

The God who loves relationships

Well, good evening everyone. Let me get your attention and let me draw you together, and we're going to focus on our big topic tonight, which is: "The God who loves relationships". And I thought I would start tonight by asking you a simple question about a sport that is followed, watched by millions, if not billions of people around the planet.

Now this is either something you love or you hate. What am I talking about? I'm talking about football. Now let's just see, who are the lovers and who are the haters? Who are the lovers of this game? Maybe one or two. And who, when it comes on the television you think, "I do not want to watch this at all"? There's, a couple, 2 hands over there.

Well, let me say to you, you do not have to love this, you do not have to be an expert in football to get my question. Are you ready for it? Very simple question. How important do you think the ball is in a game of football? Are we going yeah? I know its tough isn't it! How important is the ball?

Who thinks, "Yeah, very important"? Absolutely essential. There are other aspects of the game of football. We know that. There is running around, there is shouting things at your teammates. Of course, all those are aspects of the game of football, but the ball is absolutely crucial, because without it, you don't have football, do you? Think about all you're left with. You're left with 22 people running around, shouting at each other. And you're not going to get the TV cameras to watch that. Absolutely vital.

Now why do I say that to you? Because I meet many people who think being a Christian is about believing in God and about trying to live a good life that is pleasing to God. Now what do I say to that? Well, yes those are aspects of being a Christian. Believing in God and trying to live a life that is pleasing to God, of course, those are aspects of being a Christian. But there is something major missing. And what is that? Well, in football, the ball was key. What about being a Christian? Well what is absolutely vital is a personal commitment to Jesus. But without that, all you're left with is running around.

Now, I suspect at the minute, you are saying "I know that, that does not come as a surprise to me." I hope it does not come as a surprise to you at all but you may also have another question. You might think, "Great I've got it. But what does that look like in practise? What does it look like day by day to put Jesus in charge?" Well, that's what we're going to look at tonight. I want to show you a few verses from John's Gospel, so if you grab John's Gospel and turn with me to John chapter 15, that would be a great, great help.

So John chapter 15 and I want to read to you verses 9 to 13. Now these are final few hours before Jesus goes to the crucifixion and he is preparing his disciples for what life will be like without him. And they are perfect for trying to understand in practice what does it mean to follow Jesus. Let me read verse 9. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

Now we have seen how easy it is to misunderstand Christianity. We have seen that many people mistake Christianity for rituals or maybe rules that you need to follow, but miss out the heart relationship. But even when you get it, even when you think to yourself, "I know it's all about relationship with Jesus", well, it is actually quite easy to misunderstand what kind of relationship that he offers. Now think about this, we have all sorts of relationships and we relate to people in different ways.

There are some relationships that I have with people and it's all very formal. Do you have those? It's formal, it's professional, it's distant. That's ok, that's just the way they are. And there are other

relationships that I have with people that are intimate and passionate. And the key is, not to confuse the two. So you think about some of those relationships that are professional, that's fine.

I don't know what kind of relationship you've got with your doctor. When I go and see my doctor, he's very good, he's professional, he's very pleasant. But I don't run into the surgery, give him a big hug and a big kiss. That's not great. Or if I go into my local DIY store and ask them a question. I don't have a clue about DIY, but if I go into the DIY store and ask a question about nails or something like that, and they give me the right answer, I don't embrace them and give them a massive bear hug.

But there are relationships which are right to be distant and professional, and others, that are close and intimate. The question is this, what kind of relationship does God want us to have? Well, look again with me at verse 9. Listen to what Jesus says. He says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love".

Now it's one of those verses in the Bible that should stop us in our tracks, because what Jesus is doing, is saying, "Look at the relationship that I enjoy with my Father and that is the model for the relationship that I want to offer to my followers!" So he is saying, "Think about it! Think about how the Father passionately loves me! Think about the relationship that I enjoy with the Father! Think about how I respond to the Father's love. Think about our relationship together." Well, Jesus is saying, "That is the kind of relationship I want to offer to you. That is the kind of passion that I have for you. How will you embrace it?"

So you think about the Father and the Son. What kind of relationship do they enjoy? Well, it's not distant, cold, and professional, is it? That is not the relationship you see in the Bible at all. What is it? It is an intimate, family relationship. Even the words, "Father" and "Son" suggest intimacy. They suggest passion. There is closeness. There is an intimacy between the two of them. It is intense, there is joy, there is commitment, there is passion between one and the other. There is, if you can call it, sweet fellowship between the Father and the Son.

