

## **“Knowing God: Who Is The Father?”**

Not long before he was to stand trial before the religious leaders (of his day) and (ultimately) die on the cross for our sin, Jesus prayed a prayer that gives us some good insight into why our relationship with God is so important. Listen to what he prayed, only a few hours before he was to die. From John, chapter 17, he prayed:

“Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.” (And now listen to what he says.) He says, “And this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

“This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” What Jesus is saying is that our eternal life is directly connected to our knowing God, and our knowing God is directly connected to our knowing Jesus.

Beginning this morning (and for the next two weeks) we're going to be digging into what it means for us to “know God”, and why (and how) our knowing God is so important. In some ways, this is a “back to the basics” series. We're going to start with the basics, but we're going to be pushing it far beyond. And we're going to be doing that because it's one thing to know about God. It's another to know God. It's one thing to know what's found in this book we call the Bible. It's another to know the one who is its author, and the one who holds all of life, including yours and mine, in his very hand.

Let me show you something as we get going. This is a bit of an aside, but hang with me. Do you know what I bought my wife for Christmas? (Do you care what I bought my wife for Christmas?) I bought her this nice winter jacket. Check it out. It's long and flowing. It has pockets. It has a hood. You can snuggle up in it (keep warm) and you don't even need your husband. What else would a wife want!

Do you know what's crazy about this jacket? It's big and it's (a bit bulky), warm down to 32 degrees. But you can take it and wrap it up, condense it down; roll it and shrink it and squeeze it until it fits into this nice little compartment that's no bigger than you can hold in your hand. Isn't that cool? Isn't that a great gift...a great husband?

Do you know what I think we've done; what I believe we have a tendency to do? I think we have a tendency to do the same thing with God, as I just did with this jacket. (I really do.) He's big and he's bulky and he totally works; so much so, that we can't take him all in, at least not all at once.

And so what do we do? We shrink him down, pack him up. We keep on squeezing and condensing (and rolling) until we get him into a size (and shape) we can handle. And we do that because, when we get him into a size and shape we can handle, then we can do whatever we want with him. We can use him when we need him; set him aside when we don't. We can take him and form him and mold him into an image of our own likeness, instead of allowing him to take and form and mold us into his.

What I want to do in this series (over the next few weeks), is to pull this God out of the packages we've constructed, and paint a picture for us of how great and how awesome and how magnificent this God of ours truly is. And I want to do that, because (I honestly believe) that once we grasp the magnificence of our God, it changes everything. Once we begin to realize how big this God really is, nothing in life is the same. Our relationship with God changes everything. Your relationship (with God) will change the way you live.

Now, for those of you (here today) who are long into your faith, my hope is this will be an encouragement and (maybe even) a challenge to not let your God become too small, and (as a result) to not let your faith in this God depend (in any way) upon you. This isn't about you. It's about him. And he is so much bigger than you.

And for those of you who are new to the faith, maybe even still checking it out, my hope is that you'll begin to see not only how big this God we (follow and serve) actually is, but also how much and how eternally you have been (and always will be) loved by him.

I want to do three things today, and you'll find them on your outlines. For those of you who have been around here, (who know me), you know I like to play around with alliteration, words that sound the same. (It

makes it easier to remember.) I want to talk with you today about the Who, the Heart, and the How... The Who, the Heart, and the How.

I want to start with the Who. Who is this God we follow? Who is this one who has revealed himself to us in three different ways, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? I want to talk about the Who.

From there, I want to talk about the Heart. What is the heart of the Father? What matters most to this one who is not only our Father, but the Father of the one he sent, his Son, Jesus Christ?

And then I want to close it out (today) by talking about the How. How are we to truly know this God? How can we (as created beings) in this world, even begin to come before our Creator, as his children, and call upon him as our Father?

The Who, the Heart, and the How. Let's start with the Who. Who is this God we follow. What do know about this God in whom we believe?

Just for fun, I did a little name search. (I went online and did a little looking.) Do you know there are more than 750 names (for God) found in the Bible? There are more than 750 ways in which this God we are called to know (and follow) is named?

As an example, to give us a feel, let me give you just a few. Listen to these names (for God) as I read. In the Bible, God is named (or referred to) as the Almighty, the all-sufficient, the all-knowing; he's the Alpha & Omega, the Author and Finisher of our faith, the Star of Jacob, the bright and morning star; he's our ever-present help, the Cornerstone, the hope of glory, our Shepherd, our Lord, our King; he's a consuming fire, the covenant of the people, the Creator of the ends of the earth; he's our Deliverer, the Desire of Nations, our Dwelling Place, the Everlasting God, The Everlasting King, the Faithful Witness; he's the firstborn from the dead, the Sure Foundation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of all hope; he's our Salvation, our Rock, our Peace, our Righteousness, our Mercy, our Life; he's our Savior, our Shield, our Pardon; the One who tries our hearts, the One who knows our sin, the One who hears and answers prayer; he's the hope of the hopeless, the help of the fatherless, the Head of the Church, the One who formed us in our mother's womb.

