

Following at a Safe Distance

Exodus 19: 16 -25

Today I want to ask you about your relationship with God - and the nature of this question alone, pretty much assumes that you have, at least on some level a relationship with God – whatever that might look like or however you might describe it.

Some of you might describe your relationship with God as vibrant and exciting and the best thing that's ever happened to you since sliced bread. If this describes you, I celebrate with you. I rejoice with you and tell you that you probably fall into the minority.

Others might say that your relationship with God is hard, challenging and frustrating because you just don't feel like you can relate to God, and that you don't seem to be on the same wavelength with Him. You would even say that there is a large amount of dissonance between you and God and you have no idea how to tune yourself into him.

Still others will say your relationship with God is ho-hum or even non-existent on any sort of practical level.

For some, you're not even sure if a relationship with God is even a real thing or even possible. You put the prospect of having a relationship with God in the same category as time machines or perpetual motion machines.

Wherever you're at on the relationship spectrum with God, I think it is very important that I ask this question especially this morning given the fact that we've entered a new year, and the new year

seems to be a time when we tend to put extra emphasis on bringing order and sense to our often hectic and sometimes chaotic lives.

I know I try, with varying degrees of success, to organize and make sense out of my life, and part of this attempt is evaluating and trying to recalibrate my relationship with God. My guess is that you've probably been in the same boat.

But the question I want to home in on this morning has to do with how we are following Him.

At what I mean by this is ... Are we deliberately or maybe subconsciously trying to keep a safe distance from God?

In other words, are we being cautious with Him, making sure we don't get too close lest he notices us and calls us to do something that would cause us to change our comfortable routine and lifestyle?

As I say this, I'm reminded of my college and seminary days sitting in various classes, usually toward the back of the classroom, attempting to fly under the radar, hoping I wouldn't get called on by the teacher for fear that he or my classmates would soon discover how much I really didn't know!

This is not the best way to be a good student, nor is it very conducive for having a vibrant and real relationship with God.

What I'm saying is that it serves no purpose to stay out on the fringes away from God.

Yes, it may feel safer there, and yes, I understand that God has no boundaries and there's no place we can go to escape God.

God will pursue and find us no matter where we try to hide, but why go there in the first place?

We're only making it difficult on ourselves and missing out on the blessings that could be ours if we're willing to rest in His presence and seek refuge under his wings.

God pursues us, but he never forces us to love him.

I guess another way I might be able to put this is to ask the question... Are we going to be Old Testament people of God or New Testament people of God?

And if we're going to be Old Testament people of God, well then yes, it probably is a good idea to keep our distance from God.

I've come to this conclusion after reading Exodus 19 which basically describes God's relationship with the people of Israel after he freed them from the bondage of slavery in Egypt which they experienced for an interminable amount of time.

In Exodus 19 we learn that the Israelites, under the leadership of Moses, find themselves camping at the foot of Mount Sinai. They have been freed from their Egyptian overlords for only about 90 days – hardly long enough to pay the water bill - when God calls Moses to meet him on the mountain, to receive his message, and relay it to the people.

Essentially, God's message is this: You guys have seen firsthand what I did to Egypt in order to set you free. You are my people. I heard your cries for help and rescued you and have called you to myself.

So, in light of my rescuing you, I'm expecting something in return. I'm asking you to obey me and follow my commands. It seems like a reasonable request, especially when you realize that the best thing about it is that if you do obey, you'll be blessed beyond imagination and be my treasured possession.

Sure, every nation and every people belong to me because I've made them, but you guys hold a special place in my heart. You will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In other words, I have a special task for you: To reflect my holiness and goodness so that others will come to me and be people of God too, and my name will be the most famous among all nations as it should be.

So, in a nutshell, this is God's message to his chosen people. And to their credit, they agree without reservation to the terms of the conditions.

Exodus 19: 7 – 8 reads, *“So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. The people all responded together, we will do everything the Lord has said.”*

Don't you just love it when a plan comes together, and two separate parties have been able to reach an agreement about some issue that in the past they've been unable to resolve?

That's kind of how it feels here ... but everything is still not ideal, is it?

So, what do you think is wrong? Where is the flaw?

God has freed his people from the terrible burden of slavery, and He's told his people how they are his treasured possession and how he wants to bless them. And the Israelites are all gun-ho about keeping his commandments! *"We will do everything the Lord has said!"*

What could possibly be the problem?

What could possibly go wrong?

Well, I think we all have an idea of what it is. It's this huge gap that exists between God's holiness and our sinful nature. And we see it clearly here in Exodus 19 when the Lord says to Moses, *"Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people."*

You see, the problem is that we as human beings, because of our sin and imperfection and frailties and any other word you want to use to describe our shortcomings when compared to our magnificent Creator - a perfectly holy and righteous God – cannot approach and relate with and dwell with a holy God unless our sin is dealt with.

For us to see God in all his glory and splendor and holiness and live is an impossibility because our sin cannot withstand the holiness of God.

