

Relationships: God and Me

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You know how some movies have this memorable quality to them; where for some reason they stick with you? There are a lot of movies like that for me; one of them is the movie *Castaway* (PIC). Do you remember that one? The guy stranded on a deserted island presumed to be dead by everyone back home. I don't know what it is about this movie, but I like it a lot. I love the soundtrack; I listen to it when I study or write. And there are themes in this movie that draw me in. One of them is the importance of relationships in our lives. Do you remember the two relationships that were central to Jack's life? The first was Wilson; the blood-stained volleyball that became his best and only friend on the island. We laugh at the idea, but it's believable when you watch the movie, right? You darn-near cry when Wilson floats away the into deep blue ocean. The other relationship was with his fiancée back home. Thousands of miles separated them and they couldn't share a word with each other, but his hope, his dream of being united to her again kept him alive. Jack survived on a deserted island because his relationship with a volleyball sustained him and his relationship with his fiancée kept hope alive.

Our relationships largely define our lives; saying they are important is an understatement - they really are everything. And these relationships exist in somewhat of a matrix; we have this web of interconnectivity about our relationships. While there may be little interaction between them (or, at least from what you know), all of your relationships make you YOU and that makes them all quite interrelated.

Today, we are beginning a new sermon series that will explore a variety of the relationships that make up our lives. Some of these relationships feel more important than others. But all our relationships are important based on what God says. Our neighbor relationships might not seem as important as our family relationships, but when you read your Bibles you discover that God seems to think they are quite important. And if God says they are important you better make them important to you.

Here are the relationships we are going to explore in this series.

- God - We'll do this today and it's obvious that this would be important.
- Family - Our immediate families are quite critical to our daily lives. But it can be confusing sometimes figuring out how we can honor God in our family relationships.
- Church - I want to spend a Sunday talking about how we should regard one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Friends - Notice the capital F in *Friends*. Capital-F Friends are the incredibly close friendships we have with a few people that we trust very deeply with our lives. These kinds of friends are the ones who would do anything for you including telling you the truth when you may not want to hear it.
- Neighbors - What should our neighborly relationships look like? The Bible has a decent amount of information on this.

- Enemies - We do have enemies in life (I'm sad to say). We'll see what God says and ask for his help in relating well with our enemies.

I think a worthy goal to have with this series is to learn truth from God's word about these relationships to better honor God in them (REPEAT).

It's natural and right to start with our relationship with God for a variety of reasons. Certainly, it is our most important relationship - and you do have a relationship with God. In fact, you do have a relationship with everyone I just listed and more. The question isn't whether you have a relationship with your family, church, friends, enemies, whoever; the question is "what kind of relationship do you have?" You have a relationship with God. You do. Is it one of peace or war? Are you his child or are you his enemy? You do have a relationship with your family. Is it strong or is it estranged? Are you a helpful, loving presence to your neighbors, or are you unkind, distant, and avoidant? We can't escape the matrix of relationships; we are interconnected in a web of relationships; it's up to us determine how we will live in these relationships.

God isn't merely one relationship among the many we have. He is the central relationship of our lives. Part of the reason for that is because he defines for us how we are to relate in all the other relationships we have. God tells us how we should relate to family, neighbors, coworkers, spouses, church. I don't get orders from my neighbors about how to relate to my church or family. Nor does my family tell me what my relationship to my enemies should be (though, they might give me some advice). God tells me what every single relationship I have should look like; and that makes him, without question, the most important relationship of all.

There are many ways to relate to God. For example, God is our Creator. That means he made us and everything around us. God being the Creator makes us responsible to him for how we interact and relate to the rest of his creation. God is also a Father. Repeatedly in the Bible this is connected to his great love for you. God is the loving Father some of you never had; or he is like the loving Father some of you did have, but even greater. Being our loving Father he constantly works and serves our good. He's a king. No, He's the King of kings - Lord of the universe. You don't relate to a king like you relate to a pizza delivery boy. Being your king you will pay him homage and respect making sure to give him all honor and praise. As you interact and relate to God, make sure you take in the rich tapestry of relationships we are to have with God. One of the main goals of the scriptures is to reveal to us what God is like so we know how to relate to him.

