

Am I Close to God?

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Human beings are social creatures. Even the introverts among us need some other people to associate with, and this is particularly true with respect to our families. We prize closeness with our blood kin as we do with few others. When we're getting to know a man, and we ask him about his parents, and he replies, "We're not close," that casts a pall over the entire conversation. That's not how things should be.

However, as important as it is for us to be close to our earthly families, closeness with our spiritual families is even more important. This is certainly true of our relationships with other Christians, but it is most true of our relationship with our heavenly Father. If we aren't close to Him, that's not just a sad anecdote. It's a sign of impending spiritual disaster. Let's ask this morning, then, "Am I close to God?"

Jesus, Our Example

On our own, we might come up with all kinds of definitions for what it means to be close to God. A recent poll I read defined "very religious" people as those who attended worship services at least once a week. The world would expect people like that to be close to God. However, neither the world's definition nor our definition have much bearing on the truth. Instead, if we want to accurately define what closeness to God looks like, we must turn to the Lord Jesus, who is our example of closeness.

Jesus' closeness to God began with **OBEDIENCE**. He Himself explains this in John 8:29-30. In this text, Jesus identifies two things that He does. First, He never speaks on His own initiative. Second, He always does the things that please His Father. As a result of these two patterns of behavior, God remains with Him and never leaves Him alone. In earthly terms, this makes perfect sense. As flesh-and-blood parents, we most enjoy spending time with our children when they do the things that please us. In my case, if one of my children is doing things that are particularly displeasing, I may well put them in time-out so I don't have to deal with all the nonsense anymore. I remove the offending child from association with me.

So too it is with God. We don't have to guess what we should do to please Him or make Him happy. He's spelled it out for us in His word. If we obey, we will have a close relationship with Him. On the other hand, if we choose to disobey, we will drive Him right out of our lives. An earthly father may be forced to disown a rebellious son, and we can likewise force God to disown us. He loves us, but He is incapable of overlooking our willful sin. Only if we make a practice of seeking to please Him will He be pleased.

Second, Jesus drew close to God through **PRAYER**. We see one of many instances of this in Mark 1:35. None of us enjoy being separated from our loved ones, but we don't often think of the effect of separation in the life of Christ. We may have spent years or decades with our families, but Jesus had been with God since before the foundation of the world. He sacrificed that closeness to come to earth and dwell among men instead. I'm sure, though, that every single day that Jesus was on earth, He longed to return to heaven, to rejoin His eternal fellowship with God. When we see how devoted to prayer Jesus was, this is why. He longed to be with God, and prayer was as close as He could get.

Obviously, none of us have a relationship with God of that same long standing, but it is still true that our longing for Him should express itself in prayer. On the rare occasions when I'm separated from my wife, I call her every day. It's not all that I want, but it's as close as I can get. So too, prayer shouldn't be all we want from God. We should want to be with Him for eternity. However, it's as close as we can get.

Third, Jesus found closeness with God because His **PRIORITIES** were in the right order. This is never more starkly expressed than in Mark 14:36. Christians generally, and I myself in particular, will often say that Jesus didn't want to go to the cross. There's certainly truth in that, as we can see from His agonized prayer in the garden, but it's not entirely true. As much as Jesus was distressed by the thought of His coming agony, as little as He liked the thought of bearing the sins of mankind on the cross, there was at least one thing that He liked even less, and that was disappointing God. In the final analysis, Jesus wanted to go to the cross, because that was what God wanted Him to do. He cared more about that than about His own life.

We are used to contemplating the sacrifice of Jesus, but this familiar story assumes much greater force when we put ourselves in Jesus' sandals on that night. What if we knew that it was God's will for us to

leave behind our families and our friends to die a public, brutal, shameful death? Would we have the courage to say “Not My will, but Yours be done,” or would we start checking to see if Gethsemane had a back door?

