

What are some of the most important relationships in your life and how have you developed them? Chances are that your relationships took a lot of time and work and didn't happen instantaneously. Instead, they've been cultivated by years of communication, love, trust, and respect that has led to a growing intimacy. Like any other relationship, our relationship with God takes work and has slow growth.

In his book *Soul Cravings*, author and pastor Erwin McManus puts forth the idea that all human beings have three basic cravings. We yearn for intimacy, destiny, and meaning. We have these deep desires in us for these cravings because God has designed us to have them, to lead us into a deeper relationship with him from which we derive our identity. However, after Genesis 3, with the Fall of Creation through the sin of Adam and Eve, things have become a little messed up. We no longer look to God to fulfill our cravings, but rather turn to other things and people to define who we are.

Today, I want to focus on the first craving. The craving of intimacy. We want to belong. To be loved and accepted for who we are. The final of the three simple rules is to stay in love with God, "by attending upon all the ordinances of God such as worship, ministry of the word, Eucharist, private prayer, and fasting.

Another way to say this is what makes you feel intimate or close to God; what makes you grow closer to God. No one else can make you attend to the ordinances of God or care for your personal relationship with God. You must make time and protect it diligently.

If we are not working on our relationship with God, it will be difficult to be known as God's children. What makes it in your life that you are able to do this very difficult task? What keeps you close to God?

For Wesley it was the ordinances of God. Another way to say it would be that it's the spiritual disciplines. While Wesley gave a concise list of spiritual disciplines that feed most people, like scripture reading and prayer, there are others that may work for us specifically. I must have a Sabbath. One of my fellow commissioned ministers said something that has stuck with me: Sabbath and day off are not synonymous. Our Sabbath is set aside for doing the things that our acts of worship to God. I also attend Spiritual Direction with an advisor once a month to have a wise companion along my spiritual journey. What are the ways that you spend time with God and grow and are they working? All too often Christians get caught up in the idea of what they should be doing, when in reality it doesn't help us stay connected to God. As I said before, there are some things that all Christians need in order to grow with God - private devotion and prayer time and public worship. Like any other relationship, at times these practices may not yield the results that we would like, but we need to be committed to them, as they are the chief ways that we communicate with God and God communicates with us. We do not have the same advantage as the disciples in today's scripture passage who have walked and lived with Jesus over the past three years in his physical form. They had to be attentive to him because he was right in front of them. They had to follow his teaching or he rebuked them. They could ask him what something confusing meant. They had all of the tangible marks of an intimate relationship that we crave. We too can have such a relationship with Jesus but it will look different and requires us to be attentive in seeking him daily. What ways are you currently seeking to grow in your relationship with Christ and what new ways can you think of to try in the coming weeks?

Our relationship with God, tended to through spiritual disciplines, should be vital, alive, and growing. Yet, sometimes we shy away from going deeper into a relationship with God

because we think God will hurt us, because people have in the past. What a tragedy! We cut ourselves off in fear from the perfection of love, the only true acceptance we will ever have! We don't trust God's love for us. But God calls us to remember, remember all of the times that God held us close and told us that he loves us, and has this beautiful, amazing, relationship with us. Do not let bitterness from the pain inflicted by other imperfect people block you from this relationship.

If I could think of one person who had an intimate relationship with God from the scriptures I would say David. David was a little Shepherd boy who God chose to be the King of Israel. He is known for being called a man after God's own heart and promised that one of his descendants will be the Messiah. David and God had a relationship. If you need proof just look at the psalms. David was close enough to God to vent when he was having a horrible day. He was intimate enough with God to share his highest joys and deepest pains. He had no doubt that God had made him and loved him, even when he screwed up, which he of course did. And that is the type of relationship we crave with God! One marked by steadfast, faithful love. Love that envelops us and lets us rest in the knowledge that we are loved, perfectly, forever. And that steadfast love, the love that God showed to David, God is trying to show to all of us, if only we would work on our relationship with God - work on staying in love with God. What are you doing to help you have a relationship with God like David had - one that was growing and alive?

For Wesley, staying in love with God is the key to who we are as Christians. It is where we learn to listen to God and of God's love for us. For years now, I've been signing almost all of my emails with "You are LOVED." I hope that this is a small reminder to those I correspond with that they are first and foremost loved as a child of Christ. They are loved by God no matter how they see themselves or how others see them. They are loved by God no matter what they can or cannot do, because God doesn't alter Holy love for us. God loves us just as we are, broken pieces and all. I equate this to something that I have told a friend of mine. I love him for who he was, who he is, and who he is going to be. I love him, because I love him and I see beauty in him even on his bad days. My care for him isn't based off of a feeling, it goes deeper than that. But my friend and I did not get to have this type of care for each other overnight - it was a slow process built over years of being friends. While it is not a perfect analogy to compare our relationship with God to our relationship with humans, it is the framework we have to work in.

Sometimes our intimate connection with God can become marred in its beauty because of our tarnished human families. God loves you with the love of a perfect relationship. For those of you who didn't have an ideal relationship in your life, remember God is the one who created you. God rejoices over you. God cheers you on. God scolds you out of love in order to make you develop into a more complete person. God sacrificed everything for you. God wants nothing more than to be in a relationship with you, if only you are willing to put in the time and effort.

Brothers and sisters, I promise you that if you spend time cultivating your relationship with God you will be changed by God's love for you. Your very being will be transformed. Not all at once or overnight, but like we are changed by any relationship, one day at a time, just as the disciples were transformed by their *years* in relationship with Jesus. Relationships are never easy, and sometimes we are fearful of the change they bring. But as we fall more deeply in love with God, having our roots in this Divine relationship, we will more fully be able to reflect Christ's love for the world through our action. My hope and prayer is that we will be known as a church growing in God's love so we can be in ministry to all the world. Amen.