
How Is Your Relationship with God?

by: Ronald L. Dart

Not long ago, someone I respect a great deal remarked, that she did not have a relationship with God. She believed in God. She practiced her faith, but she did not believe she had a relationship with God. In a way that surprised me, but in another way, it did not, because I'm not at all sure what people mean when they speak of a relationship with God. I have known people who said that they had an experience with God. But an experience is not a relationship.

"You talk, I'll listen"

There's a scene in the movie, "Oh God," you may remember it with John Denver and George Burns. John Denver played the part of a grocery store manager who actually meets God. Unfortunately, the writer of the screenplay hadn't, and the God played by George Burns didn't quite jive with the Bible, but never mind, the movie was fun, and it did have a point.

The scene that keeps coming back to mind for me is toward the end of the movie when God is leaving, the job is over, and John, who has come to like God very much and would like to have a relationship with God asked, "Can we talk sometime?" God, in the person of George Burns replies, "You talk, I'll listen."

Do You Have a Relationship with God?

But you know all too well that when God is out of sight, He is out of mind. Believing that He will listen requires an element of faith. We know that some relationships, well, some relationships are closer than others. Just how close do you have to be to call it a relationship? Is the relationship horizontal as between friends? Or is it vertical between master and servant.

Maybe this is where some of us come up short. We believe in God. We even practice our faith. But we have stopped short of a relationship. We are as what someone called 'assenting believers'. We believe, we assent to the idea of Jesus. We assent to the existence of Jesus, but as far as entering a relationship, not quite.

Can You Make A Commitment?

Single women nowadays are familiar enough with men who seem to be utterly unable to make a commitment. They may go together for some time, but the man never manages to pop the question, or the man may consent to what is loosely called a relationship, but still makes nothing more than a temporary commitment, maybe to sharing an apartment, maybe sharing their budget for a while, but a real commitment, a real relationship, not anytime soon.

Maybe this is the case with some of us, we're happy to have dates with God, we will even pray to God, and we will even go to church. But we can't make a commitment. We are not able to bond.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said some things to His disciples that I think should bear some thought. After He had washed their feet on that night, (John 13:12) He said, "Do you know what I've done to you? {13} You call me Master and Lord, and you say well, for so I am."

What Jesus is describing is a committed relationship. Nothing had been done to formalize the relationship. It had simply grown over time. 'Master' is used here in the sense of a teacher. 'Lord' as one who is in authority. They had accepted Him as their rabbi, their master and as their Lord. He was the authority in their lives.

Now this is a well-recognized relationship, teacher and student, master and disciples. An assenting believer has not achieved that kind of relationship. He has not decided that he will arrange, direct and govern his life according to the teachings of Jesus. He does not study the law with Jesus to educate his conscience. He does not ask himself what would Jesus do in that situation? Or, even more important, what did Jesus say I should do in this situation?

Here we speak of a life linked to God in the person of Jesus Christ. It is not mystical. There is nothing mysterious about it. It doesn't involve speaking in tongues or falling on the floor in holy laughter. What it means is, when you face life situations, you respond as one who is related to God. You are His family and you don't want to bring disgrace on the family name. You commit to obedience to God, but you do more than that, you enter a relationship.

Jesus Is Our Friend

Later, on that same night, Jesus said something else that very likely surprised His disciples. He said, "This is my commandment," you will find this in the 15th chapter of John and verse 12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. {13} Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. {14} You are my friends, if you do whatever I command you. {15} Starting now, I'm not going to call you servants, because a servant doesn't know what his Lord is doing. I have called you friends, and from now on, all things that I have heard of my father, I will have made known to you."

Now it's surprising that there is this distinction between kinds of relationships and it is probably even more surprising in a way, that a man can enter into the second aspect of this relationship, that is as a friend with God. One relationship is master and servant. The other is a relationship between friends.

Whatever You Ask in My Name

Now Jesus had more to say about this than I think many people realize. He said in John 14 verse 13, "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it that the Father may be glorified in the Son. {14} If you ask anything in my name, I will do it."

Now I have heard preachers' site this Scripture and I think it is one of the reasons why we end our prayers in 'Jesus' name,' although that's not really what the connection is.

