature. In such practice the *quality* of life becomes sacrificed for and substituted with the *quantities* of life.

We know that the scribes and Pharisees essentially were concerned about doing the "right" thing. Their approach, however, using only "the letter of the law" functioned only to keep them from negative actions, from doing the wrong thing. It didn't serve to lead them to positive actions. Consequently, as illustrated by the examples Jesus raised (see Mt.5:21-48), they felt everything was fine as long as they maintained the limited responsibility defined by their approach to the Law—which, again, in their minds was merely avoiding negative actions. Murder and adultery, for example, were only defined literally (by the letter); the deeper implications of God's desires and design for these principles were not embraced. God's desires probably were not even considered. Even if they understood his desires, they were predisposed merely to avoid the negative. Undertaking positive action was not the focus of their minds.

The consequence of this approach affected the individual and their relationships. For the individual the focus increasingly concentrated on outward dimensions of one's action. What a person was *doing* became the prime source of defining oneself and establishing one's worth. In such practice personal responsibility became more and more limited to the outer presence or absence of certain activity. The presentation of self then relied essentially on appearances because *appearance* became the emphasis of importance. Intentionally or unintentionally, what was truly OK became more what appeared to be OK. It didn't seem to really matter whether *image* was consistent with *reality*. This is analogous to the emphasis today on the construction of image and to the influence *virtual reality* has on our thinking, our perceptions, our practice—especially, for example, on contemporary worship service.

When this happens, the purpose and function behind God's commandments are lost to one's concern to do the "right" thing, or not to make the wrong presentation. His purpose and function are constrained in one's narrow definitions of God's commandments and the substitutes replacing his deeper desires. The consequence of this on the individual's relationships is that, for example, to practice "an eye for an eye" (Mt.5:38) left no room to make a positive response to those who unjustly treated you. Some of these examples may be relatively extreme for us to identify with but the relevance and importance of Jesus' teachings about God's desires for our relationships should not be lost to us. This was how they did relationships because that was their focus, that was the extent of their interest and concern. In functional everyday practice, within the limits of this approach there was no room for quality relationships, no place for the total *person* and, indeed, no room for love.

Jesus forcefully addressed the whole issue of appearance in his teachings here (Mt.6:16-18). Properly presenting oneself before others was the focus of concern for

these persons. Activities like charitable acts (6:2-4), prayer (6:5-7) and fasting (6:16-18) became important merely as things to do—relational purpose and function being lost in their practice. The process of placing greater emphasis on the outward aspects of what we do involves turning *means* into *ends* in themselves. For example, prayer was intended as a means for greater connection and intimacy with God, but it was turned into an activity that Christians should do—as an end in itself, unknowingly or unintentionally. In this approach the objectives for prayer—or worship, church work, whatever—become increasingly satisfied merely by having done the activity. Relationship with God is subtly subordinated in practice or sometimes even forgotten in the process.

Of course, the emphasis on the outward aspects of what one does involves not only the individual and relationship with God. There is further relational consequence with others. Appearance, as it relates to one's self-assessment or self-image, does not involve just "looking good" but by its nature has to involve "looking good in comparison to others." This *comparative process* is essential in establishing one's self-worth. And this kind of comparing with others inevitably creates competition—explicit or implicit. The competition, however, is usually not of an edifying nature; and it certainly doesn't lead us to the deep desires God has for relationships. It gets us into directly or indirectly depreciating our "competitors" so that we can feel better about ourselves or look better before others. In essence, it creates exactly the kind of process indicted by Jesus later in this body of teaching (Mt.7:1-5).

As we've discussed previously, Satan promotes these common ways among Christians with special emphasis on appearance and presenting ourselves as righteous (or spiritually correct). This gets us into some ironic contrasts and subtle conflicts with Jesus' words here. For example, in relation to oaths and the value of our word (Mt.5:33-37), the common tendency was to say more than was necessary in order to establish the worth of our words. Jesus said to keep it simple; anything "over and beyond" depends on appearance which is a lie from Satan (v.37). To extend this principle, in a verbal-oriented approach as I've had, I have to really work on not going "over and beyond" with my words; this effort gets into building up my image. In contrast to the more important area of relationships, the common practice was not to go "over and beyond" in love (vv.46,47). The irony and subtlety of Christian practice should not surprise us. This issue is powerfully summarized by Paul: "knowledge puffs up [our appearance and image] but love builds up [others in relationship]" (1 Cor.8:1).

Today, we may not have the same codes to follow to the letter like the Pharisees and scribes. Yet, in terms of what we depend on to define our *self* and what we pay attention to in how we do relationships, we may have similar practices in principle to which we subscribe simply by the letter. We may not be as blatantly obvious, or even concerned, about the importance of appearance as they. Yet, we do a lot of activities which seem to be satisfied more by the presence of certain outward aspects than by a deeper substance. I mention contemporary worship again as probably being at the top of this list. Also, we may be much more sincere in the practice of these activities than the Pharisees and scribes, though I doubt that few of us are as rigorous as the Pharisees. Nevertheless, sincerity is not sufficient, and we can't plead ignorance here. Good intentions do not fulfill our relational responsibility to God and to others.

This relational responsibility is not understood merely by the letter of the law. The letter constrains our person and exerts influential control on our perceptions (of God, others and relationships) increasingly relegating our practice into a box, substituting our definitions for God's and rendering our relationship with him to compromise. That's why the Sermon on the Mount is so vital to every Christian's practice, past, present and future.

When Jesus added and made primary the dimension of **"the spirit of the law,"** he revealed the deep meaning of God's desires for his people. A review of the various examples Jesus raised (Mt.5:21-48) to illustrate the principle of *the spirit of the law* highlights the primary purpose God designed for his people: *relationships*. Jesus wasn't concerned about his disciples always doing the right thing, as the Pharisees were (e.g., Mt.12:1-8; Lk.5:33ff). Nor does he want us to be scared of doing the wrong thing. What he is concerned about and what he wants us to practice is to give primacy to our relationships and to the *persons* involved in them. In this Jesus takes us out of our comfort zones (Mt.5:46-47) and, in contrast, directs us to love—his way, not ours.

Jesus countered all common ways of doing relationships with a process of inter-*person* relationships, the depths of which can make us uncomfortable and even be very threatening to us. Why? Because with the spirit of the law Jesus revealed to us: (1) what it means to love; (2) the intimate relational process of love; and (3) the dignity and integrity of the *persons* involved in this process. All of these can touch our insecurities about being vulnerable, confront our defenses such as comfort zones and boxes for control while challenging us to change from our *old* ways to his *new* life. They can affect us like this because these deal with issues in our heart. Anything involving the heart, of course, makes us vulnerable; and how threatened we are by this depends on how much we have to change and how much we're willing to change.

We need to add that Jesus wasn't relieving us of responsibility when he abolished the legalistic systems of his day (Mt.5:17). Contrary to such thought, he really gave us more responsibility. He relieved us, on the one hand, of the burden of responsibility created by the letter of the law as a system of self-justification to establish ourselves by what we do. Yet, on the other, he gave us the added relational responsibility of the spirit of the law. This spirit does not represent only a greater flexibility and application of the Law. Its whole design is to lead us into taking positive action in our relationships with others—to care and to love.

Taking positive action involves extending oneself in a caring and loving *depth* of *relational* action toward the other person. His examples (Mt.5:21-48) accentuate the key qualifying words, *depth* and *relational*. Such action must always build intimate connection with the other person in the context of the relationship, not merely as an activity or as some act as an end in itself. In each of the examples of loose definition, misinformation or compromise, Jesus strongly set the record straight ("But I tell you...", 5:22,28,32,34,39,44) by declaring God's design and purpose for relationships and clearly expressing his desires for how he wants relationships.

The Substance of Love

As we seek further understanding of God's way to love and reflect on Jesus' teachings we may have mixed feelings. The more difficult feelings are important to distinguish for ourselves. Tension about this would be natural, even some fear because it's expanding us into *new* territory; in fact, there will be much conflict with the *old* that will need to be resolved. Feeling burdened by expectations, however, as well as the fear of failing to measure up are contrary feelings which indicate we haven't heard Jesus' words and God's desires for our life. Where is the focus, if we feel burdened or fear failure?

When Jesus set the record straight, he exposed the self-concern about what to do and defined what love truly is. Contrary to many of our concerns, **love is not about what to do**. But when we think about Jesus' teachings, that's what often gets most of our attention. The demands of what we've got to do weigh on us for the most part. They can even intimidate us at times—especially when it includes loving as Christ loved us.

In contrast to these perceptions, biases and concerns, Jesus gave us (not just told us) what love truly is. **Love is about *how to be involved in relationships.*** Love (*agape*) is relationship-specific, not deed-specific; and involvement in that relationship is deeper and fuller. There are two parts to this involvement: (1) from my side, I need to be involved with my total person, which includes the most important part—my heart; (2) in relation to the other person, I need to be involved with the *person* and resolved (even devoted) to act for the sake of, the welfare or well-being of the other (*agape*). Such involvement (*agape*) doesn't require having an affection (*phileo*) for the other nor that we even by necessity like the person. *Agape* is not selective to our preferences nor reactive to those negative to us (Mt.5:43-47). It is the willingness and openness of the heart to be involved with that person, regardless.

Jesus closed this section with "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt.5:48). How we take this depends on how we define love. If we see love as what to do, then it's "do it perfectly as God is perfect." Who of us can do that? The Greek word for "perfect" (*teleios*) also means complete, fully developed, mature. Jesus doesn't expect us to "do it perfectly" but wants us to be fully developed in love. In this sense he is telling us "Be involved with others as your Father is involved." Obviously, we are not able to be involved with others to the extent in quality or quantity as God is. Nevertheless, we can be involved with others *like* God is; this is not beyond us. "Perfect" can never be the outcome of our *doing*, but "fully developed in love" can be the expression of our *being*—our new being in Christ. With such love we also "begin to be" (Gk, *ginomai*) the sons and daughters of our Father, in function (Mt.5:45).

Growth in being "fully developed in love" is based only on *love as God loves*. We can't expect this development from the practice of a "love about what to do." That would be easy to fall into if we haven't changed how we define ourselves. God only wants love the way he defines it, the way he's involved. The common way we do relationships and the importance we give to the heart and the *person*—not in theory but practice—leave a lot to be desired when it comes to the relational act of love. Can there be anything more frustrating than to think what you're doing for someone is in love, only to find out later that they don't feel loved? The church in Ephesus learned this the hard way when Jesus put their devotion and dedication into this perspective (see Rev.2:2-4).

Love as God loves! Reflect further on the incarnation and on Jesus' person and words even before you get to the cross. Get past the information and work with the Spirit to open your heart to God's relational involvement with you.

Did God love us in theory? Was he involved with us from a comfortable distance? Did he love us in words? Was his love merely given by his deeds? The answers don't just give us information about God and how he loves. We are observing in Jesus not only historical scenes but also the ongoing process of relationship-specific involvement in which we are able to participate too. Jesus exposed God's glory to us first "to see" (Jn.1:14, Gk. *theaomai*), that is, to view attentively, to contemplate in order to perceive it correctly and in detail. Then, more importantly, he wants us to experience God in intimate relationship because that's who, what, how God is. Take in his relational messages to you.

Love's Involvement

As the God of heart who is intimately relational, he extended himself to us to be vulnerably present in our life. *That's how he's involved, that's how God loves*. His love is intimate involvement from the heart given directly (as opposed to indirectly through things, deeds or others) to the other *person* only in the process of intimate relationship. Because that's how he's involved with us, that's why we can intimately experience his *person* and thus *know* him. That is, we can when we receive his love (receive him in his involvement). His love is not a quantity or substance to possess, nor merely a deed to receive. It is solely his person vulnerably extended to our person and intimately involved in our relationship.

The relational implications of the incarnation can never be emphasized enough. To know God, unfortunately, often has been unintentionally disassociated with the vulnerable person of Jesus and his intimate words. Knowing him has come to mean a variety of things. Contrary to common thinking, frequency of contact and length of relationship don't guarantee *knowing* someone. For example, there are good friends who don't know each other because they don't share together in the intimate way Jesus shares as a *friend*. There are family members who don't essentially know each other because they don't connect in the intimate way Jesus connects with us. There are spouses who don't really know each other (even after years) because they aren't intimately involved with each other just as Jesus is with us.

Despite how straightforward this relational process is which Jesus executed, we must not oversimplify it, like we often do about God's love and loving him. By God's definition, love is an action of the heart. Therefore, **no other life action requires our transformation more than love.** There's no way *agape* gets developed in us without first being loved and ongoingly transformed by God's grace. *Agape* is a devotion that goes beyond one's self-focus, self-interests and concerns; it is action resolved for the sake of, welfare and well-being of the other. Our heart isn't automatically at this point, as we noted for Peter earlier. This love is not a natural action for us, though we were created for it. Love is predicated on God's grace; and forgiveness is the relational process through which we experience his grace and being loved. This ongoing relational experience is necessary to impact our heart and have the unequivocal effect on us of being loved.

Without this experience, everything else about love is theoretical, intellectual or wishful thinking.

Without God's grace not only are we unable to connect with God, we also don't have God available to connect with. We have to realize that for the holy God to be involved with us he has to exercise grace continuously. That is, he extends grace not only when we need it to be involved with him. He also has to exercise his favor just to be in our presence. I don't understand how the holy God can be vulnerably present with us but I know it requires his favor. His presence can't be legitimately taken for granted nor assumed because his presence isn't warranted by us. In this sense, not only do we receive God's grace for ourselves but God has to exercise it for himself too. It's absurd to think that we don't need his grace likewise for his ongoing involvement with us, whether we've received his grace to be involved with him or not.

Historically, God has had strong negative feelings about involvement with his people, and there were times he withdrew his favor. The incarnation wasn't inevitable even though the event was predetermined. His continuous presence is not a vague deterministic conclusion but the relational outcome of God's favor. This is really not inexplicable. His grace may be a mystery as well as how the holy God could do this. But his relational involvement is clear to grasp. We have to expand our perceptions of grace from only something we need to receive from God for ourselves to also include the means God is involved with us. This is his unfailing love. This is why he always acts in *agape* and how he wants us to be involved in our relationships.

