

Chapter 10

A New Relationship With God

In the previous chapter we explored some of the implications of biblical history for our lives today. Now I would like to turn more directly to the legal aspects of how a person gets right with God and stays right with God. To me this next concept is life and death to spiritual stability. You see, most types of Christian faith are grounded in the concept of the love and mercy of God, and they are certainly beautiful things. But there is a problem. Deep down inside most human beings have the sense that the mercy of God will some day run out. The mercy of God has it's limits. Not because God's love has it's limits, but there simply comes a point when mercy is no longer the appropriate response to evil. So to preach the mercy of God, as true and right as that is, is not likely to provide a strong foundation for spiritual security.

In my own spiritual tradition we have seen an increased emphasis on God's love in recent years. And that has been needed. Yet it hasn't had the power and effect that people thought it would have. It hasn't resulted in changed lives the way we thought it would. Preaching the love of God to somebody who is emotionally impaired doesn't work. Because

that person says to themselves, "Well, God can love me all He wants, but I don't deserve it.

And I just know the day is coming when He is going to say, 'You miserable wretch, I went to all the trouble of dying for you, I have put up with you all this time, now I've had enough.'"

So presenting the love of God and the mercy of God has its merits, but I have found that people are highly skilled at deflecting the impact of God's love in their minds. I believe we need to go deeper to provide people with spiritual security and stability. And that is to base our relationship with God on the legal characteristics of Scripture. It's not so much the love of God as the justice of God that provides stability.

You see, if you read the Bible carefully there is one thing you will never do and that is question that God's justice is eternal. Will there ever be a day when God ceases to be fair? When God ceases to be just? No. We know about that, in fact that's often the thing about God we fear the most. "One of these days I'm going to get what I really deserve." So we fear the justice of God, yet it is the justice of God that provides our greatest security in salvation. You see, the goal of this book is not simply to feel good about our relationship with God for the next day or two. It is to offer long-term spiritual security. So that people will **know** that they have eternal life. That they have lasting peace with God. Let me explain how this works.

Our greatest security is not in the mercy of God, but in His unfailing justice. Would it be fair for any penal system to execute a person twice for the same murder (assuming that were somehow an option in most cases)? No. Remember what happened when Jesus died on the cross. All the sins of the human race were placed on Him there. When Jesus died on the cross your sins and mine were fully atoned. When Jesus died on the cross, He broke the chain of sin

and dysfunction. If your sins are atoned for in Jesus Christ, if He exhausted the curses of the covenant, if He died as the second Adam, the New Israel, the New Moses, and all that, then that means that your sin has already been atoned for.

Is it possible to be lost in spite of all that God has done? Yes. How? Not because of anything you have done. In the end the issue is not what you have done, it is whether or not you have identified with Christ. Your personal history has already been dealt with at the cross. And if that history is dealt with at Christ, He does not need to deal with it again, unless we choose to take it back again.

Yes, we can reject the mighty act in Jesus Christ, we can say no to the Cross. We can resist the gospel whenever it is preached to us. And if we do so, God allows us the freedom to go our own way. And we will end up making our own atonement in what the Bible calls the second death. Either way, the sin will be cared for. But taking the consequences of our sin, the second death, is not necessary for us, because it has already happened in Christ. It is not up to us whether or not our sins will be atoned for, they will be. Our choice is as to how it will happen.

The universe will come into balance. The legal books will be balanced in the end, one way or the other. But the books would not be balanced if some one who accepts Jesus suffers the ultimate consequence of sin, you see. The security of my salvation is not grounded in anything I do, thank God. If my salvation was grounded in anything I did, I would be in big trouble. I've done a few things that people consider good. But I would never find any security in what I have done. Because the deeper I look into myself, the closer I look at my inner

motives and all, the more I realize that I'm in big trouble, big, big, big trouble if I have to rely on myself.

The security of our relationship with God, thankfully, is grounded in a mighty act of God. How much did Israel do to get out of Egypt? How far could they have gotten without the mighty acts of God? Yes, in the end they had to walk. They needed to accept what God had done and respond with their feet. But it was a mighty act of God that made the Exodus possible.

