

The Wired Word

Student Handout

I Don't Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus

Sunday, October 25, 2020 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Hybrid Class

In Person: First Floor Social Hall (Mask & Social Distancing Required)

or

Zoom: Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

This installment of *The Wired Word* was inspired by a recent article by a Christian who admits that her relationship with God has never been "personal" in the sense of seeing God the Father or Jesus the Son as a close companion. Her account gives us an opportunity to consider what we mean when (or if) we say things like "I have a personal relationship with God" or "Jesus is my copilot." So that will be the topic of this week's discussion.

During this time of social distancing to control the spread of the virus, *The Wired Word* is including in the TWW student version the full lesson, with all the biblical commentary and additional discussion suggestions normally available only in the teacher's version.

How To Participate:

We are offering The Wired Word as a hybrid class. You can participate in person or via Zoom. The Wired Word will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. For those meeting in person, we will be in the old social hall of the church building (located on the first floor). If participating in person, please come with a mask and follow the COVID-19 Safety Guidelines for Sunday School: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/news.html#COVID19Precautions>.

You can also participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone by calling: 1-301-715-8592 US (Germantown, PA)

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220

Passcode: 195152

To subscribe or unsubscribe to the weekly mailing of The Wired Word student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



'I Don't Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus,' Christian Writer Says

The Wired Word for the Week of October 25, 2020

In the News

Debie Thomas is director of children's and family ministries at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California, and so when she wrote recently in a national Christian magazine that she doesn't have a "personal relationship with Jesus," it may have given some people pause.

But it's important to hear her explanation before dismissing her as someone who hasn't responded to the call of God. In her essay, she goes on to say that she feels a connection with God or Jesus through the community of the church. Thus, she's not saying she doesn't have a relationship with Jesus *at all*, but that she doesn't experience it as something one-on-one, personal or intimate.

Thomas tells that when growing up in the church, "a personal relationship with God" was the primary way Christians she knew described their faith. "The idea was everywhere in our Sunday morning music," Thomas says, "which often sounded like love songs. It was ubiquitous in sermons and in the favorite spiritual expressions

of my fellow churchgoers: 'Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.' 'Jesus is my best friend.' 'God walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own.'"

Thomas also says that eventually she was "stunned" when she learned that the phrase "personal relationship" does not come from the Bible.

"Nor does the Bible ever instruct me to 'invite Jesus into my heart as my personal Savior,'" Thomas adds.

But before learning any of that, Thomas says, she spent many years "feeling spiritually deficient" because she didn't -- and still doesn't -- have a personal relationship with God.

"I've certainly hungered for the kind of intimacy I sang about so earnestly as a child and young adult," Thomas says. "But to claim that I experience a one-on-one intimacy with God that is truly personal would be a lie. God doesn't walk with me and talk with me and tell me I am God's own. I don't feel God's arms holding me close. Jesus is not my best friend."

Still, Thomas experiences God's presence and power in the shared worship, liturgy, song and prayer of the believing people of the church community. "My spiritual bedrock is not a personal relationship with God; it's the mystery of the incarnation, fleshed out in embodied community," she says. "It's in the faces, voices, hands, and feet of the body of Christ that I experience Christ. It's in the laughter of other people that I hear God's joy. It's in the tears of other people that I see God's broken heart. It's in messy human connection that God's redeeming love streams into my life."

Despite her own experience, however, Thomas does not deny the claims of Christians who say they "enjoy deep, one-on-one intimacy with their Creator." And she acknowledges that even now, with all she has since learned, "it still feels scandalous to admit that I don't have a personal relationship with God."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[I Don't Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus. *The Christian Century*](#)
[Christianity Is Not About a Personal Relationship with Jesus. 1517](#)
[Answers. *Billy Graham Evangelistic Association*](#)

Applying the News Story

Debie Thomas is correct that the phrase "personal relationship" does not appear in the Bible and that the scriptures never instruct us to "invite Jesus into our heart as our personal Savior." There are, nonetheless, Bible passages that can be read as pointing in the direction of a personal connection (see our "Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope" section below).

