

# “How to Meet God”

## Bible 101

Nov. 18, 2007

Scripture Reading: **John 5:36-40**

<sup>36</sup>But I have a greater witness than John—my teachings and my miracles. They have been assigned to me by the Father, and they testify that the Father has sent me. <sup>37</sup>And the Father himself has also testified about me. You have never heard his voice or seen him face to face, <sup>38</sup>and you do not have his message in your hearts, because you do not believe me—the one he sent to you.

<sup>39</sup>“You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me!” <sup>40</sup>Yet you refuse to come to me so that I can give you this eternal life.

Over the past couple of weeks we've been talking a lot about the Bible. We've talked about Bible translations, the different types of Bibles, how to perceive God's words and how to restore your heart. Next week, during our Sunday School time, we are going to hold a question and answer session to go over any questions you may have about the Bible and your relationship to God's word. In this weeks bulletin you'll find a three by five card. If you have a question or comment, please write it down on the card and place it in the basket at the rear of the church as you leave. We'll answer your questions next week.

To get us started this morning, turn to the person next to you and just take a guess at this: How many languages do you think the Bible has been translated into? Just take a guess. Correct answer? Best estimate from the Wycliffe Organization: 2,656 languages.

There's never been a book like this one. Every year, 65,000,000 copies of the Bible are bought in the U.S. or given away by organizations like the Gideons. Nothing else is a close second. The average home has three of these (Bibles) in our country. It's a strange thing. A lot of people cheer the Bible, buy the Bible, give the Bible and own the Bible. They just don't actually *read* the Bible.

According to George Gallup,

- Two-thirds of the people surveyed in this country could not name who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.
- Fewer than half of all Americans could name the first book in the Bible—the book of *Genesis*.
- Eighty percent of Americans claim to believe in the Ten Commandments. The vast majority of us cannot name four of them!
- Eighty percent of “Born Again Christians”—not the general public, just committed believers—believe the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible. It is not, in fact, in the Bible. Ben Franklin said that.
- Twelve percent of people surveyed thought Noah's wife was Joan of Arc.
- Thirty percent of those surveyed believed that the Epistles are the wives of the Apostles ... Actually; I just made that one up. That's not really true, but the others are true.

I want to start this message by asking a question. The question is this: What is God's greatest desire? If someone were to ask you, What does God want most of all? What would you say?

It struck me that the story of the Bible isn't primarily about the desire of people to be with God; it's the desire of God to be with people. It's really that simple. The reason God created people is so that He could be with them.

As hard as it is to believe, the reason that you and I exist and that we walk around and have a body and a mind is because God wants to be with us.

The central promise of the Bible is not "I will forgive you," although the promise is there. It is not the promise of life after death, although we are offered that as well. The most frequent promise in the Bible is "I will be with you."

The Bible says that in the Garden of Eden God would come and walk in the cool of the day with the man and woman that He had made. (Genesis 3:8) When sin came, that meant that we were separated from God, but we weren't designed for separation. From that moment on, it's like God is haunted by this one desire:

I just want to be with them. I love those people I made so much that I just want to be with them.

To make it concrete for us, He has Israel construct a tent. It's called the "Tent of Meeting," or the "Tabernacle." God says,

***So I will consecrate the tent of meeting...Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God, and they will know I brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them.*** (Exodus 29: 44-46)

It's as if God is saying,

Maybe when they see that tent...maybe they will think about how much I want to be with them. Maybe some of them will want to be with me.

But God is still not satisfied. It's not enough for Him. He gets an idea. One day God says,

I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to go down, and I'm going to be with them.

A baby is born in Bethlehem, and He is given, among others, the name "Emmanuel" which means "God with us." John says,

***The Word became flesh and lived among us for a while and we beheld his glory.*** (John 1:14)

Then it says that Jesus appointed twelve of the Israelites to be Apostles so that they might be with Him. He wants to be with people. It wasn't just for those twelve. It turns out that this whole program of Israel and Jesus and the Disciples was part of God's plan to be with anyone who will be with Him.

Jesus' final words to His friends as He was leaving the earth were,

***I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth.*** (Matthew 28:20)

Wherever you go...whatever you do.