You can't manufacture a relationship with God. You can't have it no matter how hard you want it. In the end a relationship with God is grounded on something God has done. We have a role to play in response (which we will cover in the last chapter), but our response is never the basis, never the foundation of our relationship with God. That is grounded in what He has done, and He alone. And when our relationship with God grounded in His faithfulness, rather than our own, we have real security.

This is so important at the practical level. People need to know that God won't suddenly turn on them for no reason. The fact of the matter is, if you are in Jesus Christ God can't touch you. Now that's not the nicest way to put it, but it is the way many people have to hear it. Some people are so afraid of God that they need some protection from Him before they can feel secure in their salvation. When your sense of trust and security has been shattered by abandonment and abuse, you are in a position where accepting God can be a very frightening thing!

There is something inside us, a deep sense of justice, that fuels even the arguments on

a basketball court. We need to be saved justly and we need to know that we have been saved justly. If God's going to save me, He's got to have a good reason. Otherwise, I can't trust in Him. And the gospel says, "He had every reason to save you. What happened at the cross was equal to the entire universe." And when we know that our relationship with God is grounded in His mighty act, we can begin to have some assurance of salvation, a sense of security. And that security is the crucial foundation for meaningful change in our lives right now.

If there is no security in salvation there will never be victory over sin. There will never be lasting change in our lives. We will find a way to sabotage the work of God in our lives. You want to know why? It is because every single one of us is searching for value. Everyone of use has a need to feel like somebody, a need to be somebody, a need to be valuable. And if you don't find it in Jesus Christ, you will seek it somewhere else.

Let me show you how this works. Remember Adam and his relationships? Let's go back to that and talk about the search for self worth. When people start looking for value in their lives they often start with their relationship with the earth. Their possessions. They find they "bottom line" in bank accounts, in houses, in cars. I remember a teen-ager named Chester, who grew up in the South Bronx, a run-down section of New York City. I asked Chester what happiness was for him and he said, "Happiness is a BIG, BLACK, CA-DEE-LLAC." He was referring to the kind of car that the cool dudes in the hood, the pimps and the drug dealers, were driving. That's the bottom line approach. He saw life's value in the fancy suits and slick cars of those considered "successful" in that neighborhood. Sometimes the only difference between the men and the boys is the price of their toys!

So you know what the problem is with this approach to self-worth? The problem is that it doesn't last. Things scratch. They rot. They rust. They crash. Or they come out with a better Cadillac or BMW next year. Not only that, if you could have everything you wanted, it wouldn't be worth much to you any more. What could you possibly give Bill Gates for Christmas? There is a level of wealth where nothing is worth much to you anymore. The more you have, the less it's worth. So things are not the answer to our need for worth. And, of course, you know the ultimate "bottom line," you can't take it with you. If we want a self esteem, a self worth that will last a lifetime, we're not going to find it in things.

Not only do we have a relationship with the earth, we also have a relationship with ourselves. We seek value in our performance, in our success. In this case it isn't the trappings of success (possessions) that turn us on, it is the achievement itself that provides worth. We think, "If I could only be like Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods, **then** I would be somebody." Or 'If only I could get a Ph.D., then I'd be somebody. Or maybe if I looked like Brad Pitt or Julia Roberts, then I would be somebody." Or "If only I could be president of the company, then I would be somebody."

But this kind of self-worth doesn't last either. As I write rumors are swirling that Michael Jordan is planning to make a comeback at the age of 38. And all the sportswriters are screaming, "Don't do it, Mike! We want to remember you the way you **were**! The high-flying slam dunks. The never-come-down floaters. It can't be like that anymore." The day comes when the body gets old. When Ph.D's start losing their minds. When beauty queens become grandmas. And where will your self-worth be then?