I would like to say that I would do the right thing, but I’m afraid my actions tell a different story. How can I say that I would seek closeness with God even on the cross when I’ve failed to seek that closeness in far less taxing situations? The last time I blew up at a member of my family, my life wasn’t at stake. The only thing I stood to lose was the satisfaction of that temper explosion, yet I failed the test. The last time I lied, I wasn’t going to be crucified if I told the truth, yet I lied anyway. I could go on, but this serves to illustrate that my priorities, and I suspect all of our priorities, aren’t what they should be. By contrast, we show our yearning for God above all else when we are willing to abandon what we want for Him.

Finally, Jesus achieved His closeness with God through His **ENDURANCE**. This is spelled out in Hebrews 12:1-2. Here, we see Jesus finally getting what He wanted all along. He had spent eternity at the Father’s side. He left it to come here to live with us and suffer for us. He had an unimaginably difficult road to walk, yet He perfectly completed His Father’s plan. Once He had done all of that, though, He received the reward that He wanted. He returned to His original closeness with God, and He made it possible for us to have that closeness too. If Jesus had ever faltered, we would be doomed, but He was faithful until death.

Before the Lord’s Supper, then, let’s reflect on all of this together. On the one hand, let’s remember Jesus. God mattered so much to Him that He endured thirty years of lonely exile in order to please Him. When Jesus was here, He did everything He could to seek closeness with God, even death on a cross if necessary. That’s worth remembering. That’s worth honoring.

It’s also worth emulating. During the Lord’s Supper, we are called to examine ourselves with Jesus as our mirror. How do we stack up? How does our search for God compare to His? It’s easy to spot when our hurtful words and actions drive away our loved ones here. It’s a lot harder to spot when our sinful words and actions drive God out of our lives. Let’s reflect on these things as we partake.

Barriers to Closeness

As unpleasant as it is, let’s begin a more detailed examination of the barriers that keep us from being as close to God as we should be. The first of these is **IGNORANCE**. We find a fine example of ignorance of God on display in the words of Pharaoh in Exodus 5:2. For our purposes, we can easily rephrase, “Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?” to “Who is the Lord that I should be close to Him?”

It’s funny how eerily this reflects what we just finished saying about Jesus. When He was on earth, Jesus yearned with all His being to be close to God. Why? Because Jesus knew God better than anybody else, and He knew better than anybody else what it meant to be close to Him. Pharaoh, by contrast, had no interest in obeying God or pleasing Him. Why? Because Pharaoh didn’t know Him.

When I deliver an invitation, I often tell those who have not obeyed the gospel that they don’t know what they’re missing out on. In many cases, they’re missing out precisely because they don’t know. The only life they’ve ever had is empty and godless, so they don’t understand the joy that God will bring them.

Sadly, even for those of us who do know God, the devil does his best to help us forget. In place of the joys offered by a walk with God, he offers us the passing pleasures of sin. He tries to get us to believe that church and Bible study are boring and the entertainments of the world are truly interesting. Bit by bit, he leads us from the only One who will ever satisfy to a million things that never can, until we’re miserable and we don’t even know why. We become as God-ignorant as the man who has never filled a pew in his life.

Second, we fail to seek closeness with God because of **UNBELIEF**. Look at the Hebrews writer’s take on this problem in the Israelites in Hebrews 3:18-19. In our modern religious conversation, we often hear faith and obedience pitted against each other, as though they are opposites. One of the fascinating things about this text is that the Hebrews writer uses unbelief and disobedience as synonyms. They disobeyed God’s instruction to enter the land, so the writer concludes that they must have been unbelieving. And indeed, in every case, disobedience and unbelief walk hand in hand.

A moment ago, we talked about the problems that arise from not knowing what the Bible says. Here, we see the problems that come from knowing what the Bible says, but not accepting it. The litmus test for whether we believe the word or not is quite simple. If we believe it, we’ll obey it. If we don’t, we won’t. The Israelites believed in God, all right. After all, they’d just seen Him at the top of Mt. Sinai. However, even though they believed in Him, they didn’t believe Him. He told them that if they entered the land, they

would conquer it with His help. They heard the spies' terrifying report about the warlike giants of the land of Canaan, and they chose not to believe that God would be able to help them in battle against somebody like that. As a result, God vowed to destroy them, and with two exceptions, they all died in the wilderness.

