

God's Relationship With Us

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Introduction.

According to the most recent statistics I've seen, about 90 percent of the U.S. population believes that there is a God, that there is some kind of supernatural Being out there who is responsible for the physical creation we see. Most people even believe that God is not aloof from us, that He wants to interact with us in some way. That belief raises two extremely important questions. What does God want, and what should we do about it?

To a growing number of people in this country, God is just the Great Big Heavenly Cuddle Bear of Love. He created us to be happy, and He made some suggestions for our behavior in His word, but it's not really that important for us to obey Him in everything. When people like this turn to the Bible, they don't believe that it establishes a pattern for our lives and for our church. Instead, they see the Bible as a love letter, and as long as we get the message that God loves us out of the Bible, that's all that's really there. We can follow some of the commandments if we want to, but if we don't like them, or we decide that they're outdated, we don't have to listen. It makes for a very convenient form of religion.

Of course, as inviting as this conception of God may be to us, we have to ask whether it's accurate. I'm certainly not about to dispute that God loves us, but what does that mean? Does He live for us, so that He lets us go our own way and does randomly nice things for us, or do we live for Him, so that we have to measure up to His expectations? The Scripture explores this relationship in a whole bunch of different ways, and compares the interaction between God and us to a number of familiar earthly concepts. When we look at these comparisons, we see just how God thinks we should act toward Him. Let's look at them this morning to learn about God's relationship with us.

Comparisons to Human Interaction.

God often uses comparisons to different kinds of human interaction to explain His relationship with us. The first and most obvious of these is the way that He describes His relationship to us as the relationship of a **KING TO HIS SUBJECTS**. We see a fine example of this in 1 Timothy 6:14-15. Even today, this is a concept we have no trouble understanding. We know that when a king tells the citizens of his kingdom to do something, they have to do it, and if they don't do it, they are rebels against the crown. If God is our King, then the same rules apply to His commands to us.

This is so clear, in fact, that it raises the hackles of many members of our society. They don't like the idea that the God of the Bible is a King, and so they try to erase it. For example, I've seen a translation of the Bible that took the word "kingdom" out every time it was used and replaced it with something else. I own a hymnal in which the grand old hymns about God as our King were either rewritten so they're not about kingship anymore, or were just left out of the hymnal entirely. Brethren, if I were determined to ignore God's law, I'd do that too. I'd want to get rid of all the king language so that I could do what I wanted without being reminded about all the trouble I was getting into. Of course, changing the words doesn't change the reality. The God of heaven is our King, and we must obey Him.

Scripture also depicts God's relationship to us as the relationship of a **FATHER TO HIS CHILDREN**. This sounds a little bit more like the giant cuddle bear in the sky, until we look at some of the ways this language is actually used. Consider, for instance, 1 Peter 1:17. To a lot of modern folks, this wouldn't make logical sense. God is your father, so walk in fear? However, we need to remember that the Biblical conception of fatherhood was a lot different than the bumbling oaf of today's sitcoms. In the Bible, the family patriarch was the one in charge, and he expected to be obeyed. Under the Law of Moses, parents had the right to take a disobedient child and stone him to death, and under ancient Roman law, the *paterfamilias* had the right to execute the members of his own family. Certainly, our heavenly Father loves us, but He expects our obedience too. That's why we have to walk in fear, because even as we have the right to appeal for His help through prayer, we also must remember that our Father will judge us impartially for our actions.

Even more tellingly, the Bible presents the relationship between God and us as the relationship between a **MASTER AND HIS SLAVES**. This one really makes us uncomfortable because of its connection in our minds to the slavery that was practiced in the American South before the Civil War, with all of its overtones of racism and terrible ill treatment of the slaves. Slavery in the time of Jesus wasn't necessarily that bad, but it still wasn't a picnic. Look at how Jesus describes it in Luke 17:7-9. The slave here isn't beaten for no reason, but neither does he get to look to his own needs first. He must serve his master all day in the fields, then come in and serve him at the table, and then finally, after all of his master's needs are met, then he gets to eat. The master doesn't thank him for this; it's just what is expected.

In just the same way, Jesus continues on, we are expected to serve God, and we shouldn't look for any thanks for it either. God put us on this earth to do His will and obey Him, and even if we succeed in doing that, even if we live sinlessly and do everything God's law requires, even then, we're not earning any merit badges. We're just living up to

expectations. Of course, the slave who failed to meet his master's expectations was punished, and if we disobey our Master in heaven, we can expect the same thing from Him. We are bondservants of Jesus, with all that implies.