And even if you are on top of your game right now, you can still have a bad day. I remember the time I had just landed my dream job. I had a beautiful wife (still do), a fat degree, and the students loved my classes. What more could I have wanted? Then I made four errors in a softball game and was depressed for three days afterward. None of the successes cheered me up when I had a bad day. “A SOFTBALL GAME?” you’re saying to yourself, “Get a life, Paulien!” And you are absolutely right. I **do** have a life, but that day I fell into the performance trap, the idea that somehow I could find worth in my performance that would last for a lifetime. But it lasted only until my next, albeit minor, failure. So like the previous approach to self-worth, this one doesn’t last.

So let's look at the third way people seek to find life, and that is through relationships with other people. Like Adam, we all have a relationship with others. And we tend to value ourselves in terms of what other people think of us. If other people think highly of us, we feel like somebody.

Have you ever seen teenagers fall in love for the first time? Suddenly the ugly duckling becomes a beautiful swan. Suddenly the guy that stumbled over his tongue every time he walked out of the house is spouting Shakespeare. And the way they look at each other is beautiful to watch. What is happening? Self worth is energized when other people value you. That's why people like to drop names about celebrities. Because if some celebrity thinks highly of you, then you must **really** be somebody.

I'll never forget when I was fifteen years old, and the United States was having a presidential election. My older brother said, “Barry Goldwater is going to be speaking at the

little airport about a mile from here, let's go hear what he has to say.” For those of you too young to remember, Barry Goldwater ran for president in 1964 and lost to Lyndon Johnson, who had taken over the presidency when John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

My brother parked the car and we approached the airport hanger where this speech was going to take place. Suddenly three girls wearing those red, white and blue Republican hats came running out of the building screaming, “He shook my hand! He shook my hand! I'll never wash it again!” Apparently they gotten to meet the candidate and actually shook his hand. I have thought a lot about those girls since. I wonder what their hands look like today. At any rate, they certainly found a great deal of value in this now largely-forgotten individual.

This source of self-worth, however, is no more stable than the first two. Celebrities, for one thing, are just as messed up as any of us, sometimes worse. And when we find a person who builds us up we enjoy it for a while and then discover that they have to move away, or perhaps they change their minds about us. Our sources of people-value can turn on us, betray us, divorce us and even destroy us (think of the consequences of German devotion to Hitler). And even in the best of relationships, there is never a guarantee that the person you love is going to be alive tomorrow.

If the key to self-worth were found in money, in performance, and in relationships with other people, NBA basketball players would be the happiest people on earth. They have all of the above and then some. Yet professional basketball players have as high an incidence of drug and alcohol addiction as any other profession. If money, success and people are the key to life, how do you explain the antics of a Dennis Rodman? If money and fame were the key to

life, the Kennedys should be the happiest family in the United States. But it is painfully clear that self-worth cannot be reliably found in the things we possess, in what we have done, or in the people we know.

Fortunately, the story doesn't end there. There is hope. There is a way out. And it is this: if we could find a friend with four specific qualities it would make all the difference in the world. First, it would have to be somebody who is genuinely valuable. Somebody who is **really** worth something. Not just another Clinton, Harrison Ford or Magic Johnson. Somebody who is genuinely valuable in their own right. The trouble with human relationships is that they are between flawed people without an inherent reason for self-worth.

Second, it would have to be somebody who knows everything there is to know about you. If they don't know all about you the next secret might finish the relationship. You can only have security in a relationship where there is absolute transparency. You know that the relationship will not be threatened by anything you have done, because they already know everything. They already have enough evidence to make a permanent decision. The problem with human relationships is that they are ever evolving and most people are very good at hiding their true selves

The third quality of the ideal friend is that, even though they know everything there is to know about you, they love you just the way you are. The relationship is not dependent on your performance. And, finally, that friend has to be somebody who never dies, because even the perfect relationship is threatened by death. Does such a friend exist? Or are we just losing ourselves in fantasy here?

