



Desiring God's Presence (Matt 6: 5-15)

Have you ever been in love? I'm sure most of us have and are still in love. One of the features of being in love is desiring their presence - you can't get enough of them. Because you do that when you love them. You may have your moments but if you're in love...

What about our love for God? We sing lots of songs don't we that express our love for God. "Father we love You" "My Jesus I love Thee" and all that. Always beware what you sing. Do you mean it?

Surely if we love somebody we desire their presence. We want to talk to them, share with them. And the God who we sing that we love so much?

So often that isn't so of our relationship with God is it? But that's the nature of the family relationship that the Father, by His grace has brought us into. He loves us and as a result desires our presence, but so often the same isn't true in reverse.

A few weeks ago I started off what turned out to be a series. It was only supposed to be one sermon on Thirst for God. But we seem to have got into delighting in God, Seeking God first and finally waiting for Him and not running on ahead. This really is going to be the final item in the series and I've called it delighting in God's presence.

As God's people we are called into *relationship* with Him. It started because in Christ we have come into relationship with God. I still keep taking you back to the first three chapters of Ephesians which was the first thing I preached on here, because I believe it lays the foundation of our relationship with God. And it's one of grace. It's one of a God who desires relationship with us and expressed His love for us in Christ. Love was action. God loved us, took action and all because He wants his prodigals to return and to enter into relationship with Him as our Father - a family relationship.

Relationship means just that. We are in a family relationship with the eternal God. That's the fact and God wants us to live that reality. But as I suggested, so often that isn't *our* reality.

Sometimes God seems distant doesn't He? Maybe we are going through a difficult time spiritually and we somehow feel with the Psalmist that God has forgotten us (Psalm 77: 7-9). As with him, perhaps we should remember who God is and what He has done for us.

Let me give you another angle from John's gospel:

John 14: 15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever-- 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you."

Just consider it. Here's a promise. *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever-- 17 the Spirit of truth and On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you*

One of the real problems that we have to deal with as believers is to beware the danger of having an unbalanced view of God. Let me run the risk of throwing a bit of theology at you. I hope it doesn't hurt too much. God presents Himself to us in two ways in the Bible. Firstly, He is the *transcendent* God: the creator of the universe. He's powerful and almighty and we are nothing but ants in comparison - inadequate, powerless, sinful. For people without Christ, He's distant, unreachable. That's often a picture people associate with the OT but as we have seen in the series on Bible Characters, that transcendent God desired relationship and communion with people - Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah and so on.

But God reveals Himself to us through Christ as the *immanent* God - the God who is in us. By His Spirit He is God in us. That's the relationship that the God who is transcendent is also immanent. You can't get more intimate and personal as that. \

So you feel distant from God? You feel He has forgotten you? Someone once said "*If you feel distant from God, which one of you moved?*" He's not gone anywhere. He desires relationship.

The problem is, that there are plenty of things that can stop us going back and Jesus uses the picture of the "religious" people of the day to show how not to have a relationship with God and I've used the example of prayer that Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount to show what can go wrong with our relationship with God.

We desire to satisfy ourselves

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Why did these people stand on the street corners to pray? Was it to show their devotion to God? No, it was to show everybody how "spiritual" they were! And as people stood and admired how "spiritual" they were they got their reward in full - the admiration of men. That's what they sought, that's what they got. And God - they neither sought or got recognition.

When we pray, when we come to worship or whatever, or talk to others about our spiritual life: who are we trying to impress? If it's other people then you get what you want. But by implication this doesn't please God - He wants us to spend time with HIM because that's what prayer is all about.

Before you think "this isn't me" let's examine ourselves and our motives carefully. How often have we been at church because it's the done thing? How often have we done things to impress other people? It's the biggest danger for everyone with an "up front" role. Who are we trying to impress - is it God, or is it our audience? If we were to have had a look at a larger chunk of Matthew 6 we would see Jesus testing motives in other context. When we do acts of devotion, are they aimed at the Father or at building us up? To many churches are full of ego-trippers and we are all in danger whether up-front or not. This was the sin of the "hypocrites".

So we love God? if so, we should desire to be in His presence because He desires to commune with us. The normal place for worship for the people of God isn't in a

meeting of the church. After all we only spend a few hours a week doing church things. But we spend more time by ourselves, and the indwelling God, the holy Spirit is always with us. But how much of that time do we spend in that quiet place, worshipping Him, speaking to Him, interceding, requesting, or just enjoying His presence? I'll answer for all of us without exception Too little!

Yet we have a God who desires to commune with us - one to one. That's the relationship that ultimately matters. For weeks now I've been encouraging you to corporate prayer, but frankly, our corporate prayer life of our church may reflect our personal prayer lives. If we don't desire the presence of God at home in the quiet places, we aren't going to desire to commune with Him with others. If fellowship with the Father means little to us, then so is fellowship with God's people.