Jesus said, "If you ask anything in my name, I'll do it." Wonderful isn't it? How come He doesn't? Because in fact, He doesn't, not just on the basis of ending your prayer 'in Jesus' name'. Well perhaps some of the reason is in what follows on the heels of this, "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it, {15} If you love me, keep my commandments." UH, well now, this sounds more like a deal, a covenant, than it does like a promise. It describes a relationship of absolute trust. It serves to underline an important point. There is no such thing as a one-sided relationship!

You cannot have a relationship with someone who won't commit to you. Some women, these days, in particular women get this figured out, they cannot have a relationship with a man who will not commit. They should not assume it.

Some people try to make it that way and they end up getting badly hurt. Now listen to this, how many people do you know, that you would trust with this kind of promise, whatever you ask, anything, I'll do it. Frankly, I do not know many.

Did you notice, this has to be understood as part of a two-sided relationship? It is what a relationship is all about, mutual trust, mutual commitment. It is also about being connected.

We Must Stay Connected to Jesus

In the 15th chapter of John, Jesus started out the chapter by saying, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. {2} Every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit, He takes away. Every branch that bears fruit He purges it, that it may bring forth more fruit."

You don't have to know a lot about horticulture, to know what it means to say, that one is a vine and the others are branches. They are connected, and it's a dependent relationship, not only that, but you don't have to know a lot to realize that the pruning of a branch, the trimming away of unnecessary sprigs and what have you, is also essential.

"Now," verse 3, "you are clean through the word that I've spoken to you. {4} Abide in me, and I in you." We have to stay connected. "The branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine," and you're not going to either, "unless you abide in me. {5} I'm the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in me and I in him, all the same brings forth much fruit, for without me, you can do nothing." Our relationship must be connected.

"Now," verse 6, "if a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth like a branch, and will wither, and men will gather them up and cast them in the fire and they are burned, {7} but, if you abide in me and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done to you."

Now I think it's important to understand something else, the relationship that Jesus is describing on this occasion is not one of a groveling underlings. The relationship offered is one where a man stands upright as a friend of God and enables a man to be bold before God.

Jesus Is Our High Priest

The writer of Hebrews wrote in chapter 4 verse 14, "Seeing then we have a great high priest, who is passed into the heavens, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. {15} We don't have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin." We have a High Priest who can be touched. {16} "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace." Let us stand up and come in here, we don't have to grovel. We don't have to crawl on our hands and knees across acres of glass. We can stand up and walk in, "that we can obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." That's what it means to be a friend.

Abraham Was A Friend of God

There is one singular man in the Bible who is called a friend of God. James in his New Testament epistle in chapter 2 verse 23 said, "Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness and he was called the Friend of God." What an accolade. How did this friendship get started? I suppose, like most friendships get started, it started with an invitation, a calling if you will, coupled with a promise. It is almost as though God came along and said, "Let's make a deal."

"The Lord had said to Abram." This is in Genesis chapter 12, "Get out of your country, from your kindred, and from your father's house, unto a land that I will show you." Now here's the deal. {2} "I will make you a great nation. I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." You will be so great, and you will be a blessing to everybody that is "around you, close to you or passes through your property. {3} "I will bless them that bless you, I will curse him that curses you. In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Abraham said, "What do I have to do?" God said, "Get out of your home, leave your country and go where I want you to go."

So, {4} "Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him." And here's the kicker, "Abram was 75 years old when he started on his journey." He was 75 and he sets out to make a new life. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

So, you will understand what this was like, there is an incident in the 18th chapter of Genesis that develops it a little further. "The LORD appeared to Abram in the plains of Mamore. Abraham was sitting in his tent door in the heat of the day. {2} And he looked, and there were three men standing opposite him and when he saw them, he got up and ran to meet them and bowed himself

toward the ground." Now I don't know that at this point he quite understood who they were. This is Middle Eastern hospitality and there was nothing particularly unusual about that.

But then he says, {3} "My Lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, don't go away. {4} Let me get a little water, wash your feet, rest yourselves under the tree. {5} I'll get some food, some bread and we will have a meal and after that you can pass on, because, I think that's why you have come to your servant. And they said, "Go ahead and do what you said."

