

How Do You Relate to God? **Matthew 7:7-11**

We are nearing the end of our series on the Sermon on the Mount. And as we begin this morning I want you to think about how you relate to God. It's something we do automatically when we spend time in prayer, worship, or just thinking about him, but it might not be something we evaluate or consider, we just do it. But are we relating to him rightly? Do we have an accurate view of God and relate to him how he wants us to? The Bible makes it clear that the way we relate to God is very important and he wants it to be in a way that reflects what our relationship with him is actually like. He wants us to experience him for who he truly is, and not in a distorted way.

The passage we're going to look at today is an invitation to experience God in right relationship. I believe it was given to bring correction to a distorted view of God that was held by many in 1st century Galilee.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been correcting all kinds of distorted beliefs and practices and calling his listeners to a new way of life. So far, we've seen six areas in which he was calling them to be different than the people around them:

1. They were to be different in their calling and purpose – not just blending in with everyone else, but being salt and light to the people around them.
2. They were to be different in their righteousness – not just empty outward religious practices, but transformation from the inside out.
3. They were to be different in their motivations – not living for the praise of man, but for the joy of glorifying God.
4. They were to be different in what they were aiming for in life – not focused on laying up treasures on earth, but on laying up treasures in heaven.
5. They were to be different in their lifestyle – not obsessed with just trying to survive, but seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness.
6. And they were to be different in how they treated people – not devaluing people who didn't meet their standard, but showing mercy and compassion.

This morning we are going to see the seventh and final area that Jesus was calling them to be different, and it has to do with how they related to God.

How do you think 1st century Jews related to God? What comes to my mind are things like the temple, the Law of Moses, and the religious traditions of the scribes and Pharisees that we've been looking at throughout this series.

The temple was an intimidating structure in the heart of Jerusalem. (Picture) It was the most prominent building in the city and an impressive sight for people approaching and entering. And in the minds of the Jewish people, its glory was fitting because that's where their God was. Past the ceremonial baths, outer courtyards, sacrificial altars, basins, and inner chambers of the priests was an area called the Holy of Holies, separated from everything and everyone by stone walls and an enormous, thick veil, and that's where God was in all his holiness. No one was allowed to go in there except the High Priest on one day of the year.

Then there was the Law of Moses. (Picture) The Law is what dictated the relationship between Israel and their God and it was complicated and extensive. There were all kinds of regulations that had to be followed to separate the holy from the profane; all kinds of rules that people observed both outside the temple in their daily lives and inside the temple when they came for worship and sacrifice. Everyone was required to follow the law. And in addition to that were the traditions of the fathers which were rules added to the Law by the scribes and Pharisees that were meant keep people even further from breaking it.

How would a worshipper in that context think of God? What would their relationship with him be like? I think they would have thought of him as separate and holy. I think they would have felt reverence and fear. I think they would have related to him through prayers and singing, but their prayers and singing would be going outward and upward toward the heavens in the hope that God would be pleased (or venerated). And if he was, they would receive blessing, but if he wasn't, there would be suffering.

The impression I get is that the way they were relating to God wasn't that much different than how the pagan nations around them related to their gods. They saw him as distant, separate, powerful, dangerous, dwelling in his holy

temple, and they were attempting to appease him by offering sacrifices, worship, and following religious rituals.

I think Jesus saw something wrong with that – that the people were relating to God in a distorted way and in his teaching that we look at today he gives them an invitation to experience him in right relationship. As we look at what he says, I want us to think about how we’re relating to God to see if it matches up with what Jesus is teaching.

Matthew 7:7-11

⁷“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

I think this would have come across as a surprise to the people Jesus was speaking to because he was encouraging and describing a kind of relationship with God that was much different than what they had been experiencing. He was inviting them into a relationship with God that was much more personal, welcoming, and responsive than what they were used to.

He gave them three instructions for how to approach God: “ask, seek, and knock.” This was different than what they normally did, which was probably more like: “obey, worship, and sacrifice.” Jesus was inviting them to ask, seek, and knock and if they did, he said they would receive, find, and be welcomed. That’s much more personal, relational and responsive. Let’s look into each of these a little bit to try to understand what he had in mind.

The Greek word for “ask” means simply “to make a request or petition.” In verses 9-10 he talks about asking for bread and fish, so it’s obvious he had that in mind. But I also think he had in mind what he just taught them in Matthew 6:9-13 about how to pray and what to ask for. He said: “*Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily*

*bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’”*

Here he gives them 6 things they were to ask for. The first three were that God would bring about things here on earth as they already were in heaven: that his name would be hallowed, that his kingdom would come, and that his will would be done. The fourth was that God would provide for their daily needs, which ties in with asking for bread and fish like he mentioned in today’s passage and makes sense because most of them were very poor. The fifth is that God would forgive them for their debts or trespasses as they were also forgiving others. And the sixth is that God would keep them from temptation and deliver them from evil.

These are the things Jesus probably had in mind when he invited them to ask, and when they asked for these kinds of things he said they would receive them. This is praying according to God’s will and asking for things that God wants to give.