As we are loved by God and being transformed by his grace, he is starting to be loved also. *Love is about how to be involved in relationship*. Letting him forgive us and transform us are how he wants us to be involved with him. That's why Jesus made obedience to his commands basic to loving him (Jn.14:15,21). He didn't separate obedience from love because obedience *is* that involvement with him in our relationship.

The Extent of Involvement

To understand how to love God, it's really vital for us to connect together some of Jesus' important words to us. Let's start with his first set of words above:

A. Obeying his commands (Jn.14:15,21), his teachings/words (14:23) is to love him.

Obedience as Jesus describes it is a relational process, the same process of obedience he himself is involved in with his Father (Jn.15:10) as an expression of his love (Jn.14:21). Like love, obedience is not about what to do or to give him. Obedience is not something we perform individualistically by merely exercising our will independent of any relational significance. Even gritting our teeth to act is not sufficient for obedience. In probably his deepest experience of humanness, what was the relational process when Jesus didn't want to die on the cross (see Mt.26:39,42)? Exercising obedience as our involvement in the relationship puts us in the relational position to experience him *more* and thus to *know* him intimately.

How does this happen? Let's go to his next set of words. Whatever Jesus said (his commands, teachings, words) is only what his Father commanded him to say (Jn.12:49,

50b). Jesus obediently passed that on to us because:

B. God's command leads to eternal life (Jn.12:50a).

But it's important to understand that eternal life is not a reward for obeying his commands; failing to make this distinction eliminates the need for his grace. Obedience is not a *quid pro quo* exchange process. Eternal life is the relational outcome of obedience's involvement in the relationship—an ongoing outcome to experience even now. We have to connect set A to set B. Obedience to God's command engages him in deeper involvement and opens the relational process to experience greater intimacy, with the outcome of *knowing* God.

Why is this the relational outcome? This goes back to what eternal life is all about. If it remains about longevity and a future condition, then we take Jesus' words out of context and miss his person.

C. Eternal life is to *know* God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ (Jn.17:3).

Knowing him is not about intellectual information or the limited knowledge of the mind, which were insufficient for Thomas and Philip to *know* Jesus (Jn.14:1-10). To truly know him is the relational experience of the total person intimately involved in the relationship. This relationship cannot be on our terms in our common context. His grace has brought him to us and is always sufficient for us to be with him. Nevertheless, his grace is not sufficient for him to be involved with us on our terms nor for him to have relationship in our context. It's silly for us to try to have him do this. The holy God cannot do relationship by the common and ordinary or within the context of the temporal.

The bottom line is that we can't truly *know* him and experience the extent of his love until we get down to the eternity substance planted in our heart and get "into eternity" with him. He indeed came to us first, but he leads us from here into the context of eternity to have intimate relationship with the Uncommon, undertaking our transformation in this relational process. When we connect set A with B to set C, obedience puts us in the relational position for this outcome.

Obedience is not something we give God, however willingly; it's not something we do for him, whatever our good intentions. Obedience as God wants it is strictly relational work. Like love, it is relationship-specific, and the two should not be separated. So, loving God also is not something we give him nor do for him. To love God is the relational work of being intimately involved with him.

In this deep sense God doesn't want the time, gifts or resources we can give him, the services we can do for him, nor even merely our words, no matter how much they talk of love. He only wants our *person*, that is, *me*. But how can we give him *me* without our being vulnerable to him, especially with our heart? It's always easier to give gifts or deeds to the other person in a relationship, it's much harder to offer *me*. This is the beauty of the prostitute's love for Jesus when she anointed him (Lk.7:36ff). Don't be distracted by the act, she gave Jesus *me*. How did Jesus love us? Don't focus only on the cross or the manger. As much as Jesus did, his acts reflect the giving of *me*.

This is the relational significance of *agape*. We can't give *me* without sacrificing our self-concerns, subordinating our self-interests and being vulnerable with the honest

reality of our heart. *Agape* does this and involves *me* with the other person. Anything less in relationships is a substitute. In our Christian practice, for example, it is important to distinguish between discipline and *agape*. Whether it's the discipline of obedience or the discipline to love—even spiritual disciplines—discipline tends to give too much focus to what *we* do whereas *agape* focuses on the *other*.

When we try to love on the basis of what we do, then by this self-definition the focus is on the act because the *doing* is necessary to accomplish one's objective. So, it really becomes difficult to know exactly whom the act of love is for—even if one sacrifices in order to do something for the other. This kind of love would focus on the sacrifice because that involves what one does. *Agape*, however, focuses on the other person and the relationship, and how to be involved with them. *Agape* is how Jesus loves us and involves himself in our relationship. Our relational experience of him is the sole basis for how he commanded our relationships to be:

D. "As I have loved you, so you, yourselves, must love one another" (Jn13:34).

He doesn't expect us to love without first being loved. How we do relationships reflects significantly what we experience in our relationships, past and present, especially with God. *Agape* is relational work, not a deed to perform even though some undertake it as such. Because of its nature, *agape* is also not an act we can merely exercise our will to produce, though it certainly involves our will. Likewise with obedience, we can't keep obeying routinely as a personal commitment or rigorous discipline without relational involvement and outcome.

The nature of relational work is that it is never unilateral. The relational process with God is always reciprocal. That is, the relationship involves "receiving and giving," "giving and receiving." No dimension of the relationship experiences the reality of reciprocity more than the process of love. In response to set A, Jesus expands on the relational outcome from set C with the promise to intimately experience:

E. "The person who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love that person and show myself to him/her (Jn.14:21) ... my Father will love that person, and we will come to that one and make our home with him/her" (Jn.14:23).

While set E is responding to set A, it is ongoingly interacting with set D and resulting further in set C. This is the reciprocal relational process of relationship with God involving the intimate experience of love.

Remember what the Father's love is from our previous discussion. His love for us includes *phileo* (Jn.16:27) as well as *agape*, just like he loves the Son with both (Jn.5:20; 15:9). Furthermore, the Father loves us in the same way he loves Jesus (Jn.17:23b,26). What they share together intimately in their relationship is what is available for us to share in and intimately experience together. This is what it means to be *family*. This is the relational outcome of eternal life which happens now.

The interrelation of these sets of Jesus' words is vital for us to understand and experience. It takes us from the static information and knowledge of Christ's teachings to the dynamic process of relationship with the *person* Jesus and his words for relationship. When connected in this relational context, his words describe the reciprocal and reflexive

nature of the relational process and involvement with God.

Yet, this process results in more than this relational outcome. It also has a profound effect on the individual person who participates in it. Jesus shares this outcome somewhat as a conclusion to his words:

F. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (Jn.15:11).

His words are not to burden us with expectations, to cause us fear of failing, to intimidate us back into our comfort zones and boxes. What is his joy that he wants to be in us? That we do the will of the Father so we can be together intimately and be *family*. This is how he wants our joy to "be complete" (Gk. *pleroo*), that is, deeply and fully satisfied. This is the outcome of *the blessed* (*makarios* of the Beatitudes in Mt.5), those who are deeply and fully satisfied because they intimately share in God's very own personal life. Frequently in relationships we feel like we need to be *doing* something to validate our involvement in the relationship. We have difficulty just *being* together. So, in relationship with God we feel blessed the most when God is *doing* something for us. We don't perceive just *being* together as feeling blessed. Yet, that's the greatest blessing of all: *enjoying the presence of God and his involvement with us, and being able to participate in his life together in his family*. This is the *more* of eternity that keeps growing, the potential extent of which is not a measure of our heart but of the heart of God.

Set F is underlying to each of the previous sets and the process as a whole. While this satisfaction should not be our goal nor the primary motivation for our involvement, nevertheless, our satisfaction is a distinct outcome we can expect—which we also need relationally to hold him accountable for.

Total Involvement Undifferentiated

Jesus' words ultimately are about relational work. Authentic relational work is always focused on the primacy of the relationship and the importance of the persons involved, not on doing something, not just on me. *Agape* always focuses on the other person in the relationship, not on what needs to be done, not on what needs to be sacrificed in order to do it—though obviously those things may have to be accounted for, but not taken into consideration to determine whether to act or not. *Relational work is not about me and what I have to do*. As such, Jesus didn't separate the relational act of love from the relational act of obedience.

This is important for us to consider further regarding the various relational acts involved in our relationship with God. We talked earlier, for example, about not constraining worship to a time or even a place. The act of authentic worship is a relational posture which needs to be present in how we're involved with God whatever the time, place or activity. We can't separate this act from the relationship as a whole and relegate it to only a certain aspect of the relationship. These various acts, like love, are about how to be involved with God in our relationship. So, whether we're talking about the relational acts of love, obedience, worship or service, increasingly it is important not to separate these into exclusive actions, partitioned into one area of the relationship. They

are all part of our relational work in growing intimate with God.

In this sense it can be helpful not to distinguish them in our thinking such that we're not always aware that this is my worship, my obedience, my love, my service and so forth. They are so interrelated in our total involvement with God; they all reflect deep involvement with God. In spirit and in truth, with heart and honesty, they increasingly together need to express our involvement with him. For example, it would be fitting to be praising him while serving, to express love to him as we obey, to obey him in love along with worship as we submit to him in service. If any of these acts don't express this kind of involvement, then that action has no relational significance to God. That is, he's not interested—absolutely no interest in being a part of an activity (like worship), in being the object of duty or obligation (like obedience), in being a figurehead in the relationship (like love), in a relationship in name only (like service).

The Relational Question

Having said this we need to return to the dominant focus in these sets of words from Jesus. Since love is about how to be involved in relationships, love dominates Jesus' words: his commands, his teachings, his promises. Loving God is **the *extent*** of our involvement with him, worshipping him is **the *nature*** of our involvement. While worship rightly bows down to him, love opens fully the heart to him and deepens the relationship. The extent of the relationship is significantly limited without this involvement. Its absence indicates a problem with trust. Trust is indispensable to relationship with God.

Trust is also unavoidable in any meaningful and significant relationship. Whether in relation to God or to others, **love is fundamentally about making ourselves vulnerable to intimacy, which includes being vulnerable to our own heart.** Anything less than this in our relationships, foremost with God, is a substitute—the *less* we often are settling for, both in our giving and in our receiving. Rather than being vulnerable to intimacy, our common ways of defining ourselves and doing relationships make us essentially more susceptible to compromising the primacy of relationships and the importance of the persons involved.

Relational involvement has always been time-consuming, as well as the more difficult choice to make because of conflicting influences, including Satan's counter-relational work. That's why Jesus (Lk.13:24) and Paul (1 Tim.6:12) both said that it is imperative to put everything we can into authentic relational work. But for us today, relational work is also not efficient by our modern standards and work habits. Most persons today don't want to be bothered by its demands. And many Christians are influenced by this predisposition and mindset, thus compromising the importance of relational work with substitutes. Not only is God shortchanged by this, we all are.

Attached to his words in set D, Jesus said that *agape* involvement with one another distinguishes his followers to the rest of humankind (Jn.13:35). But if we do relationships according to the commonly established ways of our socio-cultural contexts, what distinguishes us as Christians? *Agape* is always characterized by going beyond what is common (Mt.5:46-47). Our most significant distinction is the *agape* depth of relational involvement with one another based on the direct personal experience of his intimate involvement with us (Jn.13:34b). If we limit our involvement in relationship with him,

obviously that will reduce our experience of him. This, in turn, lessens the base from which to be involved with one another. Based on the quality of relationships (both with God and with others) implemented by the person and words of Jesus in fulfillment of the Father's design and purpose, will we settle for less and continue to make substitutes in our relationships?

The reduction or loss of intimacy is the most glaring problem in relationships facing us. The limited or shallower level of involvement characterizing relationships today has become so established in our midst that most persons routinely expect to experience only that—at times, even to the extent of wanting it this way, as dissatisfying as it may be. This can be said for relationships at church also. We have no apparent conflicts about wearing "masks" in presenting ourselves to each other just as Adam and Eve wore fig leaves. We hide our heart in our activities in the same way they hid in the garden. Or we keep our relational distance by the titles we wear and with the roles we perform. To engage person-to-person, heart-to-heart almost seems foreign to us. In the process down through the years, we've become scared to be vulnerable with our true self, even to the point of being unaware of those feelings. The relational consequence is that we get comfortable in how we do relationships, set in the ways we've defined things and resistant to change.

Our salvation may not depend on changing our current practices. Hopefully, the desire for *more* will encourage us to step out of our comfort zones to satisfy this need caused by the substance of eternity planted in our heart. Certainly, the critical condition of relationships in general challenges us with the urgent need to expand our boundaries and connect with more persons, especially those different from us. Ultimately, we can't stay where we are and expect to grow in our *person*, in our relationships (with God and with others), in our place in his family because Jesus' person and words make it imperative for us to be ongoingly transformed.

To worship and to love God, to be involved or to have distance—that *is* the relational question! This is the position Jesus puts us in by vulnerably coming to us in the flesh with his person and words. Depending on our perceptions, this is either a burden or a blessing. Either way we choose, it is always a relational statement about how we will be involved with him.

Thank you Jesus for your presence vulnerable to us so that we have this choice.
Thank you for sharing intimately with us so we know clearly what our choice is.
Thank you for ongoingly pursuing us so we are always face-to-face with this choice.

Chapter 8 EXTENDING THE RELATIONSHIP

And the second is like it.
Matthew 22:39

The exciting thing about the relational process is its dynamic nature, always opening the relationship to adventure and affording us opportunities for greater discovery. The unfortunate, even discouraging thing is that this doesn't happen in a simple progression, in a smooth predictable fashion. If you depend on convenient results, if you need to remain under control, then you will probably minimize the relational work necessary for continued growth. If you want to go to the next level and experience deeper relationship, the relational process must (*dei*, by its nature, not out of obligation) be engaged further together with God. In addition to this *cooperative effort* between God and us, there is a *corporate effort* among his people extending the relationship.