And Jesus is saying, "You understand the passion that the Father has for me? Well, that is the kind of passion that I have for you my followers. And you see how I respond to my Father in love? Well, that is the kind of response I want from you." What is Jesus offering? Well, not some distant coldness, but intense, passionate, joyful relationship with his followers.

Now do you see what's on offer? It's not simply that Jesus is offering us complete forgiveness, as great as that would be. It's not that we come to Jesus and he says, "Well, let me tell you, all the wrong things that you have done, and all the wrongs things that you will continue to do, I've sorted it out. I've paid for it at the cross." Now that would be amazing, wouldn't it? Complete forgiveness on the basis of the death of Jesus. But it's not simply that we come to Jesus, and he says, "I forgive you, now off you go." It's that we come to Jesus, and he says, "I've completely forgiven you, but now come and enjoy this fellowship with me." That's great, isn't it!

What is the great gift of Jesus? The great gift of Jesus is Jesus! He says, "I want you to come on the basis of my death and enjoy close, intimate fellowship with me."

Now I was thinking about this this week with my own relationship with my wife, and it seems to make perfect sense to me. There are, at times, you may find it difficult to believe, when I upset my wife. There are many times when I do silly things that she thinks are just funny. She actually has a book; she writes these things down, of what she calls my endearing qualities. There are things that I do and she writes them down. The book is too long for me to read out.

Now there are all sorts of silly things that I do but occasionally I will do something that really upsets her and really angers her. Now when I'm man enough to come down into the kitchen where she is, well, there is a coldness in the atmosphere. But what do I want? At that moment, what do I want? Do I want my wife's forgiveness? Well, yes I do, of course I want my wife's forgiveness. But is that

all I want? Well, no, because what do I want? I want her back. I want the close intimacy and fellowship.

And you see that's what we should want from God. Yes we've offended him, but what do we ultimately want? Do we want forgiveness and to be told to go away? No! Surely we want God to open his arms to us and say, "Come back into fellowship with me." And that is exactly what Jesus is saying. "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you." Enjoy this intimacy.

Now for those kinds of relationships we know they can't be taken for granted and therefore I don't think it should surprise us that Jesus, at the end of verse 9, says, "Remain in my love". He says you've got to maintain this, you've got to keep the intimacy. It is so precious and so good and so close, but you've got to keep the intimacy. Yes you come to me personally but you've got to keep that intimacy. The question is: how? Well, look at verse 10. Jesus tells us the answer. He says, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remained in his love."

Now all that talk of commands may sound rather strange to you but what it should remind us of is that in a relationship with Jesus, who's in charge? He is. He is the boss. He is the one that we surrender to.

Now that doesn't mean instant change. It's not that you get up in the morning after you commit yourself to Jesus and the next morning you get up, you go to the mirror, no-one ever goes, "I think overnight I have become the perfect human being." I don't do that. There is a gradual change and the wonderful thing that Jesus promises is that as we come to him personally he sends the Holy Spirit to be within us to work within us and to change us so that day by day this transformation can occur. But there is a daily submitting to the rule of Jesus and what I remind myself of is that the Jesus who commands me is the Jesus who loved me.

And what is the model for the submission to Jesus? Do you see it again? It is the model of the Father and the Son. Jesus says, "I obey my Father and remain in his love." So Jesus is saying if we want to remain in the intimacy of fellowship with him we do as he says. We obey his commands. Because otherwise there will be a problem with that relationship with the Lord Jesus.

We see that in a father and son relationship. You see sometimes the little darlings, well, they do things that make their father smile. They do silly things and they can have a laugh about it later on. But sometimes the little darlings, well, they're just really defiant, aren't they? And you see there is an impairment of the fellowship between the father and the son. Yes, love is still there, but the sweetness, the fellowship, it isn't quite the same. We understand that. And Jesus is saying if we want to keep the intimacy of fellowship with him we obey what he says.

Now the question is what does he say? Or even you might be thinking to yourself all this talk of obeying the commands it might just sound dull, a bit depressing, I don't like that. Well, just look at what Jesus says in verse 11. This is amazing. Look at this. He says, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy might be complete." Twice he says "joy". Are you looking for joy? Or course you want joy. You want deep lasting joy. Jesus says, "Obey me and it's not all depression, drudgery and dullness." Joy is to be found in putting the commandments of Jesus into practice.