We have a God who desired to commune with us and bought that at a great price. What about our thirst and desire to commune with Him?

We desire to please a distant God

. 7 And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread. 12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

The second problem Jesus warns against is being like the pagans and babbling - crying out to a distant God. We are called to shout to the Lord, but that's in praise, not babbling away in the hope that somehow God will hear us. As I said earlier, the pagans cry and babble because God is truly distant from them. But so often to Christians we lose our balance and start to see God as transcendent and not immanent. How wise Jesus was by making this comment! One of the biggest problems by the second century was the pollution of the Christian church by Greek thought that made God distant and unreachable.

But He's not distant He's here. As an old preacher once said: *"How far away is our Father? he's only a prayer away!"* As we will find when we explore Galatians from next month onwards, right from the start of the Christian church we have been under an enormous pressure to keep law, to jump hoops and to somehow find favour with a God who our behaviour would suggest is fickle (like a Greek god) and needs to be kept happy.

That's just not true. He's a God who is transcendent, yes, but He's a God who's close and wants to commune with us.

Jesus gives us the right balance in the Lord's Prayer here. He starts with relationship - Our Father - and then we acknowledge the greatness and transcendence of God - He's in heaven and His name is holy and we acknowledge His authority - Your kingdom come etc. But as we go down we see a God who is interested in us and the little things of life - our daily bread. We see He is able to forgive our sins - our personal sins.

He's a God who wants to be involved in the nuts and bolts of our lives and the Lord's prayer recognises that relationship. We often focus on the Lord's Prayer as something to pray, but it's a statement of a relationship between Father and children. He's a God who wants to communicate with us even though He's great and powerful, He wants to provide for us, to forgive us from sin and keep us safe. That isn't just what we should ask for, that is our expectation of what THE Father should be to us. That's what He wants our expectation to be.

Do we ever think of it that way? We should because when we do, we realise that His presence is something that is to be desired. He wants us - how much do we desire Him?

🕯 We desire to preserve our honour

12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. 14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

The last barrier in our relationship with God is ourselves. We find forgiveness from our sins because our Father is a God who is eager to forgive us because He can. So why does sin get in the way of our relationship with God? Because we let it. Jesus focuses here on unforgiveness. How can the Father forgive you - how can He come into right relationship with you when you are not in right relationship with others? Sin is a barrier to relationship and I'm going to focus on it this evening when we deal with David and Bathsheba so I'll leave that one for now.

I'm aware that all this is challenging stuff. In Living Water the other week we had a challenging speaker, Jackie Pullinger from Hong Kong. She gives the message straight and challenging. Many responded but some people found her message overpowering. One person said "'When I look at my life, it makes me feel inadequate".

Maybe you've heard this morning how God wants us to spend time in His presence and you know how much you spend and maybe you know it's not enough and you feel inadequate. Maybe you know you'd like to spend more time in personal prayer and even corporate prayer but you just can't quite make it - and you feel inadequate.

Maybe you've fallen for the sins of some of the people I've mentioned this morning - you've sought to impress people and not God, you've tried works to somehow please God, you have unforgiveness and sin in your life.

The whole purpose of what I've said this morning is not to make you feel inadequate, but to give you a message of grace: we have a God who has desired us. He loves us, he chose us, through Christ He redeemed us and by His Spirit He lives in us and desires to be a Father - to have relationship: to commune with us. That's me and that's you. He desires our company - and so often we spurn that desire - but He still wants to be a Father to us. Will you let Him? He's only a prayer away.

Let's pray.

We don't have to do any great feat to contact Him: just say "Father" and He's there. We don't need any special training to motivate us: the Holy Spirit is within us - just ask that He will prompt that desire within you this morning to desire God's presence in your life.

Maybe you've got unforgiveness and other sin in your life. He gives you strength to deal with it and move on into forgiveness and a deeper relationship with Him. All you need is the desire to deal with it and by His Spirit you can.

Father

As we come before you this morning.

***We know that so often our personal and corporate prayer life has been inadequate.
We know this has been our failing.
We ask your forgiveness this morning.***

***We pray that by the power of the Spirit that you will place that desire in our hearts to
seek your presence more and more;
To be excited by the fact that as a Father you desire a relationship with us.
May we be excited and desire your presence.***

***We pray that this morning that You will remove the barriers that we have to a deeper
relationship with You.
Give us strength by the power of Your Spirit to overcome unforgiveness and other sin
in our lives and come into a deeper relationship with You.***

***Thank you Father that you have done so much in Jesus, through the shedding of His
blood for us, to bring us back into relationship with You. We give you all the glory this
morning.***

In Jesus name

Amen

