

Daybreak

Timeless answers for an old question . . .

by Karen and Ron Flowers

Theme

The quality of our human relationships reflects the quality of our relationship with God.

Theme Text

1 John 4:7-11.

Introduction

A Rabbi once asked his students, “How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?”

One student suggested, “Is it when you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep in the distance?”

“No,” the Rabbi answered.

“Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?” asked a second student.

“No,” the Rabbi responded again.

“Please tell us the answer, then,” urged the students.

Said the wise teacher, “It is when you have enough light to look human beings in the face and recognize them as your brothers and sisters. Until then the darkness is still with us.”

Until we see ourselves as part of one family, the darkness is still with us. Dawn arrives, daybreak comes, only when we are able to look into the faces of all human beings around us and recognize them as our brothers and sisters.

Vertical and Horizontal Relationships

Our Lord recognized that we form relationships in two directions—with God and with humankind. The *vertical* if you will . . . and the *horizontal*. More importantly, He gave spiritual significance to human relationships. He elevated them to a moral plane parallel to our relationship with God.

In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus summed up the law in two commands: “Love the Lord your God . . .” and “Love your neighbour . . .” Like two sides of one coin, love for God and love for others are bound together. Christianity holds on to these two relationships at the same time. When one is emphasised to the exclusion of minimization of the other, religion is warped.

Overemphasis on the Vertical. If, in my experience, I over-emphasize my vertical relationship with God without allowing my spirituality to permeate the world around me through my relationships with fellow human beings, I have an unbalanced, mystical religion. Throughout history, such a view has led to the formation of so-called “spiritual centers,” where “the religious” have sought deeper spirituality in isolation from the world.

One such is the Shrine of La Verna in Italy. There, still today, monks endeavor by self-imposed exclusion from human contact to reach a state of perfect holiness. It is their quest to achieve such a high spiritual state that God will honor them by giving them in their bodies the stigmata of Jesus—the wound marks in his hands, feet and side—as church tradition records they were bestowed on their beloved patron saint Francis of Assisi. In order to achieve such holiness, they believe they must be totally separated from the world around them. In some cases, monks have imposed radical isolation upon themselves for over seven years, coming down out of their monastic cells twice a day—once for prayers and once to eat. At no time do they exchange even a word with another human being.

One is compelled to admire the resolve and determination of such individuals, the singular, intense focus which they exhibit. But if we hear what Jesus is saying, we must question whether or not—in their great desire to be attuned to God—they have not missed something equally important, namely their spiritual responsibility to their fellow human beings.

Overemphasis on the Horizontal. On the other hand, if my life is focused only on life in the here and now, even if I am involved with people, doing for people, but loving the “Lord’s work” more than the Lord of the work, neglecting to give attention to deepening my personal relationship with God, I run the risk of slipping into a kind of social religion. It is a religion that operates from a shallow pool of platitudes. It ebbs and flows with the waves of popular concern. But it lacks the depths of understanding and experience with God that undergirds warm loving relationships and compassionate caring ministry over the long haul. This too is an unbalanced experience.

Avoiding the Ditches. Clearly, there is the ditch on either side. In the New Testament, Paul and Peter call Gentiles from their preoccupation with life here, with the human side of the equation, to a relationship with God that will infuse relationships in the here and now with new meaning. For example, the book of Romans dedicates 11 chapters to clearly presenting the good news of the gospel. Then and only then, beginning in chapter 12, does the apostle turn to describe the transformation that belief in Jesus and a commitment to the principles of His kingdom will work in the human realm. At the same time, Matthew records his windows on the ministry of Christ for a generation whose preoccupation with the *vertical* has led to legalistic hypocrisy in the human realm. In his gospel, the events and words of Christ impress this people with the importance of the human side of the equation (cf. Matt. 5:23, 24; 25:35-45). Perhaps the Jewish audience for whom Matthew was writing was more like many religious people today.

The story of Frank (a pseudonym) comes to mind. Frank was a thin little man who kept dried seaweed in his pockets instead of jelly beans. He had a widespread reputation for his piety and sacrifice. When the congregation refinished the church basement, he gave a lot of money and worked scores of dawn-to-dusk Sundays until it was finished. He personally paid for and serviced the literature rack in the town laundromat. And when an evangelist set up his tent during off-season on the carnival grounds, he passed out more handbills than anyone. He was always present at prayer meeting and prayed most earnestly, and he could always say all his memory verses. Surely, if a man could love God, he did.

One has to wonder, though, about some other things. Frank didn’t seem to have much of a relationship with his wife and children. He didn’t bring the family into public view much. The wife was always busy taking care of the house and rearing the kids, and their house needed a lot of repair. Fellow church members can’t remember ever seeing her in a new dress. A friend in the church gave her a flat of pansies once in the Spring. She cried.

Beloved, we need the vertical relationship, but we also need the horizontal. Hearts are starving for warmth and kindness. Often the hearts that are starving the most are those closest to us. They are starving while we are pursuing our relationship with the Lord. Hence there is much in the New Testament which details how true religion will live life in human clothes.

New Testament Emphasis on Human Relationships

Jesus. Jesus spoke in both general and specific terms about His intent for human relationships under the principles of His new kingdom. And a lofty intent it is!

- John 13:34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”
- John 15:12 “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

Apostles. Like Jesus, the apostles recognized the significance of human relationships.

- 1 John 4:21 “And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”
- Gal. 5:14 A most amazing verse, “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

There is something very important here. God is profoundly interested in how we do relationships with each other.

Why Love for Fellow Human Beings Is Important

Human beings need to know human love in order to comprehend God’s love (1 John 4:11, 12). Agape love is our greatest witness (John 13:35).