So what are the commandments of the Lord Jesus? Well, the best place to start is to go to what Christians call the New Testament and to find there the words of Jesus and also the words of the people Jesus has given to us as his spokesmen. And you will find, rightly understood, that is where Jesus speaks to and rules his people.

Now what do you find when you turn to the New Testament? Well, what you do not find are a list of all the little details of our life. So think about this. You got up this morning, I presume. You got up this morning, well, you've got a few decisions to make, haven't you? What do I wear? How do you

decide that? As a Christian I don't turn to my Bible and think, "Right, where's that bit in the bible that tells me what to wear?" How I decide what to wear is I ask my wife. Because I discovered very soon when we started to date, it was on our third date, and I remember saying to her really clearly, "I think I embarrass you in public when I walk with you because of what I wear." And she said to me fantastic and she took me on a bit of a makeover. Now even to this day that's how I work out what I'm going to wear. But other things, you know, what do I have for breakfast? You don't need to turn to the Bible for that.

What do you discover when you turn to the Bible about the commands of Jesus? He puts some boundaries in place, some wide boundaries where he says, "This is the way I want you to live. Here's the area which you can inhabit." But what he wants us to do is to grow up in our faith. What he wants us to do is to learn more about what he likes and what he does and he wants us to grow up and make decisions. And I love that. It is so, so liberating.

But you might still be asking, "Hey, okay, I get that, but are there any specifics?" Well, let me finish by showing you one specific command of Jesus and you'll find it in verses 12 and 13. This is what Jesus says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."

Well, the focus here, Jesus is teaching his disciples about how they're to look after each other when he is gone. And he summarises all those relationships, all that they have to do with one simple command: Love each other. Now this is so vital to grasp because as much as we have been saying that becoming a Christian is all about a personal relationship to Jesus, it is always personal but it is never to be individualistic. Because becoming a Christian means that you join the family. We come to Jesus personally and he says meet your brothers and sisters. There are corporate responsibilities. Jesus says you cannot live in isolation as a Christian. He says we are to love each other.

Now what does that mean? To love each other? Let me tell you what it doesn't mean. And I think you'll find this good news. Loving other Christians doesn't mean giving them a big sloppy kiss all the time you see them. So just look around you. Look around your tables at the moment. Would that be good? You look around and you think, "Oh I can give them a big sloppy kiss, that's lovely." That'd just, well, you'd run!

Loving other Christians, well, it does mean we should care, it does mean that we should feel for other Christians, but the emphasis here is on action. Jesus says, "Love each other as I have loved you." And you look at the life of Jesus as recorded in this book and you see action after action of Jesus as he practically does things to serve and help his disciples. And that is to be in our minds as we think about what will it mean to love other Christians.

What will that ultimately mean? Well, again and again in the Bible and through church history and even in today's society one of the best ways to love other Christians is to spend time with them. To be in their presence, to do things that serve them, to give up some of your time in order to be with them, to look after them, that is such a loving thing to do. Another great thing you see all the way through the Bible, Christians help each other by giving up their money so they can look after each other.

Now you might think, "Well, how far do I need to go with all this?" The standard Jesus sets is his own death on the cross. Greater love has no one than this that he gives up his life for his friends. And that's what Jesus did. He's on his way to die on a cross. He was going to sacrifice his very life as an act of love for his disciples.

Now I think that word sacrifice is so helpful to us as we think about how we can love other Christians. Think about this. What are the two most precious things that people hold on to in our society? I think it's time and money. Sacrifice, what's that about? It's costly isn't it. Sacrifice involves giving something up. About not being able to do something in order to do something else.

Well, in order to love other brothers and sisters in the big global family of Jesus, it will involve sacrificing some of our time, and some of our money so that we can instead pour our time and money into helping our brothers and sisters in Christ. Now I want to emphasise as I say all this that Jesus says this is for your joy. Don't hear this and think, "Oh no! It's all depression now!" This is for our joy.

And Jesus says this is also the way to keep intimate fellowship with him. That's what he's offering – close, personal, intimate relationship with Jesus. And he wants us to maintain that. And we'll do that as we put his commands into practice.

Well I think I've said enough to get you thinking, so let me send you back into your tables and see what you make of what I've just said.

Identity – Who is God? Who are we?

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