

Draw Near To God
James 4: 1-10
Text Vs. 8

By
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“Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.” To be a Christian is to be in a personal relationship with God. It is easy to fall into the trap of learning things about God but never personally knowing him. If we are going to be a Christian we need to know what kind of being God is. The highest category of existence we know is a person. Whatever God may be, God is, at least, personal. He may be supra personal (not super), supra-beyond personal, but we don’t know what that is. God is personal. Personality is the real miracle of the universe. Our personal God is reaching out to each of us as persons. The Church is fellowship—the place where we are to be related to God in a personal way. The whole work of creation and redemption—God’s activity on and within the historical realm—the whole story that is told in the Bible—is just God’s bid for fellowship with us. We human beings are made for fellowship with God. To be a Christian is to be in a personal relationship with a personal God in the person of Jesus Christ who is made real and contemporary to us in every age through the biblical story by the person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God in the present tense. Our God is not some distant, removed, being far out beyond the reaches of the cosmos that sends messages to us. Our God is the God who comes to us. This is the visited planet. God has come to us in Jesus Christ. God wants to know us personally. The question for today is, “Do you really know God personally or are you just a member of the church like another club or a lodge?” James says, “Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”

Once we have established and experienced that personal relationship with God, we face the problem of how to keep it alive—how to keep going. Every Christian needs to learn how to keep in touch with God. All of us know that bonds can be broken and relationships can die. To become a Christian is not enough. We must find a way to keep going, a way to grow and mature in Christ. Far too many who become Christians do not last long. They are sincere—they mean well—they get off to a good start—but they cannot finish. They fall by the wayside and faith dies.

An older couple was driving down the road on Sunday afternoon. He was driving; she was learning against the door on her side. They were eager to get where they were going, but they had caught up with a slow-moving car ahead of

them. The driver of that car was a young man; a young woman was cuddled very close to him, almost sitting in his lap, rubbing his face, and now and then kissing him on the cheek. Even though it was dangerous, he would turn around and kiss her. They were in no hurry to get where they were going. It was impossible to pass them, so the older couple began to talk. The woman looked across at her husband, then looked ahead at the young couple and asked, "Why don't we sit together like that anymore?" Quick as a flash, he responded, "I haven't moved." Relationships may grow cold over the years. Love can be neglected and die. We all need to learn how to keep going, to keep in touch, to keep alive.

There is a sense in which the Christian life is a lot like mountain climbing. There is before us high and distant goal. The road into the heights is long and full of dangers as well as beauties. There are slippery, dangerous places, rough and steep precipices over which some have been hurled, crevices in which others have been swallowed up. Success means reaching the goal—standing on the summit with the wind blowing through your hair and the sun shining bright upon your face. If we are to make it we must find a way to keep our faith, to keep going and to never turn back.

When climbers set out to scale the heights of a great mountain, they always take a well made, carefully chosen rope. When they come to the place where danger begins, where the rocks are rotten, the snow loose, the glacier full of hidden crevasses, they stop and carefully fasten themselves together with the rope. Then they move forward on their dangerous path with a new confidence, because now, if one slips, the others will be able to stop them and hold them before they have fallen very far. They are safe because they are bound together. To lose touch with God and our fellow Christians is to court disaster, You have a responsibility to the church—the fellowship—and the church has a responsibility to you. You must be welcomed and taught and offered opportunities to get involved. You must form friendships and establish habits that will help to keep you from falling. The church owes it to you to help you get started and keep going. A modern evangelist once said when a person makes a decision to follow Christ we in the church have six weeks to win or lost that person.

In Portsmouth, Ohio, there was a fine man in the church, a common man, but an uncommon Christian. His name was James Cassidy. He once was a drinking man, a fighter, and a real rowdy. When the new jail in Huntington, West Virginia was built he was the first person to be arrested and incarcerated in it. But he had two sons who attended Sunday School at the Christian Church. Those boys decided to confess Jesus as Lord and be baptized. On the evening they were to be baptized "Cassidy," as we called him, came to church. He was half drunk and had a bottle of whiskey in his hip pocket. But the sermon touched his heart and he stepped out to say he wanted to be baptized with his boys. He was baptized,

but no one could say he was the greatest candidate for a strong, faithful Christian they had ever seen. “Cassidy” came to worship for a while, and then he began to slip away. There was one man in that church who was very wise and sensitive to the needs of others. He asked “Cassidy” to take the ushering assignment on the east side of the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. Thirty years later “Cassidy” was still there greeting the people and making them welcome. His church had helped him save his Christian life. He became a Christian and then almost faltered and fell by the wayside, but a discerning friend helped him to keep going by getting him involved. We have to find a way to keep going.

E. Stanley Jones tells the story of a Baptist man who was asked about the importance of baptism and he said, “It’s all right, but you must not hang around the river too long.” That is good advice. It is very important to be baptized—it is the sacrament of initiation—the way by which we are brought “into Christ” and into the church, but it is also necessary to move beyond this initial experience. A new Christian must find a way to get going and keep going. A new Christian must find a way to keep in touch, keep in contact, with God. If we do not, we will surely fall away—drift back into the old, lonely, isolated life. When we are separated from the source of our life, we slowly wilt and die. The great Quaker philosopher, Elton Trueblood, has called our culture a “Cutflower Civilization,” one that has been cut off from the source of its renewing life. A person is like a congregation in that we are both growing and dying at the same time, and if we stop growing then we are only dying. Christ gives us new life, abundant life, but we have to keep it going. That new life has to be fed and nourished and exercised.