The Forgotten Person

Relational work involves our heart and our will. Both of these need to undergo increasing transformation in order to be involved with God. This is the work of his Spirit. Relational work is not unilateral but the cooperative effort of each of us taking up our relational responsibility.

For much of my Christian life, I didn't consistently engage the active presence of the Spirit. If you're like this, then you understand how we tend to use the Spirit only to do things—and probably only when we perceive the need. This begs the question: was the Spirit given for us to *do something* or *be someone*?

So often the Spirit is the forgotten *person*, not in our beliefs or words but in this relational process. But his main function and purpose is relational work. He brings us and our relationship with God to completion, to the total development of God's design and purpose. The Spirit is the one who works out the process of transformation for us to functionally develop from *thinking relational* and *acting relational* to further maturity in *being relational*. Let's examine this development.

I think the single most significant verse related to the Spirit is Jesus' promise: "I will not leave you as orphans" (Jn.14:18). The word "leave" (Gk. *aphiemi*) means to let go from oneself, essentially abandon to a condition deprived of one's parents, which in the context of biblical times was an unprotected, helpless position. This may not have much emotional identification for you if you have parents. But the significance of the condition is relational, not situational. In relational terms the condition of the relationship can be further described as disconnected, detached, separated, distant. This may bring it closer to our experience. Whenever we feel distant from God, disconnected or don't know where he is, we are experiencing the condition of relational orphans.

Since Jesus was leaving physically, he would continue to make connection with his followers through the person of his Spirit ("I will come to you"). As Jesus requested of the Father in the bond of their relationship, he "will give you" (Jn.14:16), "will send" (Jn.14:26; 15:26; 16:7) *another Paraclete*. "Another" (Gk.*allos*) means another of equal quality, not another of different quality (*heteros*). So, the Spirit is defined by Jesus as equal to himself; in a relational sense they are interchangeable. "Paraclete" (Gk. *parakletos*) is one who comes forward on behalf of and as the representative of another in order to comfort, encourage, counsel, help. Whatever title or role you want to give the Spirit, he serves a relational function.

The Spirit's main purpose is relational: to help us to be connected with God (Jn.14:26;15:26) and to grow in this relationship (Jn.16:13-15). With the departure of Jesus, the Spirit is vitally necessary and important for us in order to continue an intimate relational connection with Christ. He is the extension of Jesus' person: "He will not speak on his own ... only what he hears ... will take from what is mine and make it known to you." Furthermore, as Jesus' relational substitute of equal quality, the Spirit extends and completes the relational process that Jesus vulnerably established. He will deepen the relationship and bring it to wholeness and fulfill all that is involved in making it complete. That's why Jesus said it was for our *benefit* (Gk. *symphero*) that he went and the Spirit came (Jn.16:7).

This is the Spirit's function. Since he is present with us for the rest of our earthly journey (Jn.14:17b), it is important for us to examine how we relate to him. We constrain his person when we only use him to help us *do something*, even if it's serving and ministry (*diakoneo*); we grieve him when we ignore his presence and function. While the Spirit does help us serve, it's to help us *be someone* in our relational responsibility. The fruits of the Spirit basically involve relational work (see Gal.5:22-23, and context). This *someone* is relationally-specific to the Creator's design and purpose and the Father's desires for which we need to be transformed in order to experience. *The Spirit works cooperatively with us for this relational outcome*.

Paul expands on Jesus' words about the Spirit. It's the Spirit's work in our "inner person" that "empowers us to be able" (Gk. *dynamis*, Eph.3:16) to continue "to establish Christ's dwelling" (Gk. *katoikeo*), meaning more than Jesus' mere presence but also deep relational connection in our hearts. His work is in cooperation with our intimate trust ("faith", 3:17). The Spirit's relational work also has the outcome of comprehending ("grasp") Christ's involvement ("love") with us and intimately experiencing it in our hearts ("know") such that we are fully satisfied from directly sharing in God's very own life (3:18-19). The Spirit is here to keep expanding our experience of intimacy with Christ. In his relational work the Spirit takes us far beyond ("immeasurably more") all we can ask or imagine (3:20).

The Spirit is here to functionally accomplish the process of our transformation so that we will live relationally-specific to the Father's desires. This process is specifically indicated by Paul in Romans 8 when he described the differences in relationship of those who aren't free (like slaves) and those who are (sons or daughters). A person is condemned because they are not justified by Christ and thus redeemed, set free (Rom.8:3). A son or daughter is not condemned because they *are* (8:1-4). But let's look at this distinction as if both were Christians. We know this truth theologically but we also know that this is often not our practical experience. At times we feel bad about ourselves

and live unaware that we are under the constraints of condemnation, thus not being free. So, a very real issue for those who have been justified and redeemed by Christ is how are we going to live—as a free person or a virtual slave?

The influence of our old self focuses us on matters which constrain our person and limit our relationships, especially with God (8:5a). Apart from the obvious sins of rebellion that Paul discussed, which are hostile to God (8:7), the more subtle areas of our inner person directly relate to the issue of "how we define ourselves." Essentially, the matter of how we are going to live becomes the issue of trying to measure up, establish our self-worth and, in terms of relationships, be accepted and loved. This effort actually leads to greater distance in relationships (8:7,8), even broken relationships ("death", 8:6a), not to mention its controlling effects from pressure and fear (8:15a). This should not be surprising because Satan creates many lies about this effort for us to live by, which are in subtle conflict with the truth. Remember his goal for Christians: to distance us from our heart and to interfere in our relationship with God.

The presence and work of the Spirit is strongly contrasted with this old self and this effort. First, the Spirit redeems ("set free") us from the *old* (8:2) and transforms us to the *new* (8:5b). His transforming work leads us to intimate relational connection (reconciliation, "life") and wholeness, deep satisfaction ("peace", 8:6b). Ultimately, the Spirit's relational function makes it possible for us to fulfill God's purpose and desires underlying his law: relationships and intimate connections of the heart that express love. Whereas the Christian controlled by the *old* is unable to please God, the Christian being transformed to the *new* by the Spirit lives relationally-specific to the Father's desires (8:7,8).

The Christian working relationally with the Spirit has a different and opposite mindset than those doing it alone (8:5-8). Paul said Christians have "an obligation" (Gk. *opheiletes*, a debtor, one indebted for favors, 8:12) to define ourselves and do relationships according to the grace and truth of Christ's relational work and the reality of his Spirit's presence and function in us (8:9-13). Yet, despite his presence as a further expression of God's favor, we constrain his function by remaining tied to the *old*—specifically by defining ourselves by what we do and have, and the relationships which follow that mindset.

The relational work of his Spirit is operative only in those Christians who practice *living free*, that is, those who actually function as God's sons and daughters (8:14). At the same time, we need the Spirit's work to help us function and experience being his children (8:15b-17). This reflects the cooperative and reflexive nature of this process that goes back and forth between us. The old mindset disrupts this process and prevents this most significant of relational outcomes: the freedom to *live* as his son or daughter and the intimate relational experience of him as "my Father" (8:15b), person-to-person, heart-to-heart. Even in our weakness and limitations in this relational work to make intimate connection with God at times, the Spirit's relational work will help us especially at those moments to make the connection (8:26,27).

But the Spirit's relational work is not unilateral; he works cooperatively with us. Though he stirs in our hearts and convicts us, he does not impose his work on us. We can constrain his person and grieve him. I think the most significant matter that interferes with this working relationship is *fear*. That's why Paul contrasts being controlled by fear with the relational experience of his son and daughter (8:15). Fear, in one form or another

(from doubt to distrust), to one degree or another (from hesitation to panic), is the dominant motivating force for human action. Can you think of anything stronger which drives us than fear? Are you aware of anything which controls/enslaves us more than fear? Fear can dominate our lives. Whatever its form or degree, fear prevents our heart from being vulnerable, and distances us in our relationships if left unattended.

His person is here to insure the ongoing intimate relational connection between the Father and his sons and daughters. And he will bring those relationships to completion, transforming us to be like Jesus as *his family*, just as the Father desires (8:29). This is the relational outcome we confidently know in our hearts (*oida*) that we can expect, as those deeply involved with him (*agape*) and relationally responding to his purpose and design (*prothesis*, 8:28). The presence and function of his person guarantees it when not constrained nor grieved.

It's acutely clear why Jesus sent us his Spirit and the need he fulfills in us in order to extend the intimate relationship he established by his person and words. We must (*dei*) realize this need in our daily practice so that we can also experience its relational fulfillment.

Discovering *Others*

My relationship with God doesn't revolve around us; that is, it's not focused only on him and me. He broadens our relational context. The relationship extends to others by design, purpose and command. This is where the cooperative effort with his Spirit extends to the **corporate effort** of his people. In this process we go from not only being a member of his family as an individual but also to actively involving ourselves in the actual practice of *being family* together with his children. This may make us most uncomfortable and even provoke the most ambivalence in developing intimacy with God.

Family (in God's plan and desires, Rom.8:29) establishes the corporate relational process of our relationship with God. It was clearly because of the Father's family love extended to us by his Son that any of us are able to be his son or daughter. Because of it and the Spirit's cooperative effort, we can grow together in actually being his family and in building it as his family love is extended to others. But the process of developing family does not limit relational connections, for example, to the activities shared at church. It will not allow the relationships between God's people to remain distant, shallow, casual, situational or independent. Such relationships are not of God's nature, nor do they reflect the relationships between the three persons of the Godhead, their involvement with each other as well as with us. *Family relationships are based on the relationships in the Godhead, so the corporate process is an extension of their intimate involvement* (Jn.17:20-23).

Any other kind of relationship and involvement does not reflect God's design and purpose, nor fulfills his desires for his people. That has been problematic in what we've experienced with each other at church and what others outside the church have observed about us. When Jesus gave us the second greatest commandment (Mt.22:39) and a new one (Jn.13:34), he extended the relationship of the greatest commandment (Mt.22:37) and our relational experience with him to others. *Others* involves two distinct groups. The new command tells his people how to be involved with each other; the second greatest

tells us how to be involved with all others. This is how God *is*, how he's involved within the Godhead, how he's involved with us, how he wants us to be involved with him and how he wants us to extend that relationship and involvement to *others*.

What is the significance of this involvement (*agape*) in the corporate process? This process not only extends it to others but it also broadens it to take in God's big picture. In God's plan for redemptive history and all of creation, individuals alone are incapable of fulfilling his mission, no matter how many individuals and how much involvement. This could only be accomplished by the relational work of the church functioning corporately as family. That means redefining our individualistic ways to the *whole* of family, which certainly requires a deeper *set* of relationships.[1]

Family was fundamental for Jesus' person and words and basic to how he lived. Though he didn't talk much about it, he addressed the issue as it emerged in different situations. As I noted earlier, family involvement for him was not as we usually see it or feel obligated by it. I think the most beautiful example of the corporate process of family occurred at the crucifixion. While Jesus was in anguish on the cross and those closest to him were in distress, a remarkable interaction took place which epitomized the family love to be practiced by his church. With *agape* involvement which didn't focus on even reasonable self-concern, he focused on his mother, Mary, and the disciple he loved in a special way, John (Jn.19:25ff). Then, he said to each of them with love and affection: "Here is your son," "Here is your mother" (19:26,27). From these words John acted beyond a mere disciple, and took Mary into "his own" (Gk. *idios*, one's own, denotes special relationship, 19:27). He didn't just take her in his house; he embraced Mary as his own mother. She must have embraced him also as her son.

There is a lot for us to reflect on here: circumstances, culture, family, Jesus' promise. All of these make this a remarkable moment in Jesus' life and in the development of his church.

Apparently, Mary had been a widow for awhile. In biblical times, a widow was in a precarious position (like orphans), and so it was for Mary, particularly when her eldest and primary son was about to die. Their culture called for the eldest son to make provision for parents when they could no longer provide for themselves. The biological family had this responsibility. And though a widow, Mary still had other sons and daughters to care for her (Mk.6:3). So, why did Jesus delegate this responsibility to someone outside the immediate family?

Though circumstances, culture and family converge on this scene, they don't each exert the same amount of influence. I suggest that Jesus wasn't fulfilling his duty as the eldest son, nor bound by the circumstances. He is taking us beyond culture and circumstances, even beyond family as we commonly view it. Remember what Jesus said about his family (Mt.12:47-50). It seems that Mary was not merely Jesus' earthly mother but increasingly his follower. She was not at odds with Jesus during his earthly ministry like his brothers. She was there *for* him in her role as mother but more importantly she was there *with* him as one who did the Father's will—as follower, daughter, sister.

This touching interaction was Jesus' involvement with and response to *his family*. It was the beautiful outworking of family love in the corporate process of *being* family and building it. For this definite purpose and reason, it was just as much for John's benefit

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[1] For a full discussion of the corporate nature and function of discipleship, see my study *The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship* (Discipleship Study, 2004). Online: www.4X12.org.

as it was for Mary—both in provision and opportunity. What each of them let go of in order to follow Jesus, he promised them an even greater family (Mk.10:29-30). True to his words as ever, he was fulfilling his promise to them. Even beyond that, he established them in the corporate relational process which is necessary to keep fulfilling his promise and to extend this relationship to *others*.

We cannot subordinate the significance of this set of words by Jesus. They are as important as his other last words on the cross. They characterize God's kingdom, what it means to be *community* and to build his church. This is how God wants his people to live in relational significance B and to be relationally-specific to *others*. We need to discover *others* better in our experience together. He wants to take us to a level beyond what we can imagine. Are we willing to go beyond what we've been used to?

How Do We Do Church?

We have discussed how we define ourselves and how we do relationships throughout our study. Now we need to focus more on the related third issue of concern in our practice: how we do church. This will only be an introductory discussion, with a more in-depth discussion undertaken in the study just noted.