And on and on it goes; one name after another (given to God), and that's just the start. Now, I gave you only 45. There are more than 750 names (in the Bible) given to God; more than 750 ways in which God is named and described because of who he is and what he has done and is able to do.

Now, I don't want this to be overwhelming, (especially in week one), but how about that as a homework assignment? Only one simple task: Go home and memorize the names of God. Go home and try to wrap your mind around how many ways (and why) our God is named.

Bottom line: you can't do it. There are too many names to remember. There's too much going on. And even if you could, it still would not fully encapsulate all we know and believe about this One true God. He's too big.

It's little wonder that when Moses asked God, "What should I tell the people? What should I say is your name?" God simply said, (tell them), "I Am who I Am." There's no name I could give you (God said) that would fully describe me. There's no title I could offer that would even come close to being faithful to what I am able to do.

Now, thankfully (for us), God has shrunk it down into a framework we can understand. In the Bible, God reveals himself to us in three basic ways. We say it in our creeds, in those confessions of what we believe.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the one who comes to us and who is with us and who helps us to believe in this God we will never (no matter how long we live) even begin to grasp and comprehend."

Now, there are all kinds of ways to think about this, about this God who is three persons in just one God. (You might have heard some of the analogies.) It's like water that comes in the form of liquid and vapor and ice, but it's all still the same substance. It's like a person who is, at the same time, a mother and a daughter and a wife, but still the same person, just one.

Do you know where I end up in all of that? (Pastor Jim has said this for many years.) Do know what God wants us to know? It's real simple. He wants us to know that (to him) relationships are important. He wants us to know that (in him) relationships are found. And he wants us to know that (with him) relationships (for us) are possible.

I can't relate to a God who has more than 750 names. He is so much (and so far) beyond me that I'll never catch up. But I can relate to a God who wants to relate to us as our Father, to a God who was born among us (in Jesus) as a Son, and to a God who promises to be with us (in Spirit) all the way through life.

Today it's all about the Father. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." Now, that's a lot simpler than 750 names. But even with (only that), it's still a bit overwhelming.

Just think about it. (God is so much bigger than us.) We say, "I believe...in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." (Take that as an assignment.) Spend the next seven days with just that, and see where it leads you: "God the Father Almighty."

He can do whatever he wants. He has the power to pull off whatever he chooses. He's all-powerful. He's all-knowing. He's not limited (like we are) by time. Every moment (to God) is the present. Every challenge (we face) has already been known and faced by him. He's the Father Almighty, and he's the "Creator of heaven and earth."

Go back to the beginning, to Genesis, chapter one. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Even before reading the rest of the story, just look at what he created. There is no way you can look at the world and come to the conclusion there is no God. This wouldn't just happen. It didn't just happen.

We think Google and Facebook and Apple are cutting edge, and in this life they are. But they are so far behind! God created it by his Word. The Father spoke and the world came into being. He breathed into the dirt and gave us life.

Martin Luther says we are to "fear, love, and trust" God. We are to fear, love, and trust." Do you know what I would do, if all I knew was the beginning of the story and the 750 names? (Do know what I wouldn't do?) I wouldn't be overly-inclined to spend a lot of time with this God, if all I knew about was his power. In fact, if all knew about was his power, I'd be filled more with fear than I would with love and trust.

Just think about it. This God who has the power to do whatever he wants; who can give and end life at any moment? That's good news, if he's on your side. It's not so good news, if he's not. I'd have a hard time loving and trusting this God, and I would go through life filled with fear (if that's all I knew), because who knows what might be on the other side?

Do you know where all of that leads? It leads to the same place every other major religion in the world leads, apart from the Christian faith. Every major religion, except for Christianity, is based upon that kind of fear. And do you know where else it leads? It leads to a religion based upon what you do, a religion built upon trying to measure up. Every one; go down the list.

For the Buddhist, the goal is nirvana, to eliminate all desires or cravings for anything. And so (in Buddhism) there's an eight-fold path (you need to follow) to make it happen. (But there's no guarantee.)

For Hindus, it's the same thing. It's through yoga and meditation; a cycle of reincarnation until you finally get it right. (You might be here a long time, trying to be good enough for this God.)

In Islam, they believe we're all basically good, but (at the same time) we all have our failings and flaws. Ultimately, it comes to down to doing more good than bad; but even then, the decision (on who gets in and who's left out) is arbitrary and uncertain.

And it keeps on going. In New Age, it's all about self-awareness, transcendental meditation, offsetting bad karma with good. For Mormons, it's good works. For Jehovah's Witnesses, it's hoping you're part of the 144,000 that'll make it. For Christian Science, they believe that sin, evil, sickness and death are not even real. All of those things (in this life) are only in your mind. Really?