The Bible also compares God's interaction with us to the interaction between a **HUSBAND AND HIS WIFE**. This is another one that might leave us confused. After all, in our society, husband and wife are assumed to have an equal share in running things, and in many families, it's the wife who wears the pants. It shouldn't surprise us that this theoretical equality is accompanied by a skyrocketing divorce rate. Having two leaders only leads to continual conflict.

We see the very different Biblical conception of marriage in Ephesians 5:22-24. Scripturally speaking, the wife is to be subject to the husband in all things, and the church is to be subject to Christ in all things. We don't get to argue with Jesus about how church money gets spent. We don't get to make decisions about what the goals of the church are. All of those things are up to Jesus. He is the bridegroom, and He decides. That's the way our relationship works.

The final human comparison we're going to look at this morning is the one between a **COMMANDER AND HIS SOLDIERS**. Paul uses this one in 2 Timothy 2:3-4. Once again, our modern baggage keeps us from understanding everything that's going on here. Soldiers in the U.S. Army are still required to go to war when the President commands, but for the rest of the time, they aren't deprived of all the things we would consider basic human rights. That's not the way that things were for the Roman soldiers of Jesus' time. Today, most soldiers in our country sign up for a four-year hitch; in the Roman army, a typical term of enlistment was 25 years. During that time, the men of the legions were not allowed to live outside of the barracks or even to get married. They were 100 percent soldiers, all the time.

When Paul tells Timothy to leave behind entanglements like they did, then, it was an uncompromising command. There's no sign in Scripture that God expects anything less from us. It's not enough for us to avoid enlisting with the armies of Satan. If there is anything in our lives that prevents us from being 100 percent soldiers for the Lord, all the time, we need to get rid of it, and we must live only to please Him. As soldiers, either we are on mission, or we aren't.

Non-Human Comparisons.

However, the Bible doesn't speak of God's relationship with us only in terms of relationships between people. It also uses non-human comparisons to illustrate God's expectations. Perhaps most notably, Scripture describes His relation to us as the relation of the **HEAD TO THE BODY**. We see this in Ephesians 1:22-23. For once, this one isn't particularly mysterious to us. Human heads and human bodies haven't changed any in the past two millennia, and the same rules apply. I've read that some dinosaurs supposedly had one brain in their heads and another brain in their hips, but we've only got one brain, it's firmly seated in our skulls, and it calls the shots for the whole body all the time. When I tell my feet to walk, they walk, and when I don't tell them to walk, they don't walk. If my body doesn't obey me, that's a cause for tremendous concern, and I'm likely to seek out a doctor who can restore its natural function.

Just as our bodies are to obey us in all things, so the church is supposed to obey Jesus in all things. We are totally dependent on Him for direction, and we initiate nothing by ourselves. If He commands us to do something, we carry out His command to the fullest extent of our abilities. If He doesn't command us to do something, we don't go off and do it on our own. That's what it means for Him to be our head, and if we do our own thing, He isn't our head at all.

It's equally enlightening to see that Christ's relationship to us is compared to the relationship of a **VINE TO ITS BRANCHES**. This comparison begins in John 15:1-2. The branches off a grapevine exist for only one reason: to bear fruit. The main trunk of the vine gives them nourishment so that they can bear fruit. The vinedresser prunes them so that they will bear as much fruit as possible, and if they still don't produce, he cuts them off and burns them.

This tells us that as Christians, we exist for only one reason: to bear the fruit of good works that God wants to see. The teaching, example, and support of Jesus make it possible for us to bear this fruit. God prunes our lives through His word so that we will bear as richly as possible. After all of that, we must bear the fruit that God wants. If we don't, it doesn't matter how long our branch is. It doesn't matter how pretty our leaves are. We have failed in our spiritual existence, and God is going to cut us off and burn us. We either do what He wants, or we suffer for it.

Finally, the Bible describes the relationship between Jesus and the church as the relationship between a **CORNERSTONE AND A TEMPLE**. This shows up in Ephesians 2:19-21. I've never worked as a stonemason, but this is my understanding of the way things used to go: when the men of Jesus' day built a stone building, they began with a cornerstone. This cornerstone had sides that were perfectly straight and square, and they used the sides of that stone as a guide for every other stone they laid. That way, the entire building would be square with the chief cornerstone. If some of the stones of the building were not aligned with the cornerstone, the building would at best be unsightly and at worst unstable and prone to collapse. However, if the stones were laid correctly, the building would have great strength.

If Jesus is our cornerstone, then that means that we are all to align ourselves with Him. We are to live as He lived and follow the principles that He followed. Our strength as a church depends on the willingness of every Christian here to do this. If we all line up with the cornerstone of Jesus, we will stand against anything and be a temple that glorifies God. If we line up with anything else but Jesus and His word, we are destined for collapse and failure.