The next invitation was for them to seek, and here again I think Jesus probably had in mind something that he had just been teaching. Just before this, in Matthew 6:33 he told them to “*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.*” Rather than living their lives obsessed with trying to get food, drink, and clothing, they were to seek God’s kingdom and righteousness as their highest priority. This would have included seeking to understand the Scriptures and what they revealed about God, along with Jesus’ teachings. The promise Jesus gave them is that if they would seek, they would find. God wouldn’t withhold himself, his kingdom and righteousness from them; he would reveal himself. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Seek and you shall find.

The third invitation was for them to knock. With this one I didn’t see a direct link to something he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, like the other two, but I did find another passage that records a similar teaching, only on that occasion he also told a story related to knocking.

Read Luke 11:5-9.

⁵And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves,’⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; ⁷and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything’? ⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. ⁹And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

What I think Jesus has in mind when he invites us to knock is the idea behind the word “impudence” in this story. I looked up the original word Jesus would have used, and it means “*unembarrassed boldness*.” The one doing the knocking in the story has the kind of relationship with his friend that he isn’t afraid to knock or ask. He knocks because he is confident his friend is going to answer. And it is because of his confidence that his friend gives him what he needs. So when Jesus invites us to knock, he’s conveying the idea of having the same kind of confidence we would have when we ask a close friend for something.

“Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” – these are the things that characterize the kind of relationship God wants to have with his people! For the people Jesus was talking to, I think this would have been pretty eye-opening and I hope this brings a big smile to your face and hope to your heart! God wants our relationship with him to be close, personal, beneficial, fulfilling, and confident.

Now, there is a particular kind of relationship Jesus has in mind that he conveys in our passage that most accurately portrays how God wants you and I to relate to him, and you see it in verses 9-11. It’s the kind of relationship that an Israelite son would have with his father. That kind of relationship may or may not be similar to the kind of relationship you have with your dad, so you need to try to think of this like a first-century Israelite.

When I looked into the dynamics of a father-son relationship during that time I was reminded that Israel was a patriarchal society. That meant the father-son

relationship was crucial for cultural survival. Fathers were expected to teach their sons the Torah, a trade, and survival skills, so they often had a very close bond with them. Sons were expected to respect and obey their fathers, to honor them and inherit the family legacy. So the father-son relationship was marked by deep affection, closeness, provision, protection, loving guidance, and a deep sense of respect, duty and responsibility.

And that's the relationship Jesus has in mind when it comes to how God wants to relate to us. We are his beloved children! And we depend on him to teach us and provide for us. He is our highly respected Father who joyfully gives, reveals, and welcomes us into his presence. We are to be both confident in his love for us as well as obedient and reverent. That's the kind of relationship Jesus experienced with his heavenly Father, and that's the kind of relationship God wants to have with you.

Is that the way that you relate to God? In our culture, I think the tendency is to veer too far one way or another. Some people relate to God like he's their best friend. They feel connected, close, and comfortable, but they treat God almost like he's their peer or equal. They bring him down to their level, but I would say they go too far. They're lacking the respect, honor, and reverence that is fitting when we understand the fullness of who God actually is.

On the other hand, some people relate to God with what I think is too much fear and trepidation. There are a couple of reformed preachers that come to mind that when you listen to their preaching you come away feeling like a worm. There's this heavy weight of how awesome and holy God is and how lowly and wretched we are. And even though there is truth to that, that doesn't mean God wants us to live that way or see ourselves that way with how we relate to him.

Jesus doesn't seem to model or teach either of these perspectives, but one that is balanced. Because of Christ's redemption and our reconciliation with God through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God isn't an untouchable, holy deity high on his throne and separate from us worms and wretches; neither is he our best bud who we just hang out with and shoot the breeze with. He's our heavenly Father who is worthy of all our honor and obedience, and who provides for us and loves us as his children. That's how we relate to

God. That why we can boldly ask him for good things and know we'll receive them, and seek him and his kingdom and righteousness with confidence and know we will find them.

So a practical step that's pretty simple to help you apply this to your life is to consider how you approach God when you pray. How do you address him? I used to start my prayers with "Lord..." and not even think about it, or I would maybe try to picture him on his heavenly throne. But what does "Lord" even mean to a 21st Century American Christian? We don't have Lords in our lives, so I don't have a functioning concept of what Lord even is. The same is true for Master, or King.

How do you address God?

"Holy God..."

"Dear God..."

Some people say "Daddy..."

Several years ago I began starting many of my prayers with "Father..." or "Heavenly Father..." and I tried to think about God the way Jesus is inviting us to think about him today. If you don't think that way about God, Jesus is inviting you to begin coming to him as your heavenly Father and experiencing him in that kind of relationship. He is eager for you to come to him – think of the Father in the Prodigal Son story – running out to meet and embrace his son. Jesus told that story! And it helps us to see what our relationship with God is really like – deep honor, respect, and reverence along with closeness, affection, provision and protection. God wants you to ask; he wants you to seek; he wants you to live your life aware of his presence with you and love for you as you partner with him in the work he is doing here on earth.

Let's pray that he would help us work past any barriers to this and begin to experience him in that kind of relationship today.