Technically, the church didn't start until after Jesus went and the Spirit came. Nevertheless Jesus practiced the process fundamental to church and laid the groundwork for it. This groundwork involved how to define ourselves and how to do relationships. His later words revealed in visions to Peter (Acts 10:9-16) and John (Rev.2 and 3) tell us further what's important to him and how to do church.

When Jesus patiently pursued Peter, when he truthfully in love interacted with various followers and firmly dealt with religious practitioners, he always focused them on how they defined themselves and the need to be transformed in their heart. That transformation was needed because in one way or another they all defined themselves from the *outside in*. Whether it was by what they did, had, presented of themselves or how they appeared to others, they focused on less important areas and formed identities based on matters secondary to their heart. Jesus redefined the *person* from the *inside out* and thus revealed the need for transformation.

How we define ourselves is always relationally-specific because these perceptions and practices carry over to the way we do relationships. When the depth of our total person, for example, is not the primary focus of our efforts in life, then our relationships will reflect secondary emphases also. The relational consequence is that our relationships become characterized by relational *distance*. This distance is not measured by the amount of conversations or activities with each other, nor by the length of time together. This distance is measured by the quality of inner connection persons make with one another.

The relational significance for Christians in how we define ourselves and do relationships is that these perceptions and practices carry over to how we do church—along with, of course, influencing our relationship with God. As we tend to define ourselves from the outside in, we tend to do church from the external to the internal. Our language may express the opposite. But it's what we practice and focus on in church programs which reveal our actual emphases. How would you characterize the relationships in your church experience?

When our church efforts focus on less important areas, there can be some surprising relational consequences, which obviously would be unintentional. There is an explicit or implicit desire (maybe need) to make churchgoers feel good. The thinking could be that church is the one place in society people can count on for support. People should go home from church feeling better. Was this the way we saw Jesus "doing church" when persons came to him?

God is not into making us all feel good. When you think about what "feeling good" has come to mean in our society, how people in general perceive it today, so much of it depends on external circumstances or secondary matters. Christian culture mimics this perspective and practices "feeling good" more as "happy with one's circumstances" than as "blessed (*makarios*) with the satisfaction of sharing in God's life." Relational meaning becomes lost, even in our Christian language which *talks* of relationship but doesn't experience the relational outcome of the *blessed*. We may go away happy but we always need to understand its relational significance.

This consequence happens for a reason. "Feeling good" (about circumstances) actually gets us away from the reality of life and what's in our heart. This secondary focus distances us from our heart by increasingly making us less vulnerable. It makes us less vulnerable to the feelings, desires and needs in our own heart. With these emphases we would also be less vulnerable in relationships.

Reflect on this process for a moment. If defining ourselves focuses on less important areas and on matters secondary to the heart, we will practice a less vulnerable lifestyle resulting in greater distance (in terms of awareness, response, satisfaction) from our heart. So, then, what exactly does "feeling good" mean in these conditions; what really feels good when we're not vulnerable?

I think two things are influencing this process, making it difficult to sort things out. First, in order to have a "feel good" conclusion without being vulnerable means that we have to formulate perceptions, impressions, even illusions about the Christian life which will give us this interpretation. Outside influences already formulate most of our perceptions and some of our impressions. But it's from within the church that specific illusions are formulated about the Christian life, and what we personally are supposed to have and experience. This is why even a pervasive Christian culture must come under the scrutiny of Scripture, particularly the person and words of Jesus.

Secondly, this process is compounded because of Satan's counter-relational work. "Feel good" is what Satan wants us to think about because his goal is to distance Christians from their heart. And he wants us to have a false sense of feeling good in our Christian life because that gets us further from the deeper substance of intimacy with God. As long as he can get us to substitute feeling good for direct relational experience, he is accomplishing his goal. When the church tries to make us feel good or the like, it in effect is fostering his illusions and playing right into Satan's masquerade (2 Cor.11:13-15).

The Relationship of Fellowship

The effects of less-than-significant relationships in a church impact the church at the center of its life: its *fellowship*. In scriptural usage, the word *fellowship* comes from

the same root word in Greek (*koin*) as the word for *communion*. Basically it includes a common bond among its participants which distinctly involves having a share in something together. The fellowship of the church involves having a common experiential share together in the redemptive work of Christ, God's intimate grace and the relational presence and work of the Holy Spirit. This communal bond is based on the deep relational reality of what the believers are and experience in relationship with Jesus Christ. It also involves no sense of the independence and individualism characterizing church participation today. There was a definite sense of the individual but never separated from the *whole* and always in deference to the sake of the whole.

Fellowship has come to mean a variety of ideas and practices in church, mostly based on how we define ourselves and do relationships. Its meaning in Scripture, however, does not allow the freedom and latitude to define it by our convenience. Fellowship is also relationally-specific for which there is no substitute in its relational connections. Fellowship operates only on the basis of relationships. These relationships are primary and God clearly holds us accountable for them, as Jesus revealed in his visions to Peter and John.

In contrast to what we may like to assume about or ascribe to our practices of fellowship, biblical fellowship implies an inner, deeper relationship between the believers. Based on the deep reality of being transformed by the Spirit and *new* in Christ, this fellowship can only be fully realized through the further outworking of transformed relationships. That is, this is the experience of transformed persons engaged in relational work to build transformed relationships with each other. What is critical for us to actually put this into operation in our churches is the truth that: ***what characterizes transformation in relationships (with God and others) is the elimination of distance and the cultivation of intimacy.***

With some exceptions noted earlier, persons in the O.T. didn't experience closeness (Heb. *haber* or Gk. *koinon*) with God. Righteous persons regarded themselves as servants dependent on God but not as the *friend* of God. Obviously, this distance radically changed with the vulnerable presence and work of the person Jesus, tearing down the barriers ("the veil") between God and his people. This transformed our relationship with God and opened the relational process to deep and intimate communion together. It is this communion which is exalted in the Lord's Supper. In this intimate communion with the person of Christ arises also the deepest fellowship (common share in) and intimacy among his people. This is why the church is at its height in the worship of God at our Lord's table.

All this points to the close communion that is now a fact in the life of God's people, though may yet to be practiced. God holds us accountable for this truth and the practice of this relational reality because he wants so much for us. Our relationships can indeed also be transformed and distance no longer needs to characterize them. To share anything in common together in a truly meaningful way is not the outcome of having membership in a structure called church, of participating in service or activities together or of sharing in certain situations and circumstances; fellowship is the outcome and function only of inter*person* relationships. Even more so, to share *new life* together in a vital, ongoing process is a function of intimate relationships. When God's people actually get down to the ongoing adventure of sharing *life* together and the discovery of the *new*, this specific relationship increasingly becomes identified, necessary and worked on.

Examining Our Results

There is another major effort churches make as a result of focusing on less important areas which needs to be discussed. Because of the emphasis on what we do, accomplish and have, it is important for us to have *results*. We depend on results for the indicators of our success. Without results we are neither assured by our efforts nor satisfied. Consequently, we get so focused on results that we usually overlook the process involved in getting those results. The relational process (the relationships involved and affected) in particular seems to get lost. We also tend to strain under the illusion that we are responsible for the results, that we are the ones who bring about the results, precluding the cooperative effort with the Spirit. Getting the results then becomes the major thing or only thing. The mentality is analogous to business with its "bottom line" and to sports where "winning is the only thing."

When results are overemphasized, we become predisposed to compromise—whatever the area of life. In overlooking the process, for example, we are easily susceptible to tweaking our ethics or redefining them in order to get those results. This is a problem in more and more areas of life as the credibility of participants and the validity of results come under scrutiny. Whether in business, sports, formal education and even science, ethics has become increasingly only a *means* justifying the *end* results; therefore, ethics is compromised and becomes relative. The need for results does this to us, individually and corporately.

God says "No!"—the process is important. Ethics have, for example, an absolute basis. *How* we do things is important because it reflects the character of our person and *what* we are. These cannot be compromised. Yet, how have we been affected by doing church for results. The effects can be seen not in terms of unethical practices but in overlooking the process—the relational process. We have to examine where the relationships are and what they are in the so-called results we are getting.

In our push for results or to make churchgoers feel good, we focus on providing for them in the church's programs. What happens in this effort is that we start treating them essentially like consumers. Where are the relationships in this context and what are they? The need for results also has a way of taking control of our lives. When it does, how can we make the distinction in our practice between a slave and son/daughter? Further, if we give account of our church, will it be about how many are saved, how many have eternal life, how many members we have?

I think it's important to examine the validity of our church results. If we get past our stated ideals and a church's perceived image (even reputation) and examine our effectiveness at doing church, here is what we need to account for:

(1) How many of those who are saved are "making every effort" (as Jesus said) in the relational work necessary to intimately share in God's life and participate in his family? Luke 13:23ff

Note: There is a distinct difference between a popular church of the majority mindset (the common) and an authentic church which only has a minority perspective (the uncommon).

(2) How many of those who profess to have eternal life are actually experiencing *knowing* the Father and Jesus in intimate relationship, as Jesus vulnerably revealed? John 17:3

Note: We talk about non-Christians as those who don't know Christ. Well, there are many Christians who don't *know* him either.

(3) Regarding church membership, how many actual disciples of Jesus make up our church? Matthew 28:19

Note: Church is not a voluntary association (like service or civic groups) of those who believe Christ at their convenience. It is the corporate process of those who are engaged in the relational process of discipleship. Jesus didn't make this optional.

If we are Christ's body, then this is why Jesus incarnated, what he brought in his person and words, what he vulnerably established. This is what church is all about. Results in church which don't have these relationships, this relational process and its outcomes aren't significant to God. Jesus, in fact, said some strong words about these results and how we do church.

Churches to Take to Heart

In his vision to John, there are three churches in particular which Jesus highlights for us to take to heart (Rev.2 and 3). These are particularly relevant for us today because they illustrate how these three churches did church based on how they defined themselves and how they did relationships.

The first church is in Ephesus (Rev.2:1-7). Jesus acknowledged their "deeds" (Gk. *ergon*, works denoting comprehensively what they are and how they act), their "hard work" (Gk. *kopos*, denotes not so much the actual effort but the weariness experienced from that effort) and their "perseverance" (Gk. *hypomone*, endurance as to things and circumstances, in contrast to patience toward persons; character that does not allow losing to circumstances). Along with the rest of their efforts (2:2,3) this all tells us how they were, what they did and were involved in.

They were very, very active in church work. Plus they maintained the doctrinal purity of the church and even suffered repercussions for Christ's name. Through it all they held up and remained constant in their faith. This can certainly describe a number of successful churches in our time.

Jesus wasn't impressed, but felt to the contrary about what they were doing. "You have forsaken your first love" (2:4). In all the positives we would affirm about this church, how could this happen? If it wasn't Jesus saying this, we would probably dismiss such a charge. This is serious church business and important to account for in how we do church ourselves.

"Forsaken" (Gk. *aphiemi*) means to forsake, abandon persons, to leave, let go from oneself or let alone. It's the same word Jesus used in his promise not to leave us as orphans (Jn.14:18). This strongly implies not paying attention to persons and relationships. They worked hard *for* God but the relational process got lost in the effort. This often happens as churches develop and the goals of church growth become the

priority of church practice. As the word for "perseverance" denotes, they were so focused on circumstances and situations that persons (especially God) were forgotten, left alone or emotionally abandoned. In spite of all the positives, the relationships weren't there. They did not have *agape* involvement, which is only what is significant to God. They didn't have this relational involvement because they were focused on what they did. Albeit with sincere, good intentions, their interests were on less important areas (secondary in fact) with relational consequences, because these interests ultimately have more to do with "ourselves" than with God and others.

The basic complaint against them that we need to examine in ourselves was that, in all they were doing (which was a lot) as a church and as Christians, they were not relational. Relationships were not their primary priority; therefore, they were not loving—they lacked the best and strongest indicator of God's people (Jn.13:35). There is a direct correlation between the priority we give relationships and the extent to which we are loving. Whether Jesus' complaint against Ephesus includes both their relationship with God and with others is not clearly indicated in the passage. But we can strongly infer that it includes all their relationships because what they emphasized in their work reflected how they defined themselves, which further determined how they did relationships.

This church didn't seem to take up Jesus' challenge: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy [compassion], not sacrifice'" (Mt.9:13). The context here emphasized relational involvement (*agape*) which the full quote from Hosea expands on: "... and knowledge of God rather than ... " (Hosea 6:6); that is, God wants love (Heb. *hesed*) and knowledge of him gained from intimate involvement over anything else done *for* him. Church work never supersedes relationships.

This all tells us what's pleasing to God and what is necessary for him. Our faith which merely works without the ongoing relational involvement of intimate trust is dead also (to supplement James 2:17,18 and expand on Hebrews 11:6a), because the relationship is the most important matter to God. Thus, serving him requires the intimate relational process of following him (Jn.12:26); any service without it is not relationally significant to God. Furthermore, persons are not free to love when they are living functionally like slaves because of the controlling effects of defining themselves by what they do (Jn.8:31-36).

The second church for us to take to heart was in Sardis (Rev.3:1-6). They had "a reputation of being alive." "Reputation" (Gk. *onoma*) is used as the substitute or representative of a person himself. The church there lived behind their reputation. But Jesus knew their "deeds" (*ergon*) and what that really said about *what* they were and *how* they acted. In actuality, they were "dead" (Gk. *nekros*), useless, vitiated, the condition of being separated from the source of life, therefore being unaccompanied by something. Here we see that tension from conflict between appearance and reality when there is a gap between them.

Though Sardis had the reputation of being alive, there was no accompanying substance to their appearance and image. The substance of life was missing which meant the church operated somewhat like a "virtual reality." Their credibility was exposed as worthless and the validity of their work was insignificant. These are severe judgments to make on a church which at least was doing something. The tension, however, from the gap between what appears so and what really exists is not readily apparent when a church

relies on what it does. Reputation becomes one of those valued indicators of success. And many churches depend on that kind of feedback to evaluate their work. Yet, if everyone who gives that feedback measures a church's work by the same inadequate definition, then how do we get an accurate accounting?