James expresses this very well in the scripture we read today. Many scholars feel the book was written by James “the brother of the Lord” (Mark 6:3; Gal. 1:19), that is, the brother of Jesus. It is a most practical book. Ethical issues on how we are supposed to live leap out at us from every page. He speaks of conflicts and disputes that come from cravings (desires) that are at war within us. We want something and commit murder to get it. We covet what others have and engage in disputes and conflicts to get it. “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” James is talking about how new Christians are overcome, cut off from God, until they slip back into the old life from which they came. So James exhorts us—“Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.” James knew when you lose God on the inside—in your heart and mind—it will not be long until God is pushed completely away from your life.

How do we keep in touch with God? How do we “draw near” to God? How do we keep God in the center of our lives? There are a number of things that can help. **One is worship.** But there is something to understand—to get very clear in our minds. We don’t come to church for what we can get *from* God but for what we can offer *to* God. Worship comes from an old English word meaning “Worthship”—what has value to us. We come to worship—to offer God the praise

of our lips and the adoration of our hearts and minds. Just coming to church is not enough. Look down the order of service in your bulletin and ask the purpose of each item listed. Every one is an opportunity for you to offer something to God. Worship is intended to make us aware of God and to make his presence real in our lives. Worship can help us to draw near to God.

Another help is study—reading, thinking, and learning. Christians need to dig into their faith—seek understanding. Grow. Expand. Mature. That can be a lifetime process. Many of you have been in church school today—have you learned or experienced or decided anything that is going to make a difference in your relationship with God? The church has to recover its ministry of teaching. In his recent book, *A Teachable Spirit*, Richard Osmer writes: “The single most important task before...churches today is the reestablishment of a vital teaching ministry at every level of church life” (p.x). We would do well to remember the words of Dora Chaplin, “Our Lord said, ‘Feed my sheep’; he did not say ‘Count them’” (*The Privilege of Teaching*).

But I especially want to say a word to you about prayer. Prayer is the most personal and intimate way of drawing near to God. We need to understand, first and foremost, that prayer is communion with God. Prayer is the loftiest, the highest, and the most exhilarating experience within the reach of any soul, communion with God.

Jesus is our great example. Prayer was the habitual atmosphere of his life. His disciples asked him for one thing—“Lord, teach us to pray.” They watched him and heard him pray, and they knew he had something they wanted and needed.

In every critical moment of his life, Jesus prayed. (1) At the beginning of his ministry, when the call to his life work came swift and sudden, Luke says, “When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened” (Luke 3:21). (2) There was a day when the first apostolic band had to be chosen and the momentous decision made about the right persons to carry on his work. Luke describes the night before the decision—“He went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God.” (6:12). (3) There came a time when the twelve disciples were baffled by a particularly difficult case of demon possession and had given up hopelessly. They referred the case to Jesus and he cast the evil spirit out. Later they asked Jesus why they could not cast out the evil spirit. And he answered, “This kind can come out only through prayer” (Mark 9:29). (4) There was a day when Gethsemane closed around him, the powers of darkness descended upon him, and the temptation to desert God’s cause grew fierce. “In is anguish”, says Luke, “he prayed more earnestly” (Luke 22:44), and (5) finally, there was an your when the nails and torture of Calvary had almost finished him, and his strength was ebbing away. The dark waters of Jordan were rolling at his feet. “Father”, cried Jesus, “into your hands I commend my spirit”

(Luke 23:46). He died praying. In all the great crises of his life, and even in the moment of death, Jesus was found in prayer. Through prayer, he kept in touch with God. In every critical moment, Jesus was in touch with God.

Jesus made it very clear the kind of church he wanted—“my house shall be called a house of prayer” (Mt. 21:13). Prayer is one wonderful way of keeping in touch with God. When a Christian stops praying it won't be long until God is out of one's entire life.

Prayer changes things. Prayer changes people. Prayer changes situations. William Temple, the great archbishop of Canterbury, said many wise things, but he never was wiser than when he said, “When I pray for people, coincidences happen. And when I stop praying, the coincidences stop.”

Three good rules for prayer:

- (1) Set apart a special time for prayer. (At mealtime. At night. Other specific times.)
- (2) Cultivate the habit of praying as often as you think of it.
- (3) As soon as possible, get some other people to pray with you.

One way to improve the worship in our congregations is to give more attention to the prayers in the service. Probably most of our people feel that the reading of a printed prayer can become a mere routine procedure—as it undoubtedly can—and that a prayer to be genuine and sincere must be spontaneous and extempore. The result is that the prayers in worship are routine, off-the-cuff, full of clichés, poorly prepared, and the same week after week. But we need to be reminded that extempore spontaneity is not the only alternative to reading a printed prayer. The real alternative is thoughtful, careful, skillful preparation. If we are not offended by the minister preparing to speak to us, why should we be offended by the suggestion that we carefully prepare to speak to God? Many of our prayers begin with “Thank you, dear God”—and that is a reverent, sincere way to begin. But a public prayer should seek to express the soul's adoration (praise), thanksgiving, penitence (confession), petitions, and intercessions. That is a sacred soul-searching task. It requires time, thought, and careful preparation. It calls for deep sympathetic insight into human need. Too many of our prayers are expressed in vague generalities. Learn to be specific. Say clearly what sins for which you are asking forgiveness. There are several different types of prayer in a worship service—Invocation, Lord's Prayer, Offertory, Pastoral Prayer, Communion, Baptism, Benediction—each one should be carefully and thoughtfully prepared. Each prayer in the service, and especially the pastoral prayer can help us draw near to God.

Prayer is both the new dimension and the new language of the new life. Prayer is the path to the greatest power of all. Prayer moves the hand that moves the

universe. Prayer is the continuation of our conversion to Jesus. Prayer gets us in touch with God. If you are going to be a Christian–

Learn how to pray.
Life's shadows will depart.
Prayer will bring Jesus
Into your heart.

“Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.”