The book of Romans describes God in a particular way that I want to focus a few moments on, especially as we lean into our time around the Lord's Table this morning. Turn with me to Romans 3. Now, let me tell you what's going on: in the passage we are going to read, Paul lifts high the incredible grace of God found in Jesus. Most of chapters 1, 2, and some of 3, he has detailed our great need for a Savior. He's given detailed account of just how far short we fall from God's standard. But, thankfully, God sends Jesus to die on a cross to make up for our

failures. And Paul implies that all those years prior to Jesus dying on the cross risked God's reputation. That's interesting to think about. Before Jesus died a brutal death on the cross for our sins according to the plan of God, God risked (if you will) being poorly thought of - he risked a bad reputation. How so? He risked his reputation in this way: by not punishing sin when it was committed, it made it seem like God wasn't just. Like God didn't care that evil things were being done.

Throughout the OT God keeps telling his people he's just, he's fair, he can be counted on to always do what's right. But if that's so, why does he tolerate all this evil? Why does it seem he turns a blind eye to all the injustice in the world. The powerful take advantage of the weak. The rich steal from the poor. Neighbor hurts neighbor and, God, you just watch all this stuff happen. You ignore all this bad stuff taking place. I thought you were just and fair and righteous!

To answer that question, Paul teaches in Romans 3 that's why God put Jesus forward as a sacrifice. God doesn't ignore sins. He is paying attention. He does address evil for what it is and works to destroy it and punish it. See, look at Jesus on that cross! Look at the blood that poured from his hands and feet! See how much God hates the evil in the world and how he will not tolerate it in his creation! He put his own son forward as an atoning sacrifice for sins. He was patient all those years. He was willing to endure the evil, he was willing to risk having a bad reputation, to wait for the perfect time to do what needed to be done.

With that in mind, look at our key verse this morning (READ vs. 26). Do you see? Paul is saying, "God did what he did putting Jesus forward as an atoning sacrifice for sins when he did to show that he is the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." What does it mean for God to be both just and justifier? That's an important question; it gets to who God is and how we should relate to him. For God to show himself to be just means that he does do what is right with sins. He does judge sins. He does punish evil. He does work against the evil and wickedness in this world. Just look at the cross. Look at the punishment Jesus endured. See the wrath of God on display against the sins of the world. One look at Jesus and his painful sacrifice proves that God never turns a blind eye to evil. He is just.

But he's more than that. He's also the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus. What does that mean? The justifier is the one who pardons. The justifier is the one who gives mercy. The justifier is the one who looks that the guilty person, the one who commits the evil, and says, "You deserve my wrath and anger, but I'm going to give you grace and forgiveness."

And here's what Paul is saying: "because God put Jesus forward to die on the cross for sins, He's both of those, the just and the justifier, at the exact same time."

It's important for us to hold these two qualities or aspects of God's character in tandem. We don't want to ignore one because we favor the other. As we think about what it means to relate to God, we want to make sure that we're holding both of these things in tension.

So, for example, we want to remember that God is just as we relate to him. The Bible says that should produce a healthy fear of God in our lives. The fear of the Lord is not some antiquated, old-fashioned, and OT idea. Jesus talks about having the fear of God. The NT writers include the fear of God as a proper motivation for us.

We will never relate to God well if we forget that he is just; if we don't fear him. We're going to be more likely to avoid harmful, selfish actions when we fear God. Fearing God will help us keep our priorities straight. Fearing God helps us stay motivated in our pursuit of Christian maturity. We will care about accountability when we remember and relate to a just God.

But we also need to remember that God is merciful, that he is the one who justifies or pardons us because of Jesus. Do you know why this is important? Because if we forget that God is the justifier of those who believe in Jesus, we'll always run away from him out of fear instead of towards him when we need help. We will think he's angry with us when in fact he's compassionate towards us in our weaknesses. God is merciful to his children. God's not looking to hurt us, even though we are sinners; he's looking to show us mercy.

One of the most important things for you to remember, dear brothers and sisters, is that you will always, always, always find a kind, merciful, gracious God waiting for you when you turn to him. I know for me, I'm so scared to turn to God after I sin because I'm afraid that he's angry with me. Jesus died on the cross to prove and convince me that God's not angry with me; instead, he loves me.

Make a point, friends, to relate to God as both the just and the justifier. When you do, you will care about your pursuit of holiness while remembering that God will be merciful with you as you stumble along in that journey.

Key verse: Romans 3:26

Questions for the week

- What are the most important relationships in your life? What makes them important?
- Prov. says fearing God leads to life, yet we most likely think fearing God is bad. Why are we likely to struggle with fearing God?
- Remind yourself often this week why remembering God's mercy is important.