

HOW TO CONNECT WITH GOD

John 15:7

Good morning! I read the story about a pastor who was asked by a funeral director to pray at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the back country. The pastor was not familiar with the backwoods, so he got lost.

He finally arrived an hour late. Btw, this is not my story. So, this pastor saw the funeral guy had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch.

He felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. He went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. He didn't know what else to do, so he started to pray.

The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. He prayed out his heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. He prayed like he has never prayed before for this homeless man, full of emotion and intensity.

And as he prayed, the workers began to weep. They wept, he wept, they all wept together. When he finished, he approached each person and embraced each one of them. Afterwards, he trudged toward his car. Though his head hung low, his heart was full.

As he opened the door to his car, he overheard one of the workers say, "I never seen nothin' like that before and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years."

The pastor meant well but looks like he had a bad connection.

Connection. That's what we all desire when it comes to our relationship to God. How do we connect to God? In our society today, it's so easy to connect our devices. You turn on your smartphone or laptop and instantly, you're connected to T-Mobile or AT& T or what-have-you or to your wireless router. And when we

can't connect, we feel frustrated. Because it seems like we're not able to get on with life. Our world crumbles, so to speak. I'm exaggerating but I just want to make a point that that's the same kind of feeling we feel when it seems like we've lost our connection to God. Like we're no longer plugged in.

Today we're going to start a new series. I'm calling it "Plugged In". And over the next few weeks we're going to look at five topics related to getting connected with God. Basically, this series is about prayer.

Jesus made an incredible promise in John 15:7 about being connected to Him. *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* That is an incredible verse. That is like a blank check, like God giving you unlimited credit.

I checked other versions of the Bible and instead of "remain", they have "abide" or "stay joined". All of these words give the idea of being connected with someone.

Now, the reason why we don't have so many answered prayers, and the reason why we don't see so many miracles in our lives is because we don't stay connected. We don't stay joined to Jesus. The question then is, How do you stay connected?

All over the world people want to get connected to God. There are people who use rituals and all kinds of lights and incense, doing certain procedures and offering certain sacrifices of food to idols, or create some noise. In China, for example, some street vendors in Beijing sell gongs. For what? They will tell you, "They're to wake up God. To get God's attention." And then, in many parts of the world, I'm sure you've seen this, there are these baldheaded guys who jump up and down, beating a tambourine, chanting certain words, thinking they were connecting to God.

Jesus often exploded the common myths about prayer and He made very clear that prayer was given to us to connect with God and it was meant to be a stress reliever not a guilt producer. You see, we often think of prayer as some duty that we feel guilty about that we don't do enough of. Jesus said, "No, that's not what it's all about!"

In **Matthew 6:7-8**, he says, *"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."* In short, Jesus is saying, "There's a right way to pray, and there's a wrong way to pray."

Today, we're going to look at how to *really* connect with God. This is the most important thing in life – connecting with God. It's very basic. If you don't get it, you'll miss a whole lot in life. So, let me share with you four simple things you need to know to really connect with God.

1. The first step in connecting with God is to **BE STILL**. **Psalms 46:10** says *"Be still and know that I am God."* Some of the other translations of that verse say *"Cease striving... Stand through it... Let go of your concerns and you will know that I am God."*

We hear that and we say, "Be still? In Metro DC? The fast-paced frantic lifestyle that I live and I'm to be still? You've got to be kidding!" But that's what God says. It's the first step in connecting with Him in prayer. He gives us an illustration of that in **Psalm 131:2** *"I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother."* You know, when you hold someone's child, the child gets kind of fussy and doesn't want to settle down and no matter what you do you just can't get this child to be quiet. The mother walks in the room, throws out her arms, the child runs to the mother, snuggles up close to her and almost instantly he's quiet. He's peaceful. He's still.

God says in that passage that, “When you come to Me in prayer and you quiet yourself, you will have that same peaceful sensation that the baby does who is with its mother where he’s safe.” A Christian philosopher has said, “The more that we train ourselves to spend time with God and with Him alone we will discover that God is with us at all times, in all places.”

You and I have to schedule times of quietness, away from our busy hectic lives. There has to be something in our schedule where we are away from our normal routine. Jesus did this on a regular basis. **Luke 5:16 says, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”** If Jesus, the Son of God, had to get away from His normal routine to find that quiet time with God, how much more do we need to do that? We need to have what I call MDR – Minimum Daily Requirement of time that is alone and quiet. At least fifteen minutes every day where there are no other noises, no other sound, no other connection with other people. Just you and God. You need to have some hours in your week that are devoted just to quietness and stillness. And maybe once a month a half a day or (if you can) a whole day away from the routine of your life being quiet.

