

Knowing God by Resembling Him

I enjoy seeing couples who have been married for decades – 40, 50 years, or even longer. I've noticed, and I've heard others agree, that often couples begin to resemble each other when they have lived together for that long. I don't suppose that's been checked by scientists, but that doesn't really matter. When we see it, we smile. It's one of the sweet mysteries of living in God's magical universe.

Often things like that serve as pictures of a great reality. The Bible tells us that the great reality of the Christian life is that those who live in God's presence, begin to resemble Him more and more. People who live life in conscious fellowship with God begin to look like God in their characters. And it's through this increasing moral resemblance of God that we are able to meet the greatest priority of the Christian life.

Remember, we began this series by seeing from Scripture that the greatest priority of the Christian life is to glorify God by loving Him ultimately- which means depending on God ultimately, being devoted to God ultimately and delighting in God ultimately. We then asked how this happens - by what *process* this occurs. The process of the Christian life is coming to love God by knowing Him. God is the loveliest Being in the universe, and the more you know Him, the more you love Him. Last week, we saw that the way we know God is when we are in a right relationship with Him, and we live in His presence. Living in His presence is a process of communion, conviction, confession, cleansing, and conformity to Christ, which increases the communion and begins the cycle again.

We want to take the time today to consider this cycle in more detail. Before we do that, let's explain why this process enables us to know and love God more.

Only one Man has ever known and loved God perfectly—Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ always had God as His ultimate dependence, desire and delight. The cycle of living in God's presence is one of loving God in communion which, like those older couples, results in resembling Christ more. And the more we resemble Christ, the more we reach the grand priority of the Christian life. Becoming like Christ is becoming a person who worships, knows and loves God wholeheartedly. In other words, Jesus is the only Man who perfectly obeyed the command to love God with all of the heart, soul and mind. If we become like Him, we will know and love God increasingly.

Jesus said of His own relationship with the Father:

Matthew 11:27 ²⁷ *"All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."*

In a very real way, Christ's love for the Father, and the Father's love for the Son become ours as we are controlled by the Spirit and conformed into the image of the Son.

John 17:23-26 ²³ *"I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. ²⁴ "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ "O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. ²⁶ "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."*

Jesus emphasised His union with the Father and our union with Him as the secret behind knowing Him and becoming like Him. Because we are 'one' with Him spiritually, we can know Him in a deep and intimate sense, as He knows the Father. We'll give this considered attention in the third

section of this series- the Position of the Christian life.

This process is one that we cannot do in our own strength. Jesus said that without Him we can do nothing. As His Holy Spirit indwells us, there is the potential for us to live in His presence. The Holy Spirit creates desires to be like Christ, and He enables us to follow through on those desires.

What part do we then play?

Our role in this cycle, in this process of living in His presence, is one of faith. Faith is not something unique to us. Even before He fell, Adam lived a life of faith, trusting that God's Word was true, obeying God. In the New Jerusalem, saints will live lives of faith. Even though much of our faith will be sight, we will still be trusting God, submitting to God and desiring God.

Faith is the act of coming to God as your ultimate dependence, devotion or delight (John 6:35, Hebrews 11:6). Faith is looking to the invisible God, the promises of God, the Word of God, and resting your entire weight upon Him. If this definition of faith sounds a lot like how we have defined love, that's because the two are very closely linked. According to Galatians 5:6, faith works through love.

Faith is not merely what we do at the beginning of our salvation for the forgiveness of sins by trusting in Christ for justification. Faith remains the posture of life that we maintain before God. Faith remains the medium through which our love for God is expressed and experienced. Faith is continuing to trust and submit to and delight in Christ through our lives, leading to sanctification – spiritual growth.

The life of faith is the life that communes, is convicted, confesses, is cleansed and conforms to Christ. Let's consider what the life of faith looks like in this cycle:

I. Communion

The heart, and the goal, of living in God's presence is to commune with Him. Commune means to share. Communion is sharing life with God, both in concentrated times of personal communication with God, and in more general times of sharing everyday life with Him.

Communion between any two persons means those two persons try to know each other's minds, through what we call one-on-one time, and through simply doing all kinds of activities together. They learn of the other's likes, dislikes, interests, ambitions, goals, fears, abilities, weaknesses, temperaments.

So it is with the Lord. A Christian seeks to know God's mind – His loves, desires, hates, works, purposes, and will. When you know what God loves; what God does; what He is like in His nature, then you know Him. The primary place where God reveals His mind is in His Word. As you meditate on the Scriptures, you find the mind of Christ in the form of God's works, ways, purposes, promises, blessings, commandments, warnings, predictions and so forth.

As you imbibe God's Words, understand them by the Spirit's illumination and trust in them, you are gaining Christ's mind on all things. Therefore, communion with God happens firstly when believers hear or read God's Word and meditate on it, and then respond to it in prayer.