This theme runs throughout the Bible, all the way from Genesis to Revelation.

But when we have not met God or brought Him into our lives; there is a sense of something missing, a sense of loneliness. None of us ever wants to admit to being lonely, because it sounds like such a loser thing to be lonely—sounds so junior high.

Remember junior high? You wanted to know if somebody liked you, so you'd send them a little note,

Do you like me? Check Yes, No or Maybe.

Remember that? Sometimes you'd get back – WHO? The truth is that all of us carry this loneliness inside—everybody in this room. The reason there is this deep secret loneliness inside of every one of us is that we have been separated from Him.

So how do we meet God? Or how do we re-establish a relationship with Him?

All through this series we have been alluding to the answer. As we face the truth of the Word we see Jesus. It is impossible to have a true relationship with God, it's impossible to have a relationship with Jesus, without digging into God's Word. We can't know God without the Scriptures. Ignorance of the Scriptures is an ignorance of Christ.

To fully understand today's scripture reading we have to back up just a bit in the Gospel of John. John's Gospel places Jesus on trial not simply at the end of his life (as in the Synoptics), but rather continually. In our reading today, the Pharisees have Jesus on trail for healing a sick man at the pool on the Sabbath Day. He's aggravated them even more by claiming equality with God.

The Pharisees, the teachers of the law, had developed laws for every situation and Jesus was violating their interpretation of the Sabbath rules. The Pharisees counted 613 laws from the Old Testament that the people were to do in order to live lives that were pleasing to God. They had legalized their religion. The Pharisees had *maximized* the rules and regulations and *minimized* the love, mercy and justice that God wanted from them. By the time Christ came it had produced a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of righteousness.

Jesus is doing battle with opponents who resent his talk of intense unity with God, of His being involved in the things of eternity...of his identity as Messiah. And Jesus responds by talking about various things that witness to his identity as THE one sent from God. Please open your pew Bibles to page 817.

***<sup>36</sup>But I have a greater witness than John—my teachings and my miracles. They have been assigned to me by the Father, and they testify that the Father has sent me. <sup>37</sup>And the Father himself has also testified about me. You have never heard his voice or seen him face to face, <sup>38</sup>and you do not have his message in your hearts, because you do not believe me—the one he sent to you.***

***<sup>39</sup>You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! <sup>40</sup>Yet you refuse to come to me so that I can give you this eternal life. (John 5: 36-40)***

As Jesus debates those who oppose Him, he points to the scripture (the Old Testament) and says, "You want evidence that my claims are true, of my messiahship, of my intimate connection to God? **READ THE SCRIPTURES, SEARCH THEM, THEY TESTIFY ON MY BEHALF!**" First-century Judaism was zealous in its study of the Scriptures. Yet, Jesus says, the teachers of the law do not see the central message about Jesus and how he fulfills the Scripture. It's like a Vikings receiver all alone in the end zone with his hands flailing in the air and nobody sees him — because the Vikings just aren't used to looking in the end zone..

The Scriptures Jesus was talking about were the Old Testament, of course, but in the New Testament it becomes even clearer: The Scriptures point us to Jesus, and in doing so

become a channel of God's grace. The Bible is not just words about God, but the words of apostles and prophets, all witnessing to God's Revelation FOR US: Jesus Christ.

The Bible is many things—letters, parables, sermons, poems, histories, biographies, liturgies, songs...But behind all these multiple literary styles, the backdrop of everything is the greatest love story ever told.

The Bible is a love letter from God, not a question book or an answer book, not a systematic theology or a scientific textbook. The main subject of the Bible is God's relationship with what God loves most —God's creation and creatures. The Scriptures are the story of God's relationship with us—the covenant of relationships established between the Creator and those God created. The source of our identity as Christians is a love story, or more accurately, a collection of love stories simple enough to be read by children, yet complex enough to elude total human comprehension.