Even with such Bible verses before us, however, we can ask whether the idea of a personal relationship with God or Jesus was intended to be understood literally or as something more like a metaphor -- or perhaps even some of both. It's certainly true that a personal God -- which is a clear biblical teaching -- is much easier to relate to than some impersonal "Force" that governs the universe. But it's also fair to ask whether given the vast diversity of human beings, it's even reasonable to expect that everyone can or even should relate to God in the same way. Or maybe we should reverse this: Given the vast diversity of human beings created by God, is it reasonable to expect that *he* should relate to each one in exactly the same way?

So an exploration of what is meant by "a personal relationship with God/Jesus" will be our endeavor in this lesson.

The Big Questions

1. Does God relate to everybody the same way? Does he expect everybody to relate to him in a personal, intimate way? Explain your answer.
2. Is knowing God on a personal level more a metaphor or an actual experience? Can it be both? Can it vary from person to person? Explain your thinking.

3. Is Jesus your buddy? If your answer is "Yes," explain what you mean. If your answer is "No," explain why not. Is it possible that picturing Jesus as a close friend diminishes who he really is? How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?
4. What is the difference between *knowing about* God and *knowing* him? Might the latter be described as a personal relationship? Why or why not?
5. Is it possible that a person who experiences Christ in the laughter and tears of other people actually has a *more* intimate connection with God than someone who does not experience Christ that way?
6. From the "In the News" section above, read again the paragraph beginning "Still, Thomas experiences God's presence . . .," and say how nearly Thomas' words describe your own experience. In terms of being a follower of Jesus, is it *necessary* that your experience of God be personal and intimate? Why or why not?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Hosea 2:19-20

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD. (For context, read 2:14-23.)

The Old Testament book of Hosea is a good place to start exploring the idea of a personal relationship with God, because it tells of God instructing the prophet Hosea to take "a wife of whoredom" (1:2), which possibly meant that he was to wed a woman who was already a prostitute. It may have meant, however, that whomever he married would eventually seek illicit affairs. In any event, this woman, Gomer (1:3), subsequently bore three children in Hosea's home, but the way those births are described leaves it an open question whether Hosea was the biological father, especially with the second and third children.

Eventually, Gomer ran off in pursuit of other lovers, but her fortunes must have gone downhill, for she later showed up on the slave block. Hosea discovered her there, paid the money necessary to redeem her, and took her again into his home, demanding faithfulness from her.

That God told Hosea to love an adulteress suggests that God wanted the prophet to understand how God felt about Israel's faithlessness. Just as Hosea was the jilted lover of Gomer, so God was the jilted lover of Israel. Just as Hosea's heart must have ached, so too God's heart ached.

Subsequently, Hosea used what he had learned from his personal agony to call Israel to repentance. The verses above quote not Hosea, but God speaking to Israel, describing the nation as a people who were previously consorting with other lovers (idols) but who are now restored in faithfulness as a "wife" to God, the "husband."

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul adapted the God-as-husband metaphor so that the "wife" was not Israel but the church (see Ephesians 5:25-27). Obviously, with both Hosea and Paul using marriage as a metaphor for the divine-human bond, it's not a big step to think of one's connection to God as a personal relationship -- though in both cases, the biblical writers did not picture a solo human in the wife role, but rather a group: Israel in the case of Hosea and the church in the case of Paul.

Questions: Does the marriage-to-God metaphor work for you? Why or why not? Have you ever felt that God was "romancing" you?

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (For context, read 3:19--4:7.)

In Galatians, Paul uses a different metaphor to describe the relationship that God wants with us: one in which God is the Father and we are his adopted children. Paul wrote this as part of a larger discussion in which he was explaining how followers of Jesus who were not Jewish came to be included in (i.e., "adopted" into) God's family where the "natural" children were the Jews.