Christians must actively, purposefully and persistently seek God in His Word. If we are aimless in our seeking, we will not find Him. If we are apathetic or lazy in our seeking, we will not find Him. If we are half-hearted in our seeking, we will not find Him. If you brought any of those attitudes

into a relationship with another human being, the relationship would soon be in trouble. We do not enjoy a relationship where someone is bored with us, using us, or casual and half-interested in us. (Proverbs 2:1-5). (Matt 7:7-8). This is why Christians should seek to have a daily time of communing with God over His Word and prayer. Christians should seek every opportunity to gather with other Christians to commune with God over His Word and prayer. No one comes to love God who neglects this communion.

However, these times of private worship and corporate worship, as sweet and concentrated as they are, do not make up the bulk of our lives. We still have to go out there, go to school, earn a living, pay bills, buy the necessaries, and live life in community with others. But the Bible is very clear that this is exactly when the concept of living in God's presence is supposed to continue, not discontinue. Several commands alert us to the fact that because of God's presence in us and our presence in Christ, we are able to keep communing with God.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Colossians 3:17 And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Colossians 3:23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men,

1 Corinthians 10:31 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Proverbs 3:6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.

Now, some take these verses to mean that the Christian is to live in a kind of uninterrupted, continuous conversation with God at all times, and if ever they cease, they have sinned. I don't think this is what these verses mean. There is a time to look at God in worship, but then there is a time to look away from God Himself and at what God has made. As we go about our lives in the world that God has made, we learn all kinds of things about God's person by seeing what He has created, and remembering what He wrote in His Word. God is continually on display in His world, and as we go about our days, we can remain in an attitude of communion, even though our gaze is no longer on God Himself, but on what He has made. Our observations turn into silent prayers. Furthermore, as we go about our day, we are no longer simply adoring God, but we are serving Him. Serving Him requires us to focus, not upon God Himself, but upon the task that we are performing for His glory. A Christian pilot glorifies God, not by closing his eyes and praying during a landing, but by focussing on what he does, and doing it well for the glory of God.

God does not expect Christians to have their minds in two places at all times. What these verses mean is that in everyday life, we can use all our experiences to cause reflection and thought about God, which will lead to prayer and thanksgivings at different times. A husband and wife do not have to be continually speaking to each other to be communing with each other. They simply share life's experiences together. So we commune with God over His Word, but also in His world and through His works.

The result of communing with God in this way is that we come to know Him. Romans 12:2 and Ephesians 4:23 call this knowledge "the renewing of our minds". The more we know God's mind by communing with Him, the more our minds are shaped after His image. Colossians 3:10 says that as Christians, our new nature is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.

What is it that makes you and me unlike Jesus Christ? It is because of what God says in Isaiah: **55:8-9: Isaiah 55:8-9** ⁸ "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. ⁹ "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My

thoughts than your thoughts.

The foundation of any spiritual transformation that will enable us to know and love God is this process of a renewed mind. In Col 2:1-3, we find that another word for the mind of Christ is wisdom. You are seeing reality as God sees it. You value what He values. You love what He loves. You hate what He hates. You want to be pleasing to Him. You want the same things He does. His priorities are your priorities. His will is becoming yours. This is the foundation of change – communing with the mind of Christ, so as to become like Christ, so as to further commune with Christ.

The Holy Spirit's ministry of illuminating Christ to us as we commune with Him leads to the second stage, which is also His ministry.

II. Conviction

A strange phenomenon occurs in the Bible, and in Christian experience. The more sinful you are, the less you think you are. The less sinful you are, the more you think you are. Consider Paul calling himself the chief of sinners. Consider Peter, who falls down in the boat and says to Jesus, depart from me, for I am a sinful man. Consider Isaiah, who saw the thrice holy God and called himself ruined and a man of unclean lips.

One of the strange experiences that Christians have to get used to is the truth that the more like Christ you become, the more painfully aware you become of your sin. It is as if the clearer the light becomes, the more we notice even the smaller specks of dirt. The closer you draw to God, the more His holiness highlights the contrast between you and him.

You see, as we pointed out last week, God does not convict us of all our sins at once. Instead, He chooses to highlight a few that are causing His Fatherly displeasure, now that we are spiritually mature enough to recognise them and deal with them. And the more we grow in holiness, the more we realise how unlike Christ we are. So ironically, the further we progress, the more aware we become of how far we still have to go.

In order to grow us to be more like Christ, God puts His finger on one or two sins that need to be dealt with. He does this using His Word that properly informs our conscience. The Holy Spirit uses these means to bring upon us a sense of broken communion, and of God's call to claim ownership for our sin and turn from it.

When we choose not to confess, we prevent ourselves from deepening our communion with God. Our growth slows, and according to Ephesians 4:30, we grieve the Holy Spirit. Like any relationship, we feel the discomfort of an unresolved offence. Worse, we lose boldness to come to God, so the communion tends to dry up. If we keep doing this, our consciences begin to harden, and even become insensitive to the Holy Spirit.

If we persist in this state, Hebrews 12 tells us that God will discipline us. He will bring to bear upon us various things that will drive us back to confession. The life of faith will allow the Word to frequently and repetitively search for anything contrary to the mind of God, so that it can be identified, confessed and forsaken.