When my wife and I started dating in college, the beginning of our relationship was kind of head oriented – we were just trying to get to know each other; what's your name, where do you live, what do you like, what don't you like, what's your phone number. And as our relationship deepened, we started falling in love with each other. Our feelings for each other were moving from the head to the heart. We wanted to be with each other all the time. We did not feel complete unless we were together. Every waking moment we were on each others mind. We got to know each other at a much deeper level. We started to build trust and confidence in each other. We became committed to each other. We found there was some mystery in the other person, new things we were learning about each other every day. We found that we didn't agree on all things. We found that she had some quirks and I had some quirks. But I married her anyway. Now, even after all the years we've been together, we're still surprising each other; there's still a sense mystery and wonder that show up. Just a little word or gesture that isn't expected, but adds to our relationship.

It's the same way when we start reading the Bible. First we try to get an overall sense of what God is trying to tell us through His Word. We start to know Bible facts, Bible history, and Bible stories. Without it, we cannot understand the Bible. This is head knowledge; we are reading the Bible to affect our mind and our intellect.

But factual knowledge is not enough. We need to start listening to what the Bible is telling us, to become intimate with God's word. To understand that meeting God through the Bible is a spiritual undertaking with spiritual purposes. To let His word go from our head to our heart; which allows us to meet God in a life-changing encounter. When that happens, and it will, the Bible all of a sudden comes alive, it speaks directly to us. Words and thoughts just start jumping off the pages into our hearts. The Bible suddenly becomes a book of wonders speaking to us with words of wonder. When we read the scriptures, God will speak to us through them. We bring our faith, our hearts, our minds and say, "Lord, will you speak to me today through this word of yours?"

So how do we go about meeting God:

- First – be willing to look at the world from God's point of view, allow repentance and transformation in your life through Christ
- Second - make a commitment; be devoted on a regular basis to exposing your mind and heart to Scripture
- Third - look to see what the text is saying, what is God trying to tell you
- Fourth - how does God's word actually apply to my life
- Fifth - pray about it; ask for guidance, thank God for being with you

How many of you have lost your keys before? When our kids were younger we got ready to go on a vacation one year. The car was packed, all the kids were in the car and we were ready to go. Went to start the car ... and no keys. Looked all over the place, couldn't find the

keys. Kids are starting to get cranky because they wanted to get going. Those keys were the most important thing in my life at that point. We finally found them, kids had a victory dance and we got going.

There's a lost and found department in the Bible. Let's turn in the pew Bibles to Luke Chapter 15 starting on page 800. We'll do just a real short Bible study. These are the parables of the lost and found. There are three main themes in each of these parables; something is lost, it's found and there is rejoicing.

<sup>1</sup>Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.  
<sup>2</sup>This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such despicable people—even eating with them!

Well, here we go again, Jesus is talking to sinners and the Pharisees are all upset. Nobody should be talking with *these* kinds of people, no less eating with them. Jesus now turns to the crowd and draws them into his illustration.

<sup>3</sup>So Jesus used this illustration: <sup>4</sup>“If you had one hundred sheep, and one of them strayed away and was lost in the wilderness, wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine others to go and search for the lost one **until** you found it?

I've read this passage at least a dozen times before and all of a sudden a word popped out of the text and it brought a whole new meaning to the story. Before that it was lost, found, party – ok, that's nice. But then the word **UNTIL** popped out of the page. The item lost is of such value that it will be searched for **UNTIL** it is found; whether it's a second, a minute, an hour, a day, a month, a year or however long it takes.

<sup>5</sup>And then you would joyfully carry it home on your shoulders. <sup>6</sup>When you arrived, you would call together your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you because your lost sheep was found. <sup>7</sup>In the same way, heaven will be happier over one lost sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!

And just in case the Pharisees didn't get the point of the first parable, He gives them another example.

<sup>8</sup>“Or suppose a woman has ten valuable silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and look in every corner of the house and sweep every nook and cranny **until** (there's that word again) she finds it? <sup>9</sup>And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her because she has found her lost coin. <sup>10</sup>In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.”

In both of these parables we're not told much about what was lost other than it had great value. We don't even know why or how it got lost, only that it is lost. We don't even know much about the other sheep or the other coins. What we do know is that after a great effort the lost items were found and the woman and the Shepard are so happy they have a party to celebrate.

Jesus wraps up each of these parables by saying there will be a party in heaven when even one sinner repents, no matter how long it takes - **UNTIL**. And that party will be to celebrate just the type of people the religious leaders wanted no part of.