Some of you need to be alone, like I do. You need to be in a quiet room – all that beauty and color and sound overwhelms you. It distracts you. And you need to be somewhere where there’s not a lot of sound. Get in a closet. In your bedroom. Or in a bathroom. Seriously. I was in a conference one time and I heard the testimony of a Jewish guy. He said that at work, he had a Christian friend who would talk to him about Jesus every now and then. He just listened because he was his friend but he didn’t pay attention because he was not religious. Until, after a few months of this, somehow his words were making sense and one day while he was taking a shower, he prayed that God would reveal himself to him, and suddenly, right there, God spoke to his heart and wanted him to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. He couldn’t resist God anymore, and standing in the shower,

while water was pouring on him, in the quietness of that moment, he gave his heart to Jesus. So, he became a Christian and was baptized, too, at the same time.

The point is, to connect with God, we have to be still so we can hear God. God is always speaking to us. We just need time to be alone with him to be able to connect to him.

You have to be still and then

2. YOU HAVE TO BE SINCERE

You have to be honest and authentic. You have to be real about how you feel. In **Jeremiah 29:13** God says *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”* With all your heart. That means to be earnest. To Be genuine.

In Jesus’ day there was a group of people who were pros at insincere prayers. They were very pious about it. They prayed three times a day – at 9:00 a.m., noon, and 3:00 p.m. They always prayed in public spots so everybody could see how spiritual, how pious, how righteous they were. But they were very insincere. In fact, they just did it for show. They were just showing off.

These guys were called Pharisees. Jesus could not stand the Pharisees. They were so pompous and presumptuous. They would pretend to be talking to God and to be connected with God but they weren’t at all because they were just doing it for show.

Jesus made it very clear that these guys weren’t connecting with God. In fact, He made it clear that prayer is not a spectator sport. Prayer is not something you do to be seen, to get other people to watch you.

So, Jesus said this about the Pharisees in Matthew 6:5-6, *“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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 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.” These verses give us the **two biggest barriers that keep us from connecting to God.**

a. **Trying to impress others.** When you’re trying to impress others with the way you pray there’s no way you can connect with God because you can’t focus on God and other people at the same time. Have you ever heard a prayer that you knew when it was being prayed it was very poetic and flowery and demonstrative and you knew it was being prayed for the benefit of the hearers, not to connect with God?

You cannot focus on other people and focus on God at the same time.

Not only trying to impress other people will break the connection but...

b. **Trying to impress God.** What do I mean by this? One of the problems is, the longer you are a Christian, the more you start to pick up religious cliches. You hear somebody saying something and you think, “That’s a good one. I have to add that to my repertoire. The next time I pray I’m going to add that little line.” We have these phrases, tired cliches, overworked phrases that we hear over and over like “Keep us in the palm of your hand... Bless the gift and the giver... Bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies... Bless the hands that prepared this food”.

Another favorite of Christians is to use God’s name or variations of it throughout your sentences. You use it at the beginning of your sentence, at the middle of your sentence and at the end of the sentence. Like, “Dear God, we just want to thank You, Lord, for all that You’ve done for us today, Jesus. And Holy Spirit, we want to thank You, God, for all that You’ve done in the whole world, Lord. And Father, today, Jesus, we want to thank You, Lord, for all You’re going to do, God.” How would it be if I talked to you that way? Like, “Now Bob, today, Bob, I’m going to come over to your house, Bob, and I’m bringing some potato chips, Bob, and Bob, if you’d like me to bring steak, Bob, I’ll bring it because we’ll make shish kebab, Bob.” You’d think I was on crack! I think sometimes

God thinks we're on crack! Like God's saying, "I know My name. You don't have to use it 150 times in a sentence to make it sound so spiritual." You could say, "Dear Father..." and that's all you really need to use His name unless you want to put it in later. But to use it as filler to make the sentence sound more spiritual you don't need to do that.

I love to listen to the prayers of new believers. I'd listen to a new believer pray any day over an older believer. They don't have any cliches. It's refreshing: "Hi, God. It's me. I've got some things to talk about." It's only as we grow in the faith that we start using all this jargon that really doesn't make any sense. It doesn't come from a sincere heart. Which brings us to

3. The third step to connect with God in prayer, and it is to **BE SIMPLE**. In other words don't get complicated. Not only do you not need fancy words but you don't need to use repetitions. You don't need to use or look for a certain word or a certain phrase that somehow is going to get you access to God. There are some religions today that teach if you repeat a certain word over and over that you can have access to God. That you'll get God's attention. Like when I dabbled with this eastern religious group years before and I would chant what they taught me, "Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare" and I would repeat that over and over again using beads in my hands as a counter. I thought I was connecting with God.

Let me quote Matthew 6:7 again, this time from the NASB *"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as unbelievers do. They suppose that they will be heard for their many words."*

Jesus gave a perfect example, a very simple example of how to pray. In Matthew 6:9-13 called The Lord's Prayer although it's really not a prayer that Jesus prayed. It's just Him giving us an example, a model of the things that we can pray about. And He showed us in such a simple way.

It's on your screen and many of us have learned this when we were kids. Let us recite it together.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.”