Jesus said "Wake up!" (Rev.3:2). The sense of this two-word combination is to emerge as a new, whole, total person. They needed to become transformed persons because they defined themselves from the outside in and didn't give full importance to the total person (especially the heart). Living this way determined how they did relationships and influenced how they did church. That's why Jesus said further "I have not found your deeds complete." That is, the way they lived and did church work was not complete because it wasn't fulfilling its purpose according to God's plan and desires—which are all relationally specific. In the *common* perception of the majority who likewise define themselves from the outside in, this church was "alive" in its purpose and highly respected.

Sardis' incomplete efforts reflected how they did relationships and how they did church from the external to the internal. This affected their relationships with God and with each other. Jesus called them back to what they "received" (*lambano*, 3:3) in John 1:12, to embrace and follow as a teacher—that is, to be a disciple. They didn't ongoingly practice their faith with the intimate trust engaged in the relational process as his disciple. Jesus called them back to the basic necessity of relational work inherent in who God is, who his people are and what his church is. They needed transformation in their relationships. For this they had to become *transformed persons* who engaged in relational work in order to build *transformed relationships* with each other so as to be a *transformed church*.

This same relational process continues for us in the church today for which the Spirit is here in cooperative effort to make *complete*. We are accountable for all these relationships and must (*dei*) "make every effort" in our part of the process.

From a very active church to a highly respected church we turn to the church at Laodicea (Rev.3:14-22). Laodicea was a rich city, the wealthiest in the area at that time. They were known as a banking center, for their textile industry and famous medical school. The people had great pride in their financial wealth, fine clothes and famous eye salve. But Laodicea lacked a natural water supply. Hot water was piped in from hot springs and cold water came from the mountains. Both were lukewarm by the time it reached Laodicea. Since hot water was preferred for bathing and cold for drinking, they often complained about their water as inconvenient to their exceptionally comfortable lifestyle. This background is important for what follows.

How they did church in Laodicea was like their water: lukewarm. Though tepid does imply that they were hot before, they now lived comfortable, complacent, indifferent Christian lives. Does this sound closely familiar? Their self-assessment was that they were rich and had everything they needed (3:17). Why is this familiar to us? Before we merely focus on affluence and modern lifestyles, let's understand what's behind their thinking.

Why do these secondary things become so important to us? All of us who define ourselves essentially by what we do and/or have by definition have already made secondary things more important than the total *person*. In the process, the importance of the *person* (particularly the heart) and the primary priority of relationships are replaced

by secondary areas of interest and concern. Substitutes are made for the substance of our heart and for the quality of our relationships. The main substitutes are the mind for the heart and quantity for quality, but substitutes can involve anything. This is not only about wealth and comfortable lifestyle. The Laodicean church was not unique in making substitutes for how they did church. The well-respected church in Sardis substituted appearance for the total person and the substance of the heart. The very active Ephesian church substituted quantity for quality in their relationships.

Substitutes are absolutely necessary for those who approach life from the outside in. They are inherent to that process, and their roots go back to Adam and Eve with the fig leaves. While substitutes make it easier for us to stay in our comfort zones, they are especially problematic for the Christian user. The use of substitutes creates illusions about where we actually are in our lives, what we truly are experiencing and have. This false reading or sense of assurance is continuously reinforced by Satan, who encourages the church with Christian substitutes.

Illusions are more difficult to deal with than blatant sin. That's why Jesus said he would rather have us cold than lukewarm (Rev.3:15). At least when we're "cold" there is no illusion—we can be honest and open about where we are. Certainly, Jesus doesn't want us to stay cold, but to labor in the middle maintains a dishonest relationship. Like lukewarm water, which was distasteful, even nauseating, to drink, Jesus found them distasteful and was going to spit them out (3:16). Yet, he pursued them further.

Jesus exposed their substitutes by which they defined themselves: wealth, fine clothes, eye medicine (3:17). He didn't want them to be satisfied with substitutes. By taking away the illusion, Jesus exposed them—they were actually poor, naked and blind. Instead of their substitutes he pointed them back to himself "to buy [*agorazo*] from me" (3:18), that is to obtain something of true value from him only in the relational process. Jesus pursues those for whom he has an affection (*phileo*, 3:19). He is always doing the relational work necessary to transform us ("discipline") and help our relationship grow. The famous image of verse 20 is his persistent desire to have intimate connection with us and to build relationship. This metaphor should not be lost on even the most mature Christian because it is full of God's relational messages for his people. Will we turn from our substitutes?

These three churches describe probably a large percentage of our churches today. By restoring what's primary in how we do church, Jesus calls us away from the secondary matters which distract us, concern us, occupy us, get us caught up and control us. He keeps calling us back to himself and to the relational process of building intimacy with him in his family. Take his words to heart and "let us hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev.2:7; 3:6,22).

Equalized in the Relational Process

When we come before the Lord God as we really are and worship him as he truly is, we engage in a relational process which includes adventure and discovery. First, we have to let go of our titles, roles, accomplishments, possessions, maybe even our spiritual gifts—all the things we may depend on to define ourselves or establish our worth. Conversely, we also have to let go of the things we can't do or don't have, all the negative

things which make us feel *less* or bad about ourselves. In other words, we have to let go of those secondary areas which keep us from being vulnerable with our heart and what we really are.

In letting go of these, we also have to let **two relational outcomes** take place:

(1) We are humbled and prostrate before God in submission and service to our superior. This is not a moment of time or in a place but the ongoing posture of relational involvement.
(2) We are equalized as persons with all his children. This means no stratified identities nor partiality in relationships based on secondary matters. The only relational interaction of significance is *agape involvement*.

We discussed the first outcome previously. Let's expand a little on the second.

Self-definition based on secondary things never involves only the individual. It always includes comparison with others to one degree or another. This comparative process creates competition and stratifies persons on some totem pole, developing further into a system of inequality. You can imagine the growing distance this creates in relationships which forms into tension and eventually develops into conflict. Increasingly, differences in others become harder to accept; someone who is different has to become like us or we distance ourselves from them. At whatever level you look at this, these are the repercussions of an "outside in" approach to life.

Peter still had this approach after Jesus left and the Spirit came. It determined in part how Peter did church in the book of Acts. This is what Peter's vision is about and why Jesus spoke to him about it (read Acts 10:9-11:18). Peter discriminated against the Gentiles and treated them as *less*. This inequality negated the grace he had received and that others could receive. Intellectually this was clear to Peter, but in his heart more transformation was needed. Later, his inconsistent relational practices continued, so Paul had to confront him about his hypocrisy in order to expose the clear fact that Peter (and his major influence on others, including Barnabas) was not "acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal.2:11-14). Thankfully, God's grace prevailed.

But how does God's grace prevail when we do church from the outside in? Grace doesn't allow us to be anything but *what* we truly are; it demands it. How much can we be our true *self* when we're focused on secondary matters? For us to truly receive grace implies the need for favor that is unwarranted and requires a humble relational posture before the Superior who freely gives his favor. How well can we relate to God like this when we depend on secondary areas to establish us before others? Grace always struggles under these conditions. When we have this mindset, we struggle in the relational process also, just like Peter.

When the Father sent his Son into the human context, he bridged the only natural and justified inequality in relationships. Any other inequality in relationships is unnatural according to how God created us. Yet, the God Jesus didn't come to put us down because we are *less*, nor did he reinforce the difference between him and us. To the contrary, he washed our feet (Jn.13:12-14) and reordered the way we commonly do relationships (Lk.13:30; Mk.10:31; Mt.20:16). The inequality between God and us does not determine the character of our relationship with him. Though the basic and inherent inequality between us can never be equalized, the primary way our relationship functions together is

intimately *heart-to-heart*, *person-to-person*. In this intimate relational process, love is able to be shared B both given and received.

In this sense God's grace cultivates both inequality and equalizing. While grace demands from us the relational posture of inequality with God, grace equalizes us in the relational process with him. Don't misinterpret this; we aren't talking about becoming God or equal to him, just the relational process. We can't have intimate relationship with him as a servant; it must (*dei*) be as an authentic friend (Jn.15:15). We cannot be intimate with him and belong in his family as a slave; it must (*dei*) be as a functioning son or daughter (Jn.8:35,36). We need to be equalized in the relational process in order for love to be our ongoing experience. God accomplished this by his grace—he can be with us and we can be with him.

If grace equalizes us in the relational process with him, what does it do to our other relationships? Not only does it equalize us in the relational process it also equalizes us as persons. This gets us out of our box, expands our relational context and opens us to deeper relationships—especially with his people. This is the adventure we can expect. These relational outcomes involve the most significant experience in life: the experience of ***agape involvement***. This is the discovery we need to have more often, individually and together as a church.

Jesus challenges us to go and discover what God means that he desires compassion, not our hard work and service (Mt.9:13). The context of his words (9:10ff) reveals to us that our work focuses merely on *doing* something when it doesn't consider the persons who receive that service. This is not sufficient even with good intentions. Compassion, on the other hand, focuses on the persons receiving the service and our relationship with them. This is the *agape involvement* he has with us and wants us to have in our relationships.

While *agape involvement* considers the person receiving, it doesn't distinguish between persons (Mt.5:43,44) nor discriminate against them (5:44). It isn't selective among persons (5:46,47) nor reactive to them (5:38-42). Jesus said these seminal words for how to do relationships in the Sermon on the Mount for which he holds us accountable to relate to others as our Father relates (5:48). This is what it means to be a member of his family (5:45).

On this whole issue of how we define ourselves and how to do relationships and therefore church, Paul summarizes it for us in one verse, Galatians 5:6: "When we are rooted in intimate relationship with Christ Jesus, all the secondary areas make no difference, have no power, carry no weight (*isckyo*). The only thing that's significant is relational trust actively exercising (*energeo*) *agape involvement*" (my paraphrase). That's it—nothing more, nothing less. This is the only thing that counts with God.

The Church as Equalizer

With *agape involvement* the church becomes the equalizer, both within itself and out in the world. Obviously, when we've been talking about love, we haven't been discussing romanticized love or our common notions about it. *Agape* can be confronting when it seeks to go deeper than the other person wants. It can also be divisive when there is competition for love or possessiveness about it. Jesus put these into perspective for us,

especially regarding biological family relationships (Mt.10:34-37; Lk.14:26).

Equalizing is a blessing or a threat. It's a threat for those who depend on what they do, accomplish and have, in order to establish themselves. It's a blessing for those who need grace. Since Jesus equalized by extending the relationship of the Father to us, what distinguishes his followers, his church, his family is to equalize by extending this relationship to *others*.

Jesus didn't come just to equalize me, nor just us in the church. He came to equalize everyone and everything (Col.1:20). God is always focused on this big picture. He is always working out the big picture as well as in small parts of it. Personally, I call him "my Big Picture Daddy." Sometimes, however, we want him to concentrate on the small picture, mainly *me*, and have the relationship on our terms, within our control. It's not about *me*, though it's all *for* me and *with* me.

That's why Jesus gave us the first, the second and the *new* commandments. That's why he told Peter, the first leader of his church, to take care of his followers. That's why he gave his church the Great Commission. That's why all creation eagerly awaits "the sons and daughters of God to be revealed" (Rom.8:19). "Revealed" (Gk. *apokalypsis*) is to uncover, unveil, disclose in its meaning and purpose. This is all about the corporate effort of *family* extending this relationship to creation and to others in the world for their redemption and reconciliation. This is the Father's desire for all to be a part of his family. This is his family involved in the relational process of extending family love to take others in to be a part of it.

Can we do church like this? Given the person and words of Jesus, how can we not "make every effort," and settle for less? To make the *common* choice is certainly easier, with the many substitutes available to us. Satan will encourage us to stay where we are. No one is more threatened by equalizing than he.

"... first love ... reputation ... lukewarm!" The world needs the church as equalizer. We do also.

Chapter 9 THE RELATIONAL CONCLUSION

For God ... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge [understanding] of the glory of God in the face of Christ.
2 Corinthians 4:6

Blessed are the eyes that see what you see.
Luke 10:23

Are you blessed in seeing the glory of God? This revelation is a privilege which many have wanted but few have experienced (Lk.10:24). Christians, all of whom have the opportunity for this experience, find themselves often in the opposite relational direction on the road to Emmaus. Or are you discovering deeper satisfaction (*makarios*) with the face of Christ, his person and words?

The light to which we are exposed requires a healthy organ in order to receive it (Mt.6:22). When the eye doesn't function properly, light is worthless to it. As we noted previously, the eyes and the heart are used for similar function in the Bible. So, we are continuously warned in Scripture about the importance of our heart to be functioning properly, and the need to clear away that which prevented full function.

In 2 Corinthians 4:6, the whole process describes relational interaction the outcome of which is the intimate experience and understanding ("light shine in our hearts") of the very presence of God ("the glory of God") as vulnerably revealed by the person and words of Jesus ("face of Christ"). God has done the main part of his relational work, and he holds us accountable for it. The road to Emmaus is no longer a legitimate option for us. Plus, he holds us accountable for our part of the relational work. This relational work which establishes us in the relational process of intimate relationship with God is imperative for all Jesus' followers, not just a select group.

To know Christ beyond mere knowledge and information to the level of experiential understanding of God is the outcome only of this relational process. Therefore, nothing is more important than relational work because we don't have a greater purpose in life than relationships. That's what God made us for. That's what brings the greatest fulfillment because only relational work yields the relational conclusion and the full satisfaction in our hearts (made in the image of God with eternity planted in it). *Relational work is the only primary significance our actions can have*—all else is secondary to it. It's the relational imperative with God, as well as with others.

A Foreign Language

This relational conclusion does not happen by our definitions of ourselves and of God, nor by our terms for relationship with him or by how we commonly do relationships. In our modern lifestyle, for example, we are so busy and fast-paced that

relationship is often "done on the run," so to speak. This may make it more difficult for us to recognize living a "life faster than grace"; work to perform, objectives to fulfill, goals to accomplish, achievements to secure and minimal time for much else reflect our attachments and our priorities—whether they're important to us because we depend on them to establish our worth or due to unintentionally practicing a lie. Engaging in such practice relegates intimate trust (faith) to a situational practice, at best, while effectively negating grace in the relationship.