Obviously, while different from marriage, a father-child relationship is normally a personal, one-on-one connection, and that is especially true with God as Father, a point Paul makes by saying that the "Spirit of his Son" helps us cry "Abba!" which indicates a deep personal relationship with a father or father figure." Some Bible scholars believe that the Hebrew word "Abba" is basically the equivalent of "Dad" -- not a childish "Daddy," but an indication of an adult relationship. In other words, "father" is biological or positional language while "Abba" is heart language.

Questions: If you address God as "Father," what do you have in mind? What other terms or titles do you sometimes use in prayer to God, and what do those terms suggest about the nature of your connection to God?

John 14:21

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. (For context, read 14:15-24.)

Jesus made this statement to his disciples shortly before his death. Notice the intimacy implied in the words "loved by my Father" and "reveal myself."

Questions: What standard is Jesus stating here by which to determine one's love for him? Does one have to have a "personal" relationship to abide by that standard? Why or why not?

John 20:28-29

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (For context, read 20:24-29.)

This exchange occurred between the disciple Thomas and Jesus during one of the latter's post-resurrection appearances to his followers. Note that Jesus says that those who would come to believe in him without benefit of seeing him are "blessed." This would seem to suggest that the kind of relationship which is limited because there are no face-to-face opportunities is still enough for one to be a follower of Jesus.

Questions: Do you think Jesus was scolding Thomas in this encounter? Why or why not? If you could ask Jesus one question about your own connection (or lack thereof) with him, what would it be?

For Further Discussion

1. One TWW team member asserts that the line from the hymn "In the Garden," that says "And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own," sounds overly sentimental and far from the experience of many Christians. What is your reaction to that line? Why?

Another team member noted that the line that follows this one is the one many people take even more exception to: "And the joys we share as we tarry there none other has ever known." Really? The hymnwriter is claiming that his relationship with Jesus is so unique that no one else could possibly understand it or experience something similar. What is your reaction to that line? Why?

2. Respond to this: In his book *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud*, author Philip Yancey tells about holing up in a cabin in Colorado to read the Bible cover to cover. Snow began to fall as he started Genesis, and it was still coming down when he got to Revelation -- 72 inches of new powder in all.

In somewhat the way Yancey was buried in snow, he was also immersed in scripture. One impression he gained from reading the Bible in continuity is that God as portrayed on those pages is different from God as we commonly imagine him to be. Rather than meeting an impassive God marked primarily by great power and

omniscience, Yancey encountered a God of deep emotions, who feels joy, frustration, pain and anger, a God who allows the behavior of his children to affect him.

In particular, reading the prophets helped Yancey see the Bible as the story of God the Jilted Lover, one who deeply loves the people he has made and yearns to be loved by them in return. Even though God finds himself cuckolded by his created ones again and again, God goes to great lengths to woo humankind back to him. In that light, even the judgments that God eventually permitted to fall upon his people were not retaliations but attempts to clear the way to romance humankind afresh.

The image of God as a jilted lover should change how we picture our own behavior. When we sin, we are not merely violating certain divine rules. Rather we are breaking the heart of one who loves us as a groom loves his bride. God gladly welcomes our vows of faithfulness, only to suffer heartbreak as we run off with some other lover. Still, God wants us back ...

3. Discuss this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "[Early in the Bible,] God established a personal relationship with Abraham in which Abraham felt empowered to challenge and argue with God and even doubt him, such as that whole thing with Eliezer of Damascus (Genesis 15:1-6), but every now and then the awe bursts in, like the re-covenant ritual with the torch (Genesis 15:7-21). Ditto Moses though awe and distance is displayed on Mount Sinai and in the partial revelation with the sheltering behind the rock (Exodus 33:12-23). Much of the time the relationship is lived through festivals when history is claimed through eating and joy in Passover, Purim, The Festival of Weeks and Booths. We experience a personal God through personal relationships with God's people. On the other hand Uzzah died getting too close to the ark (2 Samuel 6:1-11), which was the physical conduit through which the relationship was mediated.

Responding to the News

This is a good time to think about what you understand "personal relationship with God or Jesus" to mean and to consider whether you hear any call from God in your understanding of the phrase.

Prayer

O God, let my relationship with you be what you intend for me as I seek to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. In his name. Amen.