Now, as I said this is a model prayer. Meaning, this is a pattern you can use when you pray. You can follow this pattern and make them part of your own prayer in your own words. As you can see, there is praises of God in the beginning, then there is submission to his will, acknowledging that he is in control of everything. Then it is followed by a request for his providing for your need. Then you ask for cleansing, for forgiveness of your sins, and lastly, protection from the devil. If you pray this prayer, sincerely and as simple as you can, I assure you God will hear you. The instructions are from Jesus himself. So, as I said, this model prayer is not meant to be prayed word for word but in your own words. In the future, I can tell you more about what each line means for us.

So, connecting with God is not that complex. It's really pretty straightforward. Be still. Be sincere. Be simple. That's all God asks. And one other thing....

4. BE SURE GOD WILL ANSWER. There are two essentials of getting an answer to your prayer. God's grace and your faith. Grace is God's gift to you. You need to remember, that the only reason you can connect with God is because of what Jesus Christ has done for you. You could never connect to God on your

own. God is holy and God is perfect and you're the exact opposite. You're unholy and you are imperfect. And there's no way that I as an unholy and imperfect person have a right to just walk into God's presence and connect with Him. We're light years apart. I need a bridge. I need a mediator. I need somebody to make the connection for me. Because God realized that you could never make that connection on your own because you couldn't earn it or deserve it, He came to earth in human form, in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died for all of your sins so that they could be forgiven so that you, an imperfect person, could make a connection to a perfect God. If it weren't for Jesus, there would be no connection. God took the initiative, not you. And it's a free gift.

Would you like to connect with God? You can. **Hebrews 4:16 says "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."** The Bible says we can come to God confidently. Not confident in our own goodness – you're not good enough. Not confident that you deserve it or you've earned it. Our confidence is in God's grace. Our confidence is based on what Jesus Christ did for us.

That's why when we pray we pray, "In Jesus' name." I make these requests not because I deserve it but because of what Jesus has done. Jesus says in **John 14:14, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."** That's God's grace. Grace is what God gives me because Jesus paid for the salvation of my soul.

You may feel this afternoon that you don't deserve to have a personal relationship with God. "I know all the things I've done wrong. God wouldn't be interested in me. God wouldn't care about me. I don't deserve it. I'm not worthy of connecting with God." And you're right, you're not. And neither is anybody else. Neither am I. It is all a gift of grace. But no matter what you've done, you can take the first step in connecting with God today.

Hebrews 11:6 says, *“Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”* What’s the requirement? Believe that He’s real and that He wants to reward those who want to find Him.

Some say, “I’d like to believe. I just don’t know if I’ve got the faith. What do I do?” I’d suggest you do what Bruce Davis did. Yesterday I read about Bruce Davis. He was a member of the infamous Charles Manson gang. In the 60’s they committed the most grisly murders in American history up to that time. They were all caught and eventually put in prison and for the last 47 years Bruce has been serving his life sentence in prison. But in 1974 God got his attention and he realized the despair in his own life. He realized he needed a Savior but he didn’t have the faith to believe. One day he prayed, “God, You say You love me. We both know that I don’t love You. You say You want to help me but I don’t believe it. I’ve never done anything for You. But if You still love me and want to help me then do whatever You can.”

He said, “That was the ugly truth. It’s all I could give to Him. And little by little God began to transform my life and by God’s grace in my 32nd year I was saved.” He now leads the prison chapel in Bible study and counsels others who are in prison for life. He had been given parole last June and is set to be released from prison unless California’s governor blocks it. His former five paroles were blocked already before by the former governors of California. He is now 76 years old. Let’s pray he gets released this time.

One day a man came to Jesus with a son who was very, very ill. Jesus said, *“Do you believe that I can heal him?”* The man said, “Lord, I want to believe. Help me with my unbelief.” Jesus said, “That’s good enough,” and He healed him right on the spot.

Can you take that step today – “Lord, I want to believe?”

Prayer:

If you want to connect with God, which is the most important thing in life I invite you to follow me in this prayer. “God, I have to admit that much of the time I feel very disconnected from You. In fact, I often completely forget about You as I rush through my daily schedule. But I want that to change starting today. I am tired of praying insincere prayers, overworked cliches, worn out expressions. Help me to remember that prayer is just a conversation with You. I want to be connected and I want to feel connected to You. I realize that I could never deserve this or earn this but it’s just a matter of Your free gift of grace through Jesus. So thank You, Jesus Christ, for making this possible. Thank You for making it so easy to connect to You. I admit that I’ve often seen prayer as a duty not a privilege. Help me to make the time this week to be still and focus on You.”

If you’ve never accepted the grace of God and asked Jesus Christ to be your Savior, you can pray the following prayer, “Jesus Christ, I want to believe in You. Help me with my doubts. As much as I know how I ask You to come into my heart and life. I don't understand it all but I want You to be the manager of my life from here on out. I want to be connected to You. In Your name I pray. Amen.”