Now one of these three men, we will see, is God himself, although that is not immediately apparent. The men are on an unpleasant mission, a mission that will finally result in the destruction of Sodom. Why did God stop here? Only one answer presents itself, and it not because it was along the way. Abraham was God's friend. God wanted to visit Abraham. But I think there was more to it than that.

They did then what friends tend to do, they sat down and ate together. {6} "Abraham went in quickly and told Sarah, "Make ready some food, knead the bread, make some unleavened cakes." He ran to the herd, got a calf, came back and set a meal, fit for a king, for all of them, and he stood by them as a good host, {8} while they ate."

As they sat there, {9} "They said to him, "Where's Sarah?" He said, "She's in the tent." {10} And He said, "I will certainly return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah your wife will have a son." "I am going to come back, and when I come back, Sarah is going to have a boy." "Now Sarah was standing back in the tent door behind him. {11} Abraham and Sarah were old." And to use the Scriptural reference, "They were well stricken in age, and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." She had passed menopause.

And {12} "Sarah laughed within herself, saying, "At this age, I'm going to have pleasure, especially considering my lord, that is Abraham, being old also?" She thought that was funny. {13} "The LORD said to Abraham." Notice, now we know who it is talking. Actually, it names him. It says "Yahweh said to Abram. "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, "Will I really have a child when I'm old?" {14} "Is anything too hard for Yahweh? At the time appointed, I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son." {15} Then Sarah was afraid and quite naturally denied saying, "I didn't laugh!" And Yahweh said, "Oh no, you did laugh."

To me this incident is altogether charming. A remark is made, He said "I think this woman needs a baby, and I am going to give her one. I don't care how old she is." She thinks this is funny and she laughs, then she denies it. Then He says, "Oh yes you did laugh." This is the kind of things that goes on back and forth between friends all the time. Now most of us can't cause a woman to have a baby when she's over 70 years old, but God can.

Now with all of this pleasant by-play aside, Genesis 18 verse 16, "The men rose up and looked towards Sodom and Abraham walked along with them to bring them on the way." This is an old custom among friends. We don't sit in our recliner and say to our friends, "We will see you later," and let them find their own way out. We walk with them to the door. We stand outside, while they get into the car and we watch them drive away waving at them. In this case, Abraham walked with them a little way.

Now we come to what was probably the purpose of the stopover in the first place. {17} "The LORD (Yahweh) said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I'm about to do? {18} Abraham's going to become a great and mighty nation. All of the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. {19} And I know him. I know that he will command his children and his household after him. I know that they will keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment that the LORD may bring upon Abraham everything he has promised him."

I think what was going on here is, it was important that Abraham, because he was God's friend, know what was about to happen, know why it was going to happen, know that God did it and that it was not just bad luck for Sodom and Gomorrah. He needed to understand it, so he could tell his children, so he could tell his household, so they could pass it on to generation after generation. This is what God did in this particular circumstance.

A Good Relationship Involves Give and Take

So, God looked at Abraham, Genesis 18 verse 20 and said. "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, because their sin is very grievous, {21} I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it which is come unto me, and if not, I will know." You know, you don't stand far off and render this kind of judgment. You go, and you face it, and it was important to God to know that Abraham knew what He was doing and that Abraham knew it was just. After all, Abraham was His friend. They had a relationship. It was a give-and-take relationship.

The men, {22} "who were with them turned their faces and went on walking towards Sodom, but Abraham lingered before the LORD. {23} Abraham drew nearer and said, "Will you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? {24} What if there are 50 righteous in the city, will you also destroy it and not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous that are there." Now it's not hard to figure what Abraham was thinking. His nephew Lot lived in that town, and he was concerned about him and his wife and his children and his daughters had husbands.

Abraham said, {25} "That is far from you to do after this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that is not like you. And if the righteous should be like the wicked, but that's far from you, shall not the judge of all the earth do, right?" Wow! Now that is a very strong statement for a mortal man to be making to God. "That is not like you, {26} Then the Lord said, "No, no, if I find 50 righteous people in the city, I will spare the whole place for the sake of 50 righteous people."

Well, they talked it all the way down to 10 righteous people. {32} The LORD said, "I will not destroy it if I can find 10 righteous people in Sodom." {33} Then the LORD went His way, Abraham, I think probably thought he had gotten the number far enough down, but he was wrong.