There are many promises that God makes to us that require us to act on the basis of belief. Do we believe that we have to be baptized in order to be forgiven of our sins? Do we believe that if we put the kingdom first, all these things will be added to us? Do we believe that if we forsake our families for God, God will give us an even better family? Do we believe that in our weaknesses, God's grace is going to be sufficient? Only if we believe God and act accordingly can we hope to find closeness with Him.

One of the places where unbelief will manifest itself is in **LOVING THIS WORLD**. Here, we have the ominous example of Demas in 2 Timothy 4:10. Because Demas loved the present world, he abandoned both physical closeness to Paul and spiritual closeness to God. If we love the world like Demas did, we can be assured that we will meet with the same disaster. Now certainly, it is true that there are many good things in this life. As the book of Ecclesiastes makes clear, there's nothing wrong with enjoying our families, our abilities to provide for ourselves, and even a few nice luxuries every now and again.

However, there's a difference between enjoying the things of this world and loving it. When we love the world, we become convinced that the answer to our search lies not with God in heaven, but here on planet Earth. Maybe it's the pleasures of the world that seem so alluring, so that if we had the looks and the charisma, we'd be delighted to live the hard-partying life of a Hollywood star. Maybe it's money that draws us, that if we just have a large enough house and a fat enough bank account, we'll be happy. Maybe it's just the joy of being in control and getting our way. There are plenty of people who love all of those things. Invariably, though, Satan will use their love of the world to turn their hearts aside from God.

Finally, we can lose our closeness to God because of **EVIL COMPANIONS**. Paul warns against this danger in 1 Corinthians 15:33. As the saying goes, your friends are your destiny. Sure, we're supposed to be a light to the world. However, as we're out there being lights, we need to be aware that the influence works both ways. If we don't have strong relationships at church, but we have all kinds of worldly friends with evil habits, we are nearly certain to end up like them. It's a math issue. No matter how godly we are, there's only one of us, and there's half a dozen of them. That means half a dozen times the influence, and unless there's a counteracting force in our lives somewhere, it will pull us away from God.

This isn't a sharp, immediate process. Instead, it's more of a death by degrees. The more we associate with the ungodly, the more we start to pick up their standards. We stop having such a problem with dirty jokes. We're more OK with smutty movies. Being at services every time the doors are open no longer seems more important, and so on. Over time, though, our relationship with them kills ours with God.

Getting Closer

Of course, failure is not inevitable. If we don't want to drift away from God, there are several things we can do to get closer to Him instead. The first of these is to **REPENT**. James points this out in James 4:8. Back when I was a kid, I spent some time messing with refrigerator magnets. I'm sure you have done this too. If you take two magnets off the refrigerator and try to stick them together, they will repel each other. Try as you might, you can't bring them together. One of them is always going to slide away at the last moment. This is what it's like when we try to establish a relationship with God when we are still in our sins. Those sins will repel Him and prevent us from ever getting close to Him.

This is not a problem that we can solve on our own. As long as we are still tainted by our sins, we are still going to drive God away. The only way to be rid of those sins is to receive forgiveness through the blood of Jesus, and the only way to receive forgiveness is to repent. As James says, we need to cleanse our hands, which is to get the evil actions out of our lives, and purify our hearts, which is to get the evil thoughts out of our heads. Repentance is not a matter of cynically attempting to manipulate the grace of God. We don't repent of our sins today so that we are safe from damnation until we carry out the sins that we have scheduled for tomorrow. Instead, repentance is about hating sin, even the sins that we struggle with continually, and doing our best to root those out of our lives forever.

Second, we need to **READ**. Consider the attentiveness of the Jews to the Law in Nehemiah 8:2-3. Ezra here spends hours reading from the book of the Law, and his audience stands for hours to listen to him attentively. That would be challenging. I suspect that from time to time during Ezra's reading, there would

be a crash as an audience member toppled over! It's not nearly as challenging for us, though, to spend time reading the word ourselves. If we're feeling really decadent, we can even read the Bible lying in bed.