In reflection on their exile in Babylon, the psalmist laments their captors' request for songs: "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Ps.137:4) The songs couldn't be sung just for entertainment or as ends in themselves; they could only be sung in the proper context (which in their case was Jerusalem). A certain *place* was important for them in order to have connection with God. We can extend this reflection to our life today but with the changes Jesus established.

Think relationally! How can we sing the songs of Jesus while using a "foreign language?" We either sing about him as an end in itself or we sing with words which don't reflect his substance. What do you think this "language" is which is foreign to him? How can we follow the person and words of Jesus while practicing a "foreign context?" That which is common and temporal is foreign to him; that which doesn't give importance to the total person (primarily the heart) and primacy to intimate relationship is foreign to him. What do you think these contexts are which are foreign to him?

Since Jesus came, the *place* is no longer important nor necessary for connection with God. Yet, our practice as his followers still seems foreign to his person and words. We haven't really grasped what he replaced the *place* with. And we won't until we "make every effort" at the relational work he put before us. Jesus restored *relationship* as the primary place to sing his songs, to follow him and make intimate connection with the Father. Thus, any substitutes we put in place of relational work take our practice out of this proper context. This results in something other than the relational conclusion.

The Experience Gap

There was certainly a gap between what Peter believed and what he actually experienced with Jesus. More often than not, the relational conclusion seemed to be elusive for Peter. The reason was summed up when Jesus told Peter where his mindset was and thus what determined his perceptions (Mt.16:23b).

We all face this *experience gap* to one extent or another. This gap is also reflected in the experiential difference between an interested observer (e.g., a sports fan) and a participant (a player). Of course, it would hardly be accurate to label Peter an interested observer; no disciple was more active during their time with Jesus than Peter. Yet, he still had a gap in his experience. In our previous discussion of Peter's life story as a disciple, we can learn that it's important also *how* we "play the game." Merely participating is not sufficient to experience this relational conclusion.

Jesus really compounds the experience gap for us when he said: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. That person will do even greater things than these" (Jn.14:12). Do you really believe this? Do you actually experience this? Or was Jesus using hyperbole to make a point? I used to struggle with

this. "Greater things" seems impossible compared to Jesus. It is, if we think of it qualitatively. I think he means from a quantitative standpoint, but don't think about things to perform, like miracles. Think relationally.

What has Jesus been doing in his person and words? He revealed the Father and was doing his work (Jn.14:10c); it was all relational work. Jesus started it all on a relatively smaller scale, if you will. We have the opportunity to extend this beyond what he did on earth. This is not about quantity of missions but about doing the Father's work—which is all relational work—for our greater experience and the experience of others. This really excites me; and I'm trusting him for more of this relational conclusion, which Jesus continues to promise (14:12c-14). Yet, this is one of those "blessing or burden" matters. Will this heighten our experience of intimate connection with God, or will it widen the gap due to greater expectations to which we have to measure up?

It's *in* the Story

Many Christians who want to narrow the gap and experience more tend to look at the matter only as their personal issue, difficulty, struggle or even problem. They think that they just need to have more faith, discipline or whatever in order to experience more. Some others see it also beyond themselves to include this difficulty, struggle or problem within the church as well. That their experience level and gap are also the reality of the church—and they just further reflect this reality in their own lives. It's almost like living out a stereotype or script of a church community or family that one is a part of.

However you may look at this issue, or any other in your life, it is helpful to reflect on our lives in the form of a story (narrative). Such a narrative gives context to different parts of our life, helping us to order our experiences and to better understand events and circumstances. When we reflect on our individual story, we can see also how our biological family story, the story of our particular church and other stories (like culture, community, education, job) have become a part of our personal story and have influenced us. All these narratives contribute to our personal life story and help shape our identity, our thinking, our perceptions.

The story (or narrative) of a particular church, or a Christian culture in general, becomes part of our personal Christian story. If the experience gap is an existing condition in those narratives, then we have no significant experience to add to our life story from the practice of our faith. What do we do in these circumstances? We turn to other experiences in life to add more to our life story; this is when secondary areas start becoming more important. Otherwise, we wouldn't have much experience to show for our life as well as our faith.

This experience gap is crucial to our hopes and expectations—if not for life hereafter, most definitely for life now. We either accept current levels of experience in our faith and continue to make substitutes thereby settling for less, or we look to another story to redefine any mindset, perceptions and stereotype of what we can experience in the Christian life and thus be changed—individually and corporately.

The *Whole* Story

Peter certainly went on to experience those "greater things" Jesus promised. We don't have all the narratives of his transformation but enough to give us his life story. After telling Peter off, Jesus told him and any other disciples: "If anyone would come after me, one must deny oneself ... and follow me" (Mt.16:24). To "deny" (Gk. *aparneomai*) means to remove from oneself, to disown, refuse, to decline or withdraw from fellowship, therefore here to refuse one's own self. Look at this in terms of Peter's life story and the narratives which made up his story and influenced him. It was absolutely crucial for Peter to refuse parts of his whole story, to stop fellowshipping with his *old* story, to disown the lies which had become a part of his personal story and, then, to follow Jesus in his *whole* story.

This *whole* story is the narrative history of the person and words of Jesus Christ, which goes well beyond the manger and the cross. His *whole* story as narrative history (not fiction) reads as love story—a story of family love. To see his life's story is to see his person as *whole*, not as fragments of teachings, miracles, events, situations. To understand his life story is to engage his person and words, as he has pursued me in my life story. To *know* his life story is to intimately experience his person and words, as my life story becomes transformed into his life story together with his Father in family. This is the relational conclusion which includes the relational experience that closes the gap and brings *new* depth and breadth to our story—beyond what we can imagine. When we don't embrace Jesus in his *whole* story, we don't embrace his total person and the vulnerable presence of God. When we don't let him embrace us in our life story, we only make ourselves available to him in certain parts of us (fragments of our self), not our *whole* and, thus, only involve ourselves in the relationship in selective, limited or substitute form.

It takes two willfully open persons engaged in relational work in order to build intimate relationship together. God has been doing his part of the relational work. This is Jesus' story! What is your story...?

Study Guide & Growth Plan

Following Jesus, Knowing Christ

Engaging the Intimate Relational Process

Introduction

A study guide is restricting if it becomes the sum and substance for the user's involvement rather than a flexible outline for discovery as well as a stimulus for further personal growth. The purpose for this outline is to assist our focus toward deeper involvement, thus I hope it engages the user much more in a personal plan of growth and less so as a guide for study.

The outline for each chapter will include four sections which are best addressed in succession:

1. Reflect: Certain aspects of a chapter need our deeper reflection; let the Spirit help you take the content to a deeper understanding or to a further level.

2. Examine: Work with the Spirit to help you examine the issues more directly in relation to your own life; you may experience discomfort in some of these matters, yet this is a necessary process for change from the ***old*** in tension with the ***new***.

3. Anticipate: If our engagement in this study is for more information or as an end in itself, then we have nothing further to look forward to; the plan and steps for growth involve first and foremost more intimate relationship with God; if this is not the experience we anticipate as the relational outcome of our involvement, our effort is in vain.

4. Optional: Only after you have thoroughly addressed the previous three sections—not necessarily completed because this is an ongoing process—you may want to respond to this section; it will require further thought and may engage you in the theological task; for this purpose church leaders are especially encouraged to participate in this section, but only after addressing the other three.

As you undertake this Study Guide & Growth Plan, you may be challenged to adapt it for your individual and/or small group context and needs. I encourage you to send us any adaptations because they may be useful to others.

The growth and development of relationships, both with God and with others, especially in his family, is imperative. The relational work necessary for such outcomes could be a burden or a blessing. His Spirit has been given to us for the blessing of completing this relational process. Yet, this does not diminish our likely struggle, eliminate difficult situations and insulate us from life's hard feelings. The Spirit only guarantees with his seal the growing experience of intimate relationship with the Father as his very own daughters and sons in his family. Anticipate this—here and now!

Chapter 1 The Relational Process

No matter how long we've had a relationship with Christ, we all need to understand the actual level of involvement we engage in with God from day to day, from moment to moment. We must never assume the depth of our involvement nor take for granted its practice. What we genuinely experience of God is directly proportional to the level of relationship we engage with him—not merely the fact of the relationship.

Be prepared to examine your relationships, particularly with Christ but also with others.

In order to establish relational significance with God, we have to revisit the ***Word*** and come to understand in deeper relational terms two basic elements to our faith:

1. What is God's revelation of himself in Christ Jesus?
2. What is the gospel and thus what exactly is the Good News we claim for ourselves as well as proclaim to others?

Keep in focus these elements throughout the course of this study. It will be important to formulate (or reformulate) a functional understanding of these two basic elements for our daily practice, not merely for our belief system.

Reflect:

When you think of Christ, what are some of the specifics which come to your mind?

Write a list and reflect on your thoughts about Christ.

Later, try to identify:

- what has become matter-of-fact information.
- what you experience or don't experience in your relationship with him.
- what you want to learn/know more of about him.

Examine:

How have you defined yourself down through the years?

How do you specifically measure growth in relationships?

- in relationship with God?

- in your family relationships?
- in relationships with friends?
- in your relationships at church?

Next, on the above lists identify what indicators focus on secondary areas.

Note: In your thinking and probably in your culture these secondary areas may appear as primary. Yet, when we examine what exactly is experienced in a relationship, they often involve more indirect connections, quantity over quality, and as an alternative to going deeper in the relationship for more substance and satisfaction we are really making substitutes and settling for less.

Anticipate:

Think about salvation for a moment. Then reflect on what Jesus saved you ***to***, not saved you ***from*** but the ***to*** aspect of salvation. What does this mean for you?

At this stage in your relationship with God what has been imperative from him for you to act on?

How do you think the relational imperative would affect this?

Optional:

In what ways do you think we make it difficult to have intimate relationships today?

How can our Christian belief system create tension or conflict with God's design and purpose for the *whole* person and for relationships?

How do we engage in an exchange process rather than a deeper relational process in many of our relationships, especially with God?

Try to identify current evangelical Christian practices which effectively in function become a form of self-justification. What are the relational implications of such practice and how does this affect our perception of the gospel?

Chapter 2 The Relational Connection

We generally assume that when we've done something for awhile or have been in a relationship a length of time, that we've gained experience and wisdom in that area. This may be true in certain areas, especially where there is a clearly defined way to do things. But this is not a good assumption to make about relationships because relationships are conducted in many ways—many of which may be practical yet not satisfying, or may form bad habits which constrain growth and development of relationships. Marriage and family relationships are the closest examples of the lack of positive experience and wisdom for relationships gained down through the years.

Relationship with Christ is the most significant relationship we have. Yet, here again, the assumption that experience and wisdom for practicing this relationship comes with time is a critical error. Philip and Thomas learned this the hard way. Review their interaction with Jesus in John 14.

Reflect:

What do you think Philip and Thomas were feeling as Jesus responded?

In what ways might you be similar to them in this interaction?

Consider how the disciples essentially put constraints on how much God revealed of himself in Christ. How does this affect how we see God and thus how we are involved with him?

In relationships a comfort zone is essentially maintaining a certain distance which keeps me from being more vulnerable to the other person(s) than I want. This keeps a relationship on my terms. Philip and Thomas, along with the other disciples, demonstrate living in a comfort zone in their relationship with Jesus. How could they have been different in their interactions with him?

This may seem like a strange question or be difficult to answer: what is it about God that you wish were different or even that you don't like about how he is? What do you tend to do with these thoughts and feelings?

Examine:

How do you think putting God in a box affects how we can be involved with him?

When do you think you put God in a box?

What has been your own perception of the incarnation and what have you done with it?

When we don't fully depend on God's revelation of himself to define who, what and how he is, we turn to assumptions to define this for us. Many of our ideas, notions and perceptions of God come from such assumptions. As you reexamine the incarnation of Jesus Christ, what assumptions do you need to let go of in order to reformulate God's revelation of himself and allow him to be his true self—not what you want him to be?

Anticipate:

How does Jesus demonstrate the relational process?

What further thanksgiving can you express to God for sharing his heart with you?

How can you further embrace your heart and express it more?

Consider more deeply the function of grace, that God's desires in the relationship are about wanting ***me*** (my authentic self) rather than what I have or what I can do. For you, what are the pros and cons of his desires?

What are you learning about the relational process, and what do you need to change in how you do relationship with Christ?

How does this balance and complete the relational equation?

Optional:

How can we characterize the exegesis of the Bible commonly practiced today and the exegesis by the Word (Jn.1:18) expressed in Jesus' life?

Make a statement about the incarnation in relational terms that reformulates God's revelation of himself distinctly in the relational process.

Contrast substitutes and something less of a true person with the incarnation.

Define the importance of relational work and the principle of "no substitutes and nothing less."

Chapter 3 Establishing This Deeper Relationship

Our tendency in established relationships is to live in them as though relationships are static. The thinking here is, that since the relationship is established its condition will remain constant despite any lack of effort to work directly on the relationship. While it may not be our intention, for example, to take the relational involvement for granted or to assume its condition, such a static approach to relationships contradicts the truth that functionally relationships are always dynamic. We can count on something always happening in a relationship—either positive or negative, growing or diminishing; and the fact is any relationship declines in absence of relational work, despite the homeostatic appearance, for example, of many marriage and family relationships.

The dynamic nature of relationships also conflicts with the additional false belief that it is sufficient for only one party in the relationship to do the bulk of this relational work. Again, even though this may not be our intention this could be how we function with God, letting him do most of it. In the opening verse of this chapter (Jn. 17:26) Jesus defines the essence of his relational work, work which quantifies the Father's revelation of himself through his Son and formulates the basis for the gospel. Yet, despite the total involvement with which Jesus engaged this relational work, it is not sufficient for this verse to become an ongoing relational reality. That is, there will always be a gap—an experiential gap—in our relationship with him without our part of the relational work. The dynamic nature of relationships makes it necessary for both parties to engage in relational work in order for the relationship to grow and not diminish. Prepare to further define your part.