I think Jesus is internally chuckling to Himself. He's got the attention of everyone, especially the religious leaders; their leaning over waiting to see what He's going to say next. His set-up is complete.

<sup>11</sup>To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons.  
<sup>12</sup>The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting **until** (there's that word again but this time – I want it now!) you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

<sup>13</sup>"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living. <sup>14</sup>About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup>He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. <sup>16</sup>The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup>"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup>and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man."

<sup>20</sup>"So he returned home to his father.

Just like in the previous parables we know what is lost. But this time we know a lot more. We know the son is separating himself from his father. The father grants his requests and the son takes off. The son and the father part company. After some time the son comes to realize his mistake and realizes he was better off when he was together with his father. He decides to repent and ask for reconciliation.

I know what this feels like. For a very long time I separated myself from God. Because of certain circumstances I would have nothing to do with Him. But, like the son, events took place I had no control over that brought me back home.

And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

There is an implied **UNTIL** here. The father had been waiting for his son to return. He must have been anticipating his return because he saw him coming. He was willing to wait, no matter how long it took ... **UNTIL**. And now that the son has returned let the rejoicing begin. Again this is directed to the religious leaders, a sinner has returned.

<sup>22</sup>"But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. <sup>23</sup>And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

And now, unlike the preceding parables, we find out how the ones that were left behind felt.

<sup>25</sup>"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, <sup>26</sup>and he asked one of the servants what was going on. <sup>27</sup>'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

<sup>28</sup>"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, <sup>29</sup>but he replied, 'All these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. <sup>30</sup>Yet when this son of yours

comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.'

There is no celebration by the older son for the son who has returned. The older brother doesn't even regard him as a brother, "this son of yours". He is bitter, angry and confused.

The parable clearly has the Pharisees in view as the older brother. Like the older brother they stand close to the father, at least in an apparent way, and appear to have an inside track to his blessing. Everything God has in terms of promise is available to them. Yet they are really on the outside, for they never choose to embrace it by acknowledging God's goodness.

<sup>31</sup>"His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup>We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"

Sometimes, when I read this parable, I find that God is speaking to me. I suddenly realize, in some respects, I may have become a little like the older brother; a Pharisee also.

- I envy people who seem to have a better relationship with God than I do.
- I am jealous of people who know more of the Bible than I do.
- I get hung up on how to run the church rather than being the church.
- I find that I am becoming intolerant of people who do not share my faith or view God as I do.
- I forget that my relationship with others should be based on love and compassion.
- That sin in my life is separating me from the Father.

And until I realize that and ask for forgiveness and guidance I go back to being the lost son – separated from the Father. God is willing to wait – **UNTIL** – for my repentance, no matter how long it takes. Then I return home - and there "is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

When we start taking the Bible seriously, and meet God through it, we are like a tree that has been planted by a source of life-giving water. The tree is constantly nourished as it is always near the source of life. The blessing of being near the source is that we will yield fruit and we will not wither away. We will always be strong not because of our own doing, but because of God's love for us. We will be strong enough to make the right decisions, strong enough to turn away from what will harm us, strong enough to grow in our ongoing relationship with the Father.

(Sistine Chapel ceiling) One of the greatest paintings in the world is Michelangelo's painting of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome. Looking at the character of God in this picture, everything about the way Michelangelo portrayed Him, is intended to express God's intense desire to be with, to touch, to reach out to that human being that He created. Every muscle is taut; His arm is stretched out; His index finger extended straight forward; His gaze is fixed on the man; He is being borne on the wings of Heaven. God's one desire is to be with the man. God is as close as He can be, but He leaves just a little bit of space, so that Adam can chose. He has given Adam that capability. He waits for Adam to make his move. He says to Adam 'I just want to be with you.'

Adam is noncommittal. He's laid back, kind of relaxed, hardly lifts a finger. He's leaning backwards as if he has no interest in making a connection. Maybe he assumes God will close the gap. Maybe he's indifferent. Maybe he lacks the strength. All he would have to do is lift a finger.

This can be the greatest moment of your life. Lift a finger, open a page in the Bible and meet God. Let Him open the doors to your heart through His Word.