What a difference such a friend would make, however. If we could find such a friend, we would have a self worth that never changes. We wouldn't have to suffer the constant ups and downs that afflict us in our regular relationships. If we had such a friend we would be able to have inner peace. We could come to the place where it really wouldn't matter what the other people thought about us. Because no one else's opinion would be as accurate or as meaningful as our ideal friend. A relationship like that would bring a sense of genuine fulfillment in life. A sense that our deepest needs are being met. And the fascinating thing is that when your personal needs are met, it frees you to meet the needs of others without expecting anything in return. You don't have to get paid for what you do. You don't have to perform. You no longer have to "fix the universe" in order to feel like what you do matters.

I have incredibly good news for you. The Bible we have been studying together makes it perfectly clear that such a unique friend exists. His name is Jesus Christ. He possesses all the four qualities that we need. He is worth the entire universe, because He made it all. He is all-knowing, which means He knows everything there is to know about us. In spite of that knowledge, however, the cross demonstrates that He loves each of us just the way we are. We don't have to earn His favor by achievement or success. And, finally, the Bible teaches that the One who died and rose again has broken the chains of death. He will never die again. And He offers a "forever friendship" to every one of us.

There is nothing wrong with money, with achievements, or with having relationships with other people. These three things are the sum and substance of life as we know it on this earth. But in Jesus Christ my self-worth is not dependant on how much I earn. It is not

dependant on how many students choose to take my class. It is not dependant on whether or not my teen-agers turn out just the way I would like. And if my self worth is thoroughly grounded in that upward relationship with God, then I no longer need to worry about what other people think of me. I will be free to serve others and to make a difference in this world. I can love because I am loved. I can forgive because I am forgiven. I can show mercy to the erring and the troubled because I have already received it myself.

It seems to me that this insight about Jesus explains why Christianity has flourished for two thousand years, in spite of many efforts to stamp it out. It explains the martyrs of the Christian faith, why anyone would choose to die rather than give up Jesus. Such a choice only makes sense when we have gained so much from the relationship with Jesus that life would not be worth living without Him.

I believe this insight about Jesus also helps us understand what sin and temptation are all about. There is such a thing as gross evil. But most people are not tempted to do the grossest kinds of evil. Most people are tempted with good things. It is often the good things that occupy our time and distract us from the ultimate thing, which is a relationship with Jesus Christ. We all gather possessions, know some people and do some good things. But when our need for self-worth is drawn to those things away from God, that is temptation.

So the next time you feel a strong need for possessions, performance or people, ask yourself some questions. Will this new toy help me to glorify God? Will it enhance my relationship with God or be a distraction from it? Why do I feel like I need to go back to school and get this degree? Is it really to make a difference in the world for God, or is it because my

deepest needs are not being met in Christ? Why am I finding this member of the opposite sex so attractive? Is this the path to real fulfillment or just another dead end way to meet needs apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ?

Possessions, performance and people are what life is all about. In their proper place the pursuit of these is spiritually and emotionally healthy. But being right with God is the one thing that truly matters. True and lasting self-worth can only be found in a relationship with God. Unless our possessions, our performance and our relationships are grounded in a living relationship with God they will eventually lead to great disappointment or even destruction.

I want to close this section with three Bible texts that speak very clearly to these matters. The first of these is Jer 9:23-24: *“This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,’ declares the LORD.”* True life is not found in riches, strength or wisdom. It is not in possessions or performance, it is in the Lord that we can safely boast.

John 12:41-43: *“Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him. Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.”* Here we find out that many followers of Jesus failed to “come out of the closet” because they feared the loss of human relationships. They placed their relationships with fallible mortals ahead of the ultimate relationship.

Galatians 6:14: *"May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."* In this text, Paul summarizes the whole matter in a sentence. The "world" is all about possessions, performance and people. These are a good and necessary part of our lives. But if they become the source of "boasting," if they become the basis on which we assess our value, we must allow them to be crucified to us in Christ. When we come to Jesus there is a sense in which we lose the whole world, yet there is another sense in which we gain it all and more. When we are grounded in Christ, life becomes truly worth living.

In the last chapter of this book we take a look at the kind of life a person takes up when they have a relationship with God through the mighty act of Jesus Christ. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? How does that change the way we live from day to day? Stay tuned!