We can try to wash and bathe and put on our best clothes and think our best thoughts and refrain from worldly passions for a time, but there's nothing we could ever do to prepare us to see our Maker clearly, without filters and live for a second in his presence let alone relate to him on a daily basis.

So, for those of you out there that are having a difficult time seeing a way towards relating to a holy God, I get it.

This is why God instructs Moses to *“put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, “Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain will surely be put to death.”*

Our sin is a very serious problem. The God of the universe, the one that has made us and brought us into being wants to be our God and wants us to be his people, but our sin is in the way, and no amount of washing our exteriors is going to take it away.

Something radical must happen on our insides, and until that something happens, we can only follow God at a distance or risk being consumed by God’s righteous holiness.

Why do you think Mount Sinai was covered with smoke when God descended upon it? Was it to impress the Israelites?

No! It was to protect them from his righteous glory which would have consumed anyone who laid eyes upon it! No one can survive the pure undiminished holiness of God. So, we must follow God at a safe distance lest we be consumed by him.

But here we are in 2026.

Thousands of years have passed since Moses met God on the mountain and received the ten commandments. How is that we are not consumed and struck down by God’s righteous and perfect holiness today?

The God of today is the same God who called Moses to the mountain top. Is it because we've been able to maintain our distance from God? I don't think so.

No. The only thing that has changed is that God, in his determination and desire and through his perfect plan to solve mankind's greatest problem, sin, took upon himself the sin that has kept us from him. Now we no longer have to live like the Old Testament people of God who were taught and instructed to maintain their distance from God for their own good lest God's holiness consumed them.

You see, God had this crazy idea that not only did he want to make us and save us, but He decided that he wanted to dwell among man so that he could be our God and we could be his people and that these two parties might be able to live in harmony with each other - Us serving and loving God. God loving us and providing for us and calling us to a great and holy purpose.

And he taught us about his plan. This is why he gave the Israelites very detailed instructions about the construction and operation of the tabernacle and later the temple. These structures were to be the dwelling places of God among men on earth. Exodus 25:8: *"Then have them make me a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them."*

When you think about for a minute, isn't it amazing that God would desire and choose to dwell among his creation that for all intents and purposes turned against him in thought and word and deed?

He could have stood back at a great distance and just admired his creation and prayed for it. Instead, He decides to be actively

involved in our lives, sharing his nature, his blessings and his divine presence.

But he couldn't do any of this fully until he had resolved the issue of mankind's sin.

And once he did, by offering his own body as the perfect and only acceptable sacrifice for humanity's sin, he then made it possible for us to follow him closely and not far off because he took away the power of sin and dismantled the schemes and plans of those who would use our sin to destroy us.

No longer do we have to worry about keeping our distance from God.

No longer do we have to worry about not touching the foot of the mountain of God.

No longer do the people of God have to worry about when and what type of sacrifice we need to bring to the temple or tabernacle of God because God is not living in those buildings anymore. He lives in us by the faith he has given us through his Son.

The partition that separated a holy God from his followers that reminded them each and every day to keep their distance was now torn asunder because of God's Son's perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

So, in light of this truth, how then shall we live?

I don't blame God at all for keeping the old testament followers of God at arm's length. It was for their own safety. The blood of sheep and cows and goats could never take away the sins of humanity and God's holiness can never tolerate the ungodliness of humanity.

Something radical had to be done if God's plan to live among men in harmony was to ever happen.

But God used these situations: Mt. Sinai and the tabernacle and the temples to illustrate spiritual truths: That those things were simply shadows of things to come as the author Hebrew described in Hebrews 8.

The Bible teaches us that we are the New Testament people of God, aka. Christians, and our bodies are now the temple of God and God has chosen to take up residence within us, by first dealing with our sin on the cross, forgiving us, and then having his spirit dwell in us when we believe in his risen and eternal living Son Jesus.

The Good News is that we no longer have to keep our distance from God. He lives in us by his spirit and guides us into his truth and righteousness, peace and love.

Isn't this amazing?

So how are you following God?

With fear and trepidation from a long way off because you think God will smite you the moment you step out of line?

If he had wanted to, he could have done this already a thousand times since we're all guilty of wandering away from God and rebelling against him.

No, we have the blessing of being and acting like New Testament people of God. We can walk close and have a deep personal relationship with the God of the universe because when we believe, God changes our hearts.

Those Old Testament folks, they wanted so much to follow God and obey his commands, but they didn't have the Spirit of God indwell them like He can in us.

Listen to Ezekiel's prophecy concerning the Lord's promise and work in our lives: *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."*

Paul writes about this loving, radical act of God that opens the way for us to closely walk with Him and each other. Ephesians 2: 12 – 18:

"Remember that at that time you were separated from Christ ... without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and in this one body, to reconcile both of them to God through the cross ... he came to preach peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one spirit."

Will follow God from a distance and hope that you can somehow stay out of his line of sight while at the same time gather what crumbs may fall to the floor?

Or will you believe in Jesus Christ and recognize and embrace his loving action toward you by faith and begin following Him closely and relating with him personally – this One who has removed all obstacles so that He can dwell within us and we can dwell with him for all eternity? Amen.