If we submit to God, the life of faith will confess. This is the third stage of living in God's presence.

III. Confession

In confession, we are agreeing with God that we have acted, or thought, or spoken in a way that grieves God. As the one who indwells our bodies, He is an offended tenant, an insulted resident, and a hurt guest. As I mentioned last week, we continually fall short of the glory of God, and it is Christ's blood that continually cleanses us. However, He knows us perfectly, and knows what is completely inappropriate for our maturity, and wishes us to bring such a sin into the light.

Confession is calling sin what it is. We are doing more than admitting we have sinned. Plenty of people in the Bible did this – Judas, Pharaoh, Saul, and Balaam, but they were not confessing in the biblical sense. Confession is to agree with God that sin is *sinful*; that it is not worthwhile. We are agreeing that our values were perverted, we loved what God hates and hated what God loves. We come back to agreeing that sin is not worthwhile, and God's ways are. We justify God, as David put it in Psalm 51. God is right, and we are wrong. We blame ourselves, and agree that we were totally unjust in choosing what we did.

Of course, until we embrace this attitude of seeing our sin as worth less than God's glory, we haven't really changed. Once again, here is why this all belongs to a life of faith. At the very root of all sin is the proud unbelief in the goodness of God. Unbelief thinks sin is good and God is not. Confession is agreement that it was not, and is not better than God's ways.

1 John 1:9 gives us a promise. 1 John 1:9⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Proverbs 28:13 ¹³ *He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.*

IV. Cleansing

Cleansing is the fourth stage of living in God's presence. Now, the cleansing which takes place here is not the cleansing of our judicial guilt before God. That cleansing takes place the day we trust Christ for salvation, and we are justified. Confession is not a process of getting saved again and again. Instead, what happens is that we are cleansed in our consciences of having knowingly violated God's Word. We are cleansed of the defilement in our consciences that we grieved the Spirit, disobeyed our Lord, and displeased our Father.

What immediately returns upon cleansing is boldness. David speaks in Psalm 51 of the boldness that comes with such cleansing of the conscience:

Psalm 51:12-15 ¹² *Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit. 13 Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You. 14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, The God of my salvation, And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.*

There is a second way that this cleansing takes place. We are not only cleansed in our consciences, we are cleansed in practice. Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (2 Cor 7:1)

As we admit that sin is sinful, we have believed God and yielded to the Spirit's work. With that will come a stronger desire to separate ourselves from the sin that we admit is evil. We will want to forsake the sin altogether.

Paul calls this process putting off the old man, or mortifying the flesh. When we confess a sin as sinful, we know better that such a sin no longer 'fits' in a life lived in God's presence and so put it off. We increasingly nullify the power of sin in our lives. We weaken its influence over us, freeing

us to see and obey Christ. Sin must be killed, or it will kill us. This is part of the life of faith.

How do we do practically cleanse ourselves from sin? There are at least three ways:

First, we must believe that we are dead to sin's power and alive to God's power. Christ has died to sin and lives to righteousness and we are united with Him. We must count this to be true of ourselves and increasingly 'become what we are' by faith. The basis for being able to say 'no' to sin in our lives is our identification with Christ in His cross, applied by the power of the Spirit. All the sins we fight are in fact defeated, forgiven, buried sins. We must fight them as such by faith. We must believe the truths of Romans chapter 6. At the same time, you must know what God says about the toxicity and danger of our flesh, still resident in us. That leads to the second thing we do to be cleansed from sin practically: we must flee from sin and temptation.

You flee from sin by removing opportunities to sin, like tempting situations, provocative stimuli, or by toying with temptation. Where a 'radical amputation' is necessary, it must be done to prevent further opportunities to sin. Faith will make sure we do not lead ourselves into temptation.

Romans 13:14 ¹⁴ *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*

Matthew 5:29 ²⁹ *"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.*

You flee from sin by removing and separating from influences that feed the sinful nature. This could be things on TV, radio, Internet, types of music, certain places, certain social situations, certain leisure activities, certain acquaintances.

1 John 2:15-16 ¹⁵ *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* ¹⁶ *For all that is in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world.*

You also flee from sin by saying 'no' to sin at the point of temptation - first in thought, and also in deed. God grants you 'victory' over sin at the moment of obedience, not a moment before. God promises a way of escape for every temptation, and we must flee from sin and to this way of escape.

1 Corinthians 10:13 ¹³ *No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.*

The third thing we do to be cleansed from a sin we have confessed, is to submit entirely to the Word of God. Our attitude must be one that is prepared to obey whatever the Word says, and allow it to have the final say in our lives.

Psalms 139:23-24 ²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties;* ²⁴ *And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.*

We commune with God in His Word and prayer, both in times of adoring worship, and in times of service in everyday life. As we do this, we come to know Him better, and we see our sins clearer. God convicts us of something He now wishes us to see as sinful and we must forsake it. We confess it, with full intention to forsake it. He cleanses us, in our consciences, and assists us to further cast it off from our lives. This leads us to the fifth stage – conformity to Christ, which then begins the cycle again. We'll consider what this conformity to Christ looks like next week.