Reflect:

To one degree or another we all face a gap between what we believe and what we experience in our faith, particularly about our experience directly in relationship with God. John 17:26 accounts for intimate involvement with the Father and experiencing from him the same relationally intimate love Jesus himself does. This relational experience cannot be substituted for by activities or even service for him; these represent indirect involvement with him. In the relational principle of "no substitutes and nothing less," we are talking about engaging God directly—specifically, not he engaging us in the context of our life (for example, what we're doing) but *we* engaging ***him*** within the context of ***his*** life. This means involving ourselves with the Jesus of the incarnation and following him for the correct reasons, thus functionally on his terms, not ours.

What are you "searching" for or pursuing in your relationship with Jesus (cf. Jn.6:24)?

In what direction do you think this is taking the relationship?

_____

Examine:

What are "secondary things" about your person which you focus on consistently?

What are "secondary things" about your relationships which occupy your involvement with others?

What influence do these have in how you see yourself? How you see others? How you do relationships?

Consider: what do you bring to a relationship if it's not what you do or have?

Anticipate:

It is increasingly difficult in modern times to readily discern the substitutes we make and how we settle for less. Not only are we preoccupied by the "task" but are also dominated by multi-tasking. With a growing quantity of substitutes and an elevating dependence on virtual experiences, we are ongoingly engaging one alternative after another, in effect trying to satisfy a seemingly bottomless heart. Yet that which lasts and satisfies usually eludes us. This applies to Christian culture and the context of the church as well as to general culture and the surrounding context.

This process is significantly compounded when we account for Satan's counter-relational work. The distinction between truth and lie gets very hazy in various Christian practices. Can you identify some practices which appear as truths but in function are actually lies which distance the person from the heart and/or interfere with intimacy with God?

What lies have affected your own self-perception and how you do relationship with God?

How would you distinguish "time and quantity" and "depth and quality"?

Apply these to how you see God functionally and to how you actually do relationship with him.

Without becoming self-absorbed do you have a desire to experience *more* in the practice of your faith and your relationship with God?

What do you think needs to change in order to experience more?

Optional:

So far, how does this study affect your formulation of the incarnation and the gospel of Jesus Christ?

What are the implications of limiting God's self-disclosure to correct doctrine and to engaging merely the mind and what we do?

Chapter 4
...to Uncommon Intimate Relationship

The title of this chapter can be taken in two ways. First, in the general context of everyday modern life intimate relationship is an elusive experience, thus not common to our common ways of living. This includes the context of churches and Christian practices. The reason intimate relationship is elusive even among Christians is that intimate relationships according to God's created (original and new in Christ) design and purpose is ***uncommon***—the main focus of the chapter title. How we approach intimate relationship (if we do so at all), especially with God, will determine the extent of our experience—elusive or growing.

It may be hard to take responsibility for the fact that we make intimacy with God difficult, particularly if we've been praying for it. Yet, how we function and do relationships often create the primary barriers for Christians to experience intimacy with God; and our prayers may be merely extensions of ***common*** relational practices.

Be prepared to change further.

Reflect:

We usually don't think of God not knowing someone (Lk. 13:24-30). After all, isn't the issue about ***us*** getting to know ***God***? But when does the omniscient God not ***know*** someone?

Do you think Christ is demanding too much by holding us accountable to rigorously engage the relational process of developing intimate relationship with God (Lk. 13:24)? What's the alternative?

How does that which is ***common*** distance us from our heart and interfere in our relationship with God?

How would you define redemptive change? Why is it the kind of change necessary for relationships?

Examine:

Since none of us live in a vacuum, what is it about your broader context that you need to understand, particularly how it influences your focus and perceptions?

The early disciples didn't "get it" and couldn't "put the pieces together" because of this influence which prevented more deeply seeing Jesus' person and making intimate connection with him. With the information you have about Christ plus the

benefit of hindsight (unavailable to the disciples), what part of God's revelation of himself have you yet to receive relationally and take responsibility for, thus in effect putting you in the same relational difficulties with Jesus as the disciples—even living on the road to Emmaus?

We distance our heart and maintain comfort zones in relationships because of biases and perceptions influenced by the common. Start to identify ways the common operates in your life which affect your person and your relationship with God.

How does redemptive change become necessary for you to take responsibility for where your heart is and for developing intimate relationship with God?

Anticipate:

How do you go from ***thinking relationally*** to also ***acting relationally***?

Define further what Christ saves you ***to*** and how not being freed (redeemed) prevents you from experiencing that.

Define ways you may function merely as a slave/servant, employee, student, house guest, observer in God's family.

For deeper change are there areas in your life which may involve the need for his comfort of a past relationship, his healing from a bad experience as well as his forgiveness and cleansing for sin? How can you address them relationally?

Give deeper focus to the ***relational messages*** you have "seen" from God and define various relational messages you give to him.

Optional:

From a relational perspective discuss the incompatibility for relationship between the common and the uncommon. Be sure to include contextual issues which affect intimacy with God and the growth and development of our relationship.

Explain the rationale for defining "our greatest sin as Christians is relational distance with God."

Our correct perception of the incarnation necessitates directly from us what kind of response? Define different responses we can make to his revelation, and discuss how they adequately balance the relational equation or not.

Chapter 5 Developing This Intimate Relationship

The depth of intimacy in any relationship is dependent on the openness and honesty of each person in the relationship. How and what we present of our ***self*** are critical for relationship. Likewise, letting the other person be their true self without imposing our predispositions and biases is essential for intimacy.

As we further examine what we present to God in relationship, we also need to assess the extent to which we relationally allow him to present his true self to us.

The progression of Jesus' purpose in the incarnation is reaching its culmination. Yet, it's not about the cross but about the Father. He came to reveal the Father, and the cross serves only the Father and his purpose. (I use "Father" to be relationship-specific, not gender-specific.)

Reflect:

Given how vulnerable Jesus was with his heart and in his relational involvement, he doesn't provide us with theological revelations about God but rather gives us ***the relational imperative*** for direct involvement with God. His act of revelation is purely relational, made solely for relationship and can only be embraced by us relationally.

Reflect on the relational messages Jesus communicates by being intimately vulnerable to the relational consequences of how we are with him, pursuing us anyway and receiving us regardless, as he did with Peter.

When Christ further takes us to the Father as his very own, he established ***the relational responsibility*** for us to intimately participate in the Father's life and their relationship, and thus to intimately experience also what they experience in their relationship together as family.

Define and reflect on the relational messages the Father is saying to you in Romans 8:29.

Examine:

"Letting God love you." Is that a simple matter for you or is it difficult to leave your person that vulnerable to God? Be honest with yourself so you can be honest with God.

As you saw in Peter, consider if there are ways you are not open to intimacy with Jesus.

What do you learn from Peter's life about discipleship?

Anticipate:

Go back to the portion (set off by the asterisks) at the end of the section entitled "The Only Relationship That Works." Work through these issues with the Spirit as you anticipate experiencing more of what Christ saved you ***to.***

Optional:

What Jesus fulfilled in the incarnation necessitates not only relational formulations of God's revelation and the meaning of the gospel, it may require their reformulation without the influence of our predispositions and biases. Relational formulations also demand ongoing intimate relational function which is the only practice having relational significance to the Father. Even after becoming a leader in the early church Peter had to learn this the hard way.

Change can be not only difficult but somewhat of an illusion. When Peter's theology was dramatically changed to no longer exclude the Gentiles (review Acts 10:9-16, 34-35), we would expect a major change in how Peter did relationships. Yet, despite reformulating the gospel, this change didn't happen until Paul rebuked him later for his functional hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-14). The gospel is not about correct doctrine; the Good News is totally relational and can only be experienced in intimate relationship, both individually and corporately.

What are the implications of theology which does not change Christian practice in relationships?

Identify such gaps and discrepancies in evangelical theology, and also in your theology or belief system.

Chapter 6 The Relationship of Following

We come to a critical juncture in our study that takes us to the next level of relationship with Christ. Authentic spirituality cannot be adequately discussed and fully undertaken without dealing with discipleship. The development of spirituality and spiritual formation depend on discipleship and its coherence with God's desires for his followers, both individually and corporately.

At the same time we cannot address discipleship apart from spirituality, that is, intimate relationship with God where hearts are open to each other and increasingly coming together. Yet, the moment the subject of discipleship comes up, our focus usually concentrates on ***doing something,*** especially about serving. This all needs to be put into biblical perspective. (An expanded and more developed discussion on discipleship is available in an overlapping study entitled ***The Relational Progression: A Relational Theology of Discipleship.***)

Reflect:

What are the main perceptions of discipleship in your Christian context?

What do you think would happen in your context if following the model of Christ or becoming more Christ-like were distinguished from what discipleship really means?

How does serving become in conflict with our true vocation as his disciple?

In John 12:26, how does Jesus redefine what's important?

Examine:

What are the relational messages to you in John 12:26?

How do you look at the "servant model" and how would you reconsider it for yourself?

Further consider what's involved in being a friend in biblical times, and how Jesus lived and engaged his disciples. What part of this relational work do you need to work on?

Are there ways you define yourself or let yourself be defined that you need to let go of in order to be freer to be loved by God and to love him/others?

Anticipate:

We have to distinguish between something we have to do because God expects it and that which he says is necessary for optimal function in our relationship with him. Doing the former tends to result in, even with good intentions, duties and obligations involving misplaced priorities with relational consequences. Practicing the latter is responsive to God's person and desires in what is important to him, thus bringing relational outcomes of deeper involvement with each other, particularly in the experience of love.

Obedience can be associated with either approach but John 12:26 puts this into relational perspective for us. Discuss obedience from both approaches and the relational consequences and outcomes emerging from them, respectively.

As you take to heart the relational messages at the very end of this chapter, how does this affect your relationship with God?

What changes in you do these messages encourage?

Optional:

Explain the direct correlation between how we define ourselves and how we do relationships.

How does this influence how we do church?

At this point in your deliberations, can you initially start to articulate how "discipleship as following the person of Jesus in the relational progression" coheres with God's overall desires and thus brings coherence to our beliefs—that is, as parts of his ***whole***?

Chapter 7 The Nature and Extent of Our Involvement: Vital Relational Acts

We have to start putting together the various words of Jesus into the ***whole*** of his "one and only" purpose fulfilled in the incarnation of his person. If we take any of his words out of the context of this whole, we lose the relational significance of his purpose in sharing those words. If we practice any of his words apart from the relational process he vulnerably established in the incarnation, such practice loses its relational significance to God.

Each of Jesus' words is only one part of this whole which the Father gave him to fulfill. As we "put the pieces together" (*syniemi*) and grasp his "one and only" person of purpose, we have the further opportunity to grow in intimacy with God.

The alternative is reductionism—reducing truth, life, the person, relationships with substitutes and settling for less than the gospel. Our choice determines whether the News for each day of life now is indeed Good or merely So-so.

We need to understand and take responsibility for different ways we relationally compromise (not morally) the quality of relationship with God.

Reflect:

If you truly believe that God is present in your life, how do you treat him ongoingly?

Identify the relational messages you are communicating to him in each of the various ways you treat him.

Contemplate the statement: "The functional posture of worship serves as the primary determinant for what a relationship means to us."

Why does God need, in a sense, to exercise grace for himself also?

Examine:

Explain the significance of Jesus' question in Luke 6:46 for the relational work you are engaged in ongoingly.

Why didn't Jesus separate obedience from love? Explain how obedience is a vital way for you to love him and ***know*** him deeper.

If love is making ourselves vulnerable to intimacy, what are the implications of practicing love without practicing intimacy?

How do substitutes and settling for less compromise relationships and the persons involved?

Anticipate:

Review the incarnation as the relational process of love. Use this relational context to determine the relational work ahead for you.

How does Christ's life reflect "the giving of ***me***" and how can you further grow to give him ***me***?

Outline how you can further respond to Paul's charge in 1 Timothy 6:12 in your relational work.

Optional:

How does the incarnation beg the ***relational question*** and how does our answer define the extent of the gospel, the Good News?

Explain what the Father's will is for us "here and now" and how this leads to eternal life.

Explain what ***agape*** love is and is not in relational terms.

What is the focus of authentic relational work and why is it important not to differentiate its various relational acts?

Chapter 8 Extending the Relationship

Relationship with God was never meant to be between merely the individual and God. The intimate nature of this relationship is always designed to function, as in the Trinity, in life together—together with God as his very own and together as his family.

Too often we interpret relationship with Christ merely on individual terms. We stop short of following Jesus in the relational process that takes us to the Father and his family. At times, there is even an emotional sense of being possessive about Jesus, maybe idolize him. This essentially puts God in a box and constrains our relationship with him to operate on our terms. This way of doing relationship is not the commitment and devotion to Christ that the Father desires for us to be conformed to (Rom.8:29). Such a dominant focus on Christ takes him (and thus us) out of the relational context with the Father and short-circuits the relational process apart from the ongoing relational work of the Spirit.

This has two relational consequences. One, it individualizes Christ functionally (not theologically) separate from the Father and the Spirit; and, two, it also becomes a rationale for our individual freedom apart from the relational responsibility to the Father as his very own and to his family in interdependent relationships.

This brings us from how we define ourselves and thus how we do our relationships to how we do church—that is, actually practice being the church.

Reflect:

Jesus said it was to our benefit that he leave so that the Spirit would come (Jn. 16:7). If he is not clung onto as the dominant focus of our attention, the Spirit could take over and complete what he started—the relational progression to the Father.

Describe the Spirit's relational work (use Romans 8 as your outline).

How does the ***old*** in us disrupt this relational process?

What is the need in us that the Spirit fulfills?

Define and distinguish the ***cooperative effort*** and the ***corporate effort***.

Why are individuals alone incapable of fulfilling God' mission?

Study Guide & Growth Plan

Examine:

How specifically do you constrain the Spirit? Grieve the Spirit?