Dan (a pseudonym) once told a pastor his story. First, you should know that Dan was the head elder in his congregation. He was also the treasurer. And the personal ministries leader, and the Sabbath School teacher, and the caretaker of the property When the pastor and his family arrived, Dan’s wife informed the new pastor’s wife that it would be all right to have them around for awhile, but that her husband really was the shepherd of that congregation. He had a saying of his own that conveyed the same sentiment: “Pastors come, and pastors go, but I stay on forever!”

It wasn’t long into his pastorate in that place that the pastor began to receive reports from the members of the hardness of this man’s preaching and teaching in their midst. “It’s like he has the church in the palm of his hand and he’s squeezing out all of its life juices,” one woman confided. “He says we aren’t faithful with our tithes and offerings. We don’t study our Bibles enough. We don’t eat the right things or wear the right clothes. We never do anything right!”

Finally the pastor knew he had to confront the brother. With trepidation the young pastor made an appointment with the now old man. Expecting a mighty defense to his confrontation, the young pastor was totally taken by surprise by the great sobs that came from deep within the old man as he listened to the concerns of the pastor and the members of the church about his ministry in their midst.

Then, without fanfare, he wiped away his tears and began to tell a story of a little boy. A little boy who wanted so very much to please his father, but who never seemed to be able to do anything right. At first the pastor was puzzled, then the connection broke over him. The old man was the little boy. And now, in his dealings with the church, his own experience had come full circle. He was the hard father, and the congregation were his children. “I know they say God is a loving Father,” he concluded. “I preach about it, but I don’t know what it means.”

Our experience with human love either sets us up to understand and respond to Scripture’s familial metaphors of God as loving parent and marriage partner, or our human experience makes it virtually impossible, but for a miracle of grace, for us to understand God as Love.

The love of Christians for people. The love of Christian parents for their children. The love of Christian spouses for each other. The love of Christians extended freely into a needy world. Such agape love is our most powerful testimony and evangelistic witness. We have priceless opportunities in our human relationships. Hear Paul's plea for the radical transformation of the gospel to be worked in our lives that our witness might heard:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. Be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:17-20).

By our love for each other, our love for God is manifested (Matt 25:40). This is the second reason why God elevates human relationships to a spiritual plane. Our love for others is a tangible expression of our faith. Loving others is not our salvation, for that salvation was prepared for us long before we ever did anything good. But *it is the evidence* that we have laid hold of the salvation God has worked out for us in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

1 John 3:14 makes this very point: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren." Our love for others is the surest evidence that we have understood the gospel. The quality of our human relationships is the best litmus test for quality of our relationship with God.

The story is told of a young theology student who sought to deepen his spirituality through much time in prayer and Bible study with fellow theologians. Long days he was in class and at work, and late into the night he was absent from the home praying and studying with fellow students. One day when he came home for supper, his young son begged him to stay home for the evening. Seeing the father brush his son aside, his wife attempted to intervene. "He only wants to be with you," she said. "He loves you so much." Her intervention was met with an angry rebuff indicative of how little we understand the connectedness between our relationship with God and our relationship with our families. "That's the trouble with you woman," he said with disgust, "you don't understand the things of God."

This love for one another, of which the Bible writers speak, is not a love we generate in ourselves. 1 John 4:12 says, "If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us."

Some time ago a remarkable story by Henri Nouwen appeared in the magazine, *Signs of the Times* (May 1989) called "Adam's Peace":

I live in a house with six handicapped people and four assistants. We live together as a family. We eat together, play together, pray together, and go out together. We all have our own preferences, and we all have our problems getting along with someone in the house, whether handicapped or not. We laugh a lot. We cry a lot too. Sometimes both at the same time.

Adam is the weakest person in our family. He is a 25-year-old man who cannot speak, cannot dress or undress himself, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without much help. He does not cry or laugh. Only occasionally does he make eye contact. His back is distorted. His arm and leg movements are twisted. He suffers from severe epilepsy and, despite heavy medication, sees few days without grand-mal seizures. Sometimes, as he grows suddenly rigid, he utters a howling groan. On a few occasions I've seen one big tear roll down his cheek.

It takes me about an hour and a half to wake Adam up, give him his medication, carry him into his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, walk him to the kitchen, give him his breakfast, put him in his wheelchair and bring him to the place where he spends most of the day with the therapeutic exercises.

After a month of working this way with Adam, something happened to me. This deeply handicapped young man, who is considered by many outsiders a vegetable, a distortion of humanity, a useless animal-like creature who shouldn't have been born, started to become my dearest companion.

As my fears gradually lessened, a love emerged in me so full of tender affection that most of my other tasks seemed boring and superficial compared with the hours spent with Adam. Out of his broken body and broken mind emerged a most beautiful human being offering me a greater gift that I would ever offer him: Somehow Adam revealed to me who he is, and who I am, and how we can love each other.

Adam in his total vulnerability calls us together as a family. Adam. The most broken of us all, is without any doubt the strongest bond among us. Because of Adam there is always someone home. Because of Adam there is a quiet rhythm in the house. Because of Adam there are words of affection, gentleness, and tenderness. Because of Adam there is always space for mutual forgiveness and healing. Adam, the weakest among us, is our true peacemaker. How mysterious are God's ways!"

(First published as "The Peace That Is Not of This World", Weavings, March/April 1988. Published as "Adam's Peace", Signs of the Times, May 1989. Copied with permission of the Estate of Henri J. M. Nouwen.)

Conclusion

It's hard to know whether the wise old Rabbi who talked about the darkness and the dawn ever read the New Testament. Perhaps he did. In the first letter of John we find these words: "I am writing you a new command. . . . Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light" (2:8-10).

References

Nouwen, H. (1989, May). Adam's peace. *Signs of the Times*.