Bottom line, (in all of those other religions), it's all based upon fear. There's no certainty. There's no assurance. The best you can say is that we hope this God we can't understand will ultimately understand us, and we'll have a chance. That's the best we can say. And (if that's all we could say), I, like many others would be afraid.

Thankfully, that's not all we can say, because God has shown us his heart. So much of this overlaps. We believe in only One God. That's all there is. But this (One God) comes to us in three ways, and so you can hardly talk about the one without bringing in the other two.

That was our gospel reading today. It was all about the Father's heart. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

Just think about it, (Jesus says). “Which of you fathers (or mothers), if one of your children asks for food, will you give them a stone? If one of your kids comes to you and needs your help, will you shut them out?” Of course not! Why would you do that, if you love your kids? You wouldn’t do that, if they’re your kids.”

Then, “how much more, (Jesus says), will your Father in heaven do good to those who ask him?” How much more will this God (who is so much greater than us) be good to those he created and loved from the start?

You want an assignment? Spend the next seven days thinking about that. It’ll blow your mind! Go through the gospels, those good news stories (written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and you’ll find story after story that helps reveals the Father’s heart.

Matthew 6: “Don’t worry about your life (Jesus says), what you are to eat or drink or wear. Your heavenly Father provides for the birds of the air and the grasses in the fields; he’ll give you the things you need. You don’t have to worry.”

Luke 15: “Even if there are a hundred sheep (Jesus says) and only one is lost, the Father leaves the 99 and goes after the one.” That’s how much he cares. That’s how much he loves you.

It’s like a father waiting for the return of his son who had strayed. It’s like a mother who would do anything and everything to protect her little ones from that which can harm. It’s like a mustard seed that grows into a tree and provides a place for the birds. It’s like a net thrown into the sea that catches all kinds of fish.

Go through the gospels and you’ll discover how big this God of ours truly is. Read through the stories and you’ll discover how loving and caring (for you) is the Father’s heart.

John, chapter 3: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” God so loved you, that he was willing to let Jesus go all the way to the cross that you might have a chance at life.

If you want to know the Who, spend some time with the names. This God is bigger than we give him credit. If you want to know the Heart, spend some time with the stories. God will show you his heart. He cares more than we might realize. And, if you want to know the How, then you need to make a commitment. You need to give God some time.

The Who, the Heart, and the How. I want to close this out today with a challenge. This three-week series is designed, in part, to help us see how big this God truly is and how much (and how eternally) each of us have been loved. It’s also designed to help us take some practical steps in the direction of knowing God.

“This is eternal life (Jesus said): that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” How does that happen? How are we to know this God?

Here’s the challenge, and it’s something you’ll be hearing over and over throughout this coming year. It’s like any other relationship. If you put in the time, the relationship grows. If you neglect (putting in the time), it begins to fade.

I could give you a long list of people I knew by name, but whom I never (really knew) until I sat down and listened to what was in their heart. It’s the same thing with God. If we want to know God, and that’s what this community is about. Longtime believers or new to the faith, don’t sell short what God is doing in this place and why we are here. This community exists for the very purpose of helping each other (and the world) to know God. That’s why we’re here. Don’t sell this short.

Here’s the challenge. I told you I liked things that rhyme, easier to remember. Here’s the rhyme: “You and Two... You and Two.” (Say it with me.) You and Two. (Say it again.) You and Two.

Here’s the deal. Here’s how it works. You find two (two others) – it could be family, it could be friends, it could be a co-worker, a neighbor. Maybe you’re a family of four. Call it “Me and Three.” I don’t care. You find two (or three), whatever it is, and (beginning this week) challenge each other, support each other, encourage each other to spend time with God. Send a text; make a phone call. Do whatever works, whatever helps.

And here’s how; through worship, Word, and prayer; through worship, Word, and prayer. (Say it with me.) Through worship, Word, and prayer. (Say it again.) Through worship, Word, and prayer.

You’re going to be hearing this over and over again: “You and Two.” You and two others; encourage, challenge, support, through worship, Word, and prayer.

Commit to being here in worship; not once a month, not once in a while, but every week. This God who cannot be described by more than 750 names, that’s what he wants. That’s what he commands. Who are we to think we have a better way? Commit to being in worship.

From there, spend time in the Word. Spend time in God's Word. It doesn't matter where you start, what you read, or how much. Pick something. Do it together. Do your own thing. (It doesn't matter.) But do it, every day. Even, if only one chapter, five minutes, turn it into a habit. And watch (and listen) for God's heart.

And, from there, then pray. Spend time in prayer. It's the same thing. Don't overthink it. (It's not that hard.) Prayer is talking with God. (That's all it is.) If you can talk with me, you can talk with God. If you can talk with a friend, you might be surprised how friendly God really is.

"You and Two." Worship, Word, and Prayer. Start this week. Find your two (or your three), and make it happen. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that you do it.

Don't sell this short. This is eternal life: that you know the Father, and the one he sent, his Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.