How does your church compare to the three churches in Revelations 2 and 3? Explain what characterizes transformation in relationships and how this directly relates to fellowship.

How does ***agape involvement*** define the church and how does this help you to do church?

Does the corporate process of intimate relationships with the Father and thus ***discovering others*** give you more than you expected or want?

Anticipate:

The first, the second and the ***new*** commandments express the ***whole*** of God's desires. How does seeing them individually and practicing them separately affect how you define yourself, do relationships and thus do church?

What do you need to account for in how you are doing church?

How does engaging in ***agape involvement*** make you feel, and what do you anticipate about its practice?

Optional:

Explain how Christ practiced the process fundamental to church and laid the groundwork for it.

How is the corporate process of the church an extension of the intimate involvement within the Godhead?

How does grace work in how to do church as the Father desires and why is equalizing necessary to this relational process

Chapter 9 The Relational Conclusion

The face of Christ is difficult to take in and embrace when our focus is on his "hands" (his deeds) or on his "mouth" (his teachings). This focus reflects the influence of seeing ourselves and defining ourselves by what we do or have, as well as demonstrates the effects of living in relationships as a result of this definition. These ways directly alter our perceptions of the incarnation and God's revelation of himself.

The issues of how we define ourselves and do relationships further influence and even determine how we do church today. When these three major interrelated issues are left unattended, they not only alter God's revelation but also reduce the meaning of the gospel. This renders our faith to a practice, both individually and corporately, without relational significance to God, thus lacking deep satisfaction for us and for others.

There is a deep personal loss that comes with making substitutes for or settling for less than "the face of Christ." Our popular notions of Christ need to be assessed with his full incarnation and the whole truth of the gospel. Jesus didn't come to be with us on our level of life—to initially engage us where we are, yes, but not to do relationships on this level. He came to take us to the level of his Father—the uncommon and eternal.

Reflect:

Compare and contrast relational work from all other human activity.

How did Jesus replace the ***place*** for intimate connection with God? And what makes our practice foreign to him, resulting in something other than the relational conclusion?

Examine:

Outline your life in the form of a story and examine how you've defined yourself, done relationships, practiced church.

How well does your story intersect with Christ's story and interact with his person and words?

What parts of your story do you need to let go of, disown, or refuse in order to follow Jesus in his ***whole*** story?

What redemptive changes need to be made and further relational work engaged in order to be more deeply involved in relationship with him?

Anticipate:

The experience gap is reduced only by involvement with God in intimate relationship on his terms and thus on his level. As you anticipate this, can you imagine engaging in even greater things than Jesus (Jn. 14:12)? Rigorous relational work involves holding him accountable for this promise.

Imperative:

While this chapter may conclude our current study, it must (***dei***) not end the growth process. We are held accountable for all of God's revelation, especially his intimate relational work of the incarnation, thus accountable to follow Jesus in the relational progression to the Father as his very own and as his family together with his Son and all our sisters and brothers. This is not optional but ***the relational imperative*** to engage in ongoing relational work—rigorous relational work in cooperation with his Spirit. In the process be sure to account also for Satan's counter-relational work.

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Scripture Index

Page numbers in ***bold italics*** indicate where the primary discussion can be found.

Old Testament

Genesis
2:25-3:13 *36*
3:7-13 *36*
21:33 *46*

Exodus
4:21 *72*
7:3 *72*
7:13-14,22 *72*
8:15,19,32 *72*
9:7,34-35 *72*
9:12 *72*
10:1,20,27 *72*
11:10 *72*
14:4,8 *72*
17:4,6 *28*
33 *24,27*
33:2-20 *24*
33:19-34:7 *24*
34 *24,27*
34:6 *21*

Numbers
11:10ff *28*
20 *28*
20:1-12 *28*

Deuteronomy
4:29 *15*
5 *125*
5:9 *126*
6:13,15 *126*
8:3 *58,59*

1 Samuel
16:7 *15*

2 Samuel
11 *29*
11:1-4 *29*
12 *29*
12:13 *30*

1 Kings
17 *30*
18 *30*
18:16-46 *30*
19 *30*
19:1-3 *30*

2 Kings
19:4,5,9,13 *30*

Psalms
2:4 *88*
17:7 *130*
33:5 *130*
50:14 *123*
51 *30*
51:16,17 *15*
57:10 *130*
63:6 *29*
106:32 *28*
137:4 *160*
147:11 *123*
147:10,11 *111*

Proverbs
4:23 *1,7*

Ecclestiastes
3:11 *46,129*

Isaiah
29:13 *15*
53 *118*

Jeremiah
10:10 *46*

Hosea
6:6 *152*

New Testament

Matthew
3:17 *17*
4:2 *56*
4:4 *58,62*
4:10 *126,127*
5 *132,140*
5-7 *131*
5:3-5 *84*
5:17 *134*
5:21-48 *132,134*
5:33-37 *133*
5:38-48 *157*
5:43-48 *135*
5:46,47 ***133**,134,142*
6 *92*
6:2-7 *133*
6:16-18 *133*
6:22 *159*
7:1-5 *133*
7:13,14 *66*
7:21 *129*
7:22,23 *128*
7:27 *129*
9:10ff *157*
9:13 *86,**92**,153*
10:34-37 *158*
12:1-8 *134*
12:7 *91*
12:47-50 *147*
12:49,50 ***129***
14:25-33 *97*
15:1-9 *84*
15:8 *16,79*
15:8,9 *108,**126**,127*
15:10-20 *84*
15:17-20 *15*

Matthew (continued)
16:13-20 ***98***
16:13-23 *121*
16:17 *107*
16:21-23 *101,107*
16:21-25 ***98***
16:23 *160*
16:24 *108,162*
16:24-25 *99*
16:25 *95*
17:1-8 ***99***
17:1-13 ***17***
17:6-7 *100*
17:6-8 *18*
18:3 *94*
18:21-22 *100*
19:16-26 *51*
20:1-16 *81*
20:14-16 *84*
20:16 *157*
20:24 *98*
22:37 *125,146*
22:37-39 *131*
22:38 *125*
22:39 *143,**146***
26:8 *122*
26:10 *121*
26:29 *34*
26:33 *102*
26:34 *104*
26:36-46 ***103***
26:36-42 *19*
26:36-46 *34*
26:38 *36*
26:38-39 *89*
26:38-44 *90*
26:39,42 *137*
26:41 *36*
26:69-75 *104*
27:46 *89,90*
28:19 *113,152*

Mark
3:21 *129*
3:33,35 *129*
4:35-41 *32*
6:1-6 *67*
6:3 *147*
6:6 *68*
6:30ff *68*
6:45ff *68*
6:52 *70,71*
7:1-13 *84*
7:1-23 *69*
7:14-23 *84*
8:11,12 *68*
8:14-21 *32,**68***
8:14,16 *69*
8:15 *69,73,78*
8:17 *34,69,71,77*
8:17,18 *70*
8:17,21 *73*
8:19-21 *71*
9:2-13 *99*
9:6 *18*
9:33-37 *33*
10:13-16 *47*
10:17ff *76,92,97,111, 113,115*
10:17-27 *33,**47**,48,51*
10:21 *116,120,128*
10:23 *116*
10:26 *50*
10:27 *50,51*
10:28 *52,97*
10:29-30 *53,97,148*
10:30 *115*
10:31 *53,98,157*
14:36 *34*
15:8 *74*

Luke
4:1-13 ***56**,90*
4:3,4 *57,58*
4:5-8 *60*
4:9-12 *62*
4:13 *63*
5:1-11 *96*
5:8 *107*
5:16 *88*
5:33ff *134*
5:33-39 *38*
6:12 *88*
6:37,38,39 *80*
6:46-49 *128*
7:36ff *121,122,138*
7:36-50 *20,**95***
7:47 *122,131*
8:22-25 *32*
9:33,34 *18*
9:44,45 *32,33*
9:59 *127*
9:60-62 *128*
10:22 *89,93*
10:23,24 *93,159*
10:38-42 *20,**119***
10:39 *123*
10:42 *120*
11:16 *68*
11:29 *68*
12:1 *27,38,**56**,69,79*
12:24 *128*
13:23 *66*
13:23ff *152*
13:24 *65,72,78,94,110, 128,130,141*
13:24-30 ***66***
13:26 *78,128*
13:27 *128*
13:28,29 *129*
13:30 *157*
14:26 *128,129,158*
14:33 *128*
16:31 *68*
17:1-10 *101*
22:24 *34,98*
22:32 *105*
22:33 *102*
22:40-46 *34*
22:45 *35*
22:49 *102*
24:13-23 *72*
24:25 *73*
24:29-32 *73*

John

1:1-5 *14,15*
1:11 *21,22*
1:12 *22,**23**,25,93,112, 115,130,154*
1:14 *11,**14**,15,17,**21**,23, **25**,**26**,32,87,93,97, 101,136*
1:18 ***14**,15,**17**,25,87*
1:46 *68*
3:16 *130*
4 *15*
4:16-18 *31*
4:19ff *99*
4:21-24 *126*
4:23 *27*
4:23,24 ***15**,25,**26**,74,89*
4:24 9
4:26 *15*
4:27-33 *31*
5:11 *140*
5:19 *88*
5:20 ***88**,89,139*
5:28,29 *121*
5:30 *89*
5:31,36-37 *88*
6 *44,46*
6:14,15 *44*
6:14-27 *112*
6:16-25,26 *44*
6:24 *45*
6:27 *45,46*
6:28,29 *45,112*
6:29-58 *97*
6:37 *112*
6:39,40 *121*
6:42 *68*
6:48-58,60,66 *112*
6:60-69 *97*
6:68-69 *112*
7:15 *68*
7:27 *68*
7:41 *68*
8:16-18 *88*
8:23 *90*
8:28 *88*
8:29 *88,89*
8:31 ***75**,76,93*
8:31ff *116*
8:31,32 *87,118*
8:32 ***75**,76,117*
8:31-36 *89,153*
8:33 ***75**,116*
8:34 ***76**,118*
8:34ff *92*
8:34-36 *117*
8:35 ***76**,116,118,157*
8:36 ***75**,157*
8:43-44 *75*
8:44 *55,108*
8:45 *75*
8:48 *68*
8:55 *89*
10:38 *6,89*
10:24 *68*
11 *120*
11:3,5 *120,122*
11:6-40 *121*
11:32ff *123*
11:41 *19*
11:42 *20*
12:1-8 *121*
12:3 *123*
12:8 *122*
12:26 *111,**118**,119, 120,153*
12:27 *90*
12:27-28 *89*
12:27-29 *19*
12:30 *19*
12:45 *6*
12:45-46 *90*
12:49-50 *89,119,**138***
13:1-10 *101-102*
13:8 *107*
13:12-14 *157*
13:21-24 *33*
13:26 *34*
13:28,29 *34*
13:34 ***41**,139,146*
13:34b,35 *142*
13:37 *102*
13-17 *4*
14 *8,11,20*
14:1-9 *31*
14:1-10 *138*
14:1-11 ***5***
14:5 *130*
14:6 *26,79*
14:9 *6,89*
14:10 *89*
14:10c *161*
14:12 *160*
14:12c-14 *161*
14:15 *123,131,**137***
14:16,17b *144*
14:18 ***143**,153*
14:20 *89*
14:21,23 *131,**137**,139*
14:26 *144*
14:28 *89*
14:31 *89,119*
15:9 *123,139*
15:9,11 *116*
15:10 *123,137*
15:13 *116*
15:14 *123*
15:15 *21,49,115,**116**,157*
15:26 *144*
16 *34*
16:7 *144*
16:12-13,14-15 *116*
16:13-15 *144*
16:17,18,19-28 *34*
16:27 *89,92,139*
16:32 *88*
17 *92,93,123*
17:2-3 *89*
17:3 ***53**,54,129,138,152*
17:6 ***16**,19,89*
17:14,16 *90,91*
17:15,17 *91*
17:20-23 *146*
17:21-22 *89*
17:21-23 *17,93*

John (continued)
17:21 *81*
17:23 *89,92,115*
17:23b *139*
17:26 *17,19,41,43,**53**,89, 92,115,129,139*
18:10 *102*
19:25ff *147*
20:24-29 *8*
21:15ff *122*
21:15-22 *104-106*
21:19,22 *111*

Acts
8 *106*
10:9-16 *106 148*
10:34-35 *106*
10:9-11:18 *156*
15:8-10 *15*

Romans
2:28,29 *15*
5:8 *95*
8 *144*
8:1-4 *144*
8:5-27 *145*
8:7 *21,76*
8:15-16 *93*
8:19 *158*
8:26,27 *94*
8:28 *146*
8:29 *22,25,**87**,92,93,114, 129,146*
9:20 *79*
12:2 *55*
13:8-10 *131*

1 Corinthians
8:1 *133*
15:49 *114*

2 Corinthians
3:14,15 *87*
3:18 ***87**,114*
4:6 *159*
6:17,18 *91*
11:13-15 ***55**,87,149*
11:14,15 *61*
11:15 *79*

Galatians
2:11-14 *106,156*
5:6 *157*
5:22-23 *144*

Ephesians
2:8,9 *86*
3:16,17 *131,**144***
3:18,19 *130,144*
3:20 *43,**106**,144*
4:25 *79*

Philippians
2:6-8 *23*
2:7 *119*
3:21 *114*

Colossians
1:20 *158*

1 Timothy
6:11ff *130*
6:12 *141*

2 Timothy
3:7 *74*

Hebrews
11:6a *153*

James
2:17,18 *153*
4:4 *21*
4:8 *41*

1 Peter
1:3 *111*
1:22 *111*
2:21 *114*
4:8-10 *111*
5:5b-7 *111*

2 Peter
1:5-8,9 *111*

1 John
3:2 *114*
4:10 *95,131*
4:19 *95*

Revelations
2,3 *22,148,**152***
2:1-7 *152*
2:2-4 *135*
2:7 *155*
3:1-6 *153*
3:6 *155*
3:2,3 *154*
3:14-22 *154*
3:15-22 *155*