I have sometimes said, that you and I should get on our knees every day and thank God for the 10 righteous people in this country that are keeping the rest of us alive.

A Friend Has Privileges

Being a friend conveys certain privileges. Abraham, who was worried about Lot, presumed to make his case. It was the privilege of a friend to make it. It was an obligation of God, as a friend, to listen to it and respond to it.

Is it possible for modern man to have the kind of relationship with God that Abraham had? To be a friend of God? Sure, it is. Jesus made it so. He called His disciples His friends. He took a step to confirm that they were His friends. He was aware that the answer John Denver got in the movie would be unsatisfying. "You talk, I'll listen." That is a pretty thin relationship.

Jesus Entered into A Covenant with His Friends

So, Jesus entered into covenant with His new friends. While Jesus and His disciples were eating the Last Supper, this is in Mark 14 and verse 22, "Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Here, take, eat, this is my body," {23} Then He took the cup, and gave thanks and offered it to them saying, "Drink from it all of you, {24} This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Now I think most people who are assenting believers in Jesus Christ, who call themselves Christians, understand and believe in the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They understand that He died in our place. They understand that He shed His blood. The hymnals that we sing from are full of songs about the blood. 'There is Power in the Blood,' 'You Are Washed in the Blood,' so we understand the blood of Jesus Christ that is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

What is sometimes forgotten is that it is the 'blood of the covenant.' A covenant is a relationship, a new relationship being established between people who are otherwise not related. Now we really have in our own tradition that we know about, the idea of a blood covenant.

American Indians have a thing called 'blood brotherhood' where let's say two men will cut themselves, let their blood flow together and they will therefore become blood brothers. They then take on all the obligations of kinship. It is a new relationship.

In ancient times, the Semitic peoples had something similar. There they would actually shed a little bit of their blood, put it in a cup, give it to the other fellow, then they would drink one another's blood and thereby become blood brothers. That practice passed away and came more to the sacrificial meal, where they would kill an animal, sacrifice the animal, shed its blood and they would then share the flesh, the meat, of the animal, then they would eat it, thereby creating a covenant or a deal between them.

So here, on the Last Supper, Jesus gives bread to His disciples and said, "Take this and eat it, this is my body. Here's the cup, drink from it all of you, this is my blood of the covenant." Fellows, we are entering into a new relationship.

Our Relationship with God

Now the relationship with God can seem rather distant at times. How does God talk to man? How does He actually communicate with us? We sit here, and we hear God say, "You talk, and

I'll listen." That sounds good up to a point, but sometimes we would really like to hear what God has to say. That brings to mind a parable of Jesus.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is found in Luke chapter 16 starting in verse 19, "There was a certain rich man, clothed in purple and fine linen, who dined sumptuously every day. {20} There was a poor beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate. {21} He desired to eat the crumbs from the rich man's table and the dogs licked his sores." To make a long story short, later on, the rich man is in the flames and in torment, he calls upon Abraham, who sees him there with Lazarus and he says, {27} "Send Lazarus to my brothers lest they come to this terrible place." {29} Abraham said, "No, I don't need to send them Lazarus, they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them." Then he said, {30} "No, no, Father Abraham, if one went to them from the dead they would repent." {31} and Abraham said, "No, if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

This is Jesus telling us if we will not listen to Moses and the prophets, there's hardly any point in having anything else to say. You see, God has already had a lot to say to man. I don't know how a person could possibly have a relationship with someone he doesn't know.

So, having been invited by God, to listen to Him, to Moses and the prophets, why don't we listen to what He has to say through the Scriptures of the Bible, and then tell Him what we have to say through our prayers and meditation.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel like you have a relationship with God?
2. If the answer is yes to the first question, how is your relationship with God?
3. If the answer is no, then why don't you have a relationship with God?
4. How would you explain what a relationship with God really is?
5. Do you see Jesus as your friend?
6. What steps does one need to do to acquire a friendship with Jesus?
7. Have you ever noticed that we have our own obligations to uphold in order for Jesus to uphold his statement, "Whatever you ask in my name..."?

8. What do you think about God's relationship with Abraham?
9. How often do you talk to God?
10. How does God talk to you?