We can read, and we should read. I'm not talking about study. I'm not talking about poring over the Bible verse by verse or attempting to answer some spiritual question. I'm talking about reading: sitting down with the word, not thinking about it too hard, and passively absorbing what the Holy Spirit has to say.

At the end of last year, I recommended an electronically delivered through-the-Bible-in-a-year plan. If you're doing that, and I know that at least some are, I commend you. If, on the other hand, you have already foundered on the instructions for the tabernacle in Exodus, or even on the genealogies of Genesis, I have a suggestion for you. If you go to <http://bibleplan.org/#17>, there you shall find a subscribe-by-email plan for reading the New Testament in a month. The readings are going to be longer; each is about eight chapters, if I recall rightly. However, there are no tabernacle building plans and only two genealogies, both of which belong to Jesus. Plus, it's only a month long, and at the end of the month, you can feel like you've accomplished something, which you actually have. Regardless, though, whether we adopt this reading plan, the one I recommended earlier, or a different one altogether, we need to read if we want to get closer to God.

Third, in our search for closeness to God, we must **DEVOTE OUR HEARTS** to Him. Solomon stresses the importance of this in 1 Kings 8:59-61. If we want God in our lives, our hearts must be entirely devoted to Him. This doesn't mean that we have to take a vow of poverty, become monks, and live in a commune someplace. Instead, it's fine for us to stay ordinary Americans leading ordinary lives. The difference, though, is that we consider those lives through the lens of our relationship with God.

If our hearts belong to God, a job isn't just a job. A job is an opportunity to render heartfelt service to our employers as we would to Jesus Himself. It's a chance to earn the money we need to support our families. It's a means to accumulate the extra funds that we want to contribute to the Lord's work and use to help our needy brother and neighbor. The what is still the same. We're still working our shift at the job site. However, the why is totally different, because to us, even work is about God.

This should be true of every area of our existence: jobs, school, families, friendships, recreation, and certainly religion. We should look to make all of those different spheres about glorifying God. We aren't here to live lives of empty selfishness. We're called to a higher purpose than that, and when God is first, even in the most mundane things we do, we achieve our purpose. Only thus can we draw closer to Him.

Fourth, closeness to God requires that we **WALK BY FAITH**. Look at 2 Corinthians 5:6-8. In many ways, this is an extension of the last point. People in the world spend their lives in pursuit of worldly goals. They see what they want, and then they figure out as best they can how to go get it. This may well require immense sacrifice from them. A man may work 80-hour weeks trying to get his business off the ground. A woman may spend hours in the salon every week and more hours in the gym in pursuit of her ideal of beauty. However, in all of those areas, we get feedback. We know that last month, our business turned a record profit. We're able to look in the mirror and see the results of our hard work.

Following God isn't necessarily like that. Sometimes it is. Sometimes we see our relationships with those around us improve as a result of our increased efforts toward godliness. Sometimes, though, it isn't. Take, for instance, the Christians who buried Stephen after he was stoned to death. They didn't see glowing writing on his forehead that said, "Gone to heaven". He just looked dead. There was no feedback at all. However, if we want to be close to God, we have to be willing to make those sacrifices for Him even when we don't see the feedback. We have to be willing to do what is right without seeing an obvious earthly result. That's what walking by faith, not by sight means, and if we don't walk that walk, we'll never be close to God.

In many ways, the list that I've constructed here is a depressing one. None of us are doing all these things perfectly. Is our search to be close to God, then, doomed to end in failure? Thankfully, there is one other thing we can do that will redeem our failures. We can **TRUST IN JESUS**. Read with me from Hebrews 10:21-22. Ultimately, when we draw near to God, we do not do it by our own righteousness. God wants us to do our best to serve Him, yes. That's part of the terms of our covenant with Him. However, God knew from the beginning that we would invariably fall short, and His plan for us reflects that knowledge. It is not we ourselves whom He expects to complete what is lacking in us. It is Jesus. When we trust in Jesus and in the power of His blood to save us, He does exactly that. We come near to God, then, not because of our own merit, but because we are a redeemed people, made holy to glorify God forever.