

“Trust Trumps Law”

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Now this letter to the Romans was written in 57-58 CE. But you need to know a little bit about the historical background to make the passage come alive.

In 49 CE, it was Emperor Claudius who expelled the Jews from Rome. So less than a decade in time earlier, all of the Jews had been taken out. But by the time this was written, Prisca and Aquila had already moved back from Florence, where they fled after the Roman siege and the Jews were kicked out. They ran to Corinth in 49 but by 57 or 58, when this letter was written, they were already back in Rome; but in that time between 49-58 when all of the Jews were taken out, the whole Church changed. During the Jewish absence, the Gentile Christians remained prominent, and they changed what Christianity meant. They fought hard to move Jewish laws - like circumcision and food laws and other things - out. They transformed Christianity in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire into something that focused more on faith rather than laws. Upon the Jewish Christians return, ethnic discord ensued.

Now there is a battle between the Jews and the Gentiles: Are we going to have more law or less law? Of course, the Jewish Christians wanted more, the Gentile Christians wanted nothing to do with the law. So, you have this battle between faith and law. And, according to Paul, righteousness comes not from following the law, but faith. Now I have a struggle, because Abraham was not a follower of the law. Abraham probably at first wasn't even a Jew, but he was blessed because of his trust in God - his faith in God.

So, we have to ask - what is faith? If we are justified - not by the law - but we are justified by our faith, we had better know what that faith is, and we had better know that we have it. If we are justified by faith alone then, how do we know that we have enough faith to be justified? How do we work hard enough to be faithful? (Is that not works righteousness in another form?) If we have to work at our faith, then we have to earn it; then it becomes just another law. I have tried to think about what faith is, if it isn't just something we have to work to like a law. Faith, in my opinion, is a relationship that we have between ourselves and God. And that relationship - between God and ourselves - dictates how we live, how we act toward other people and how we get justified by a God that we know.

I have told this story before. One of the most painful things in the world is to be with somebody as they are dying, and they have no faith. They are grasping. I had one man, in particular, when I was still a student in seminary. He was just in tears, screaming out. He wanted this relationship with God, but he had nothing in his heart. He had never known God, and he was reaching out, begging a stranger - that this stranger would take him home to God's Heavenly Kingdom. It was one of the saddest, most-frustrating moments of my life. We don't want to have to depend on a stranger for our justification, but to have faith in someone we know deep within our heart and soul, so that when we are taking our last breath, we know that we are going to be meeting a God that we truly love and are in a relationship with. But, how do we form that relationship?

Now in artistic expressions, paintings, for example, (I love watching some of the Roman Catholic nuns in the paintings and the art work that they have done because, if you know in the Roman Catholic Church, when a priest or a nun is ordained they receive a ring - a wedding ring. They are wedded to God.) So, in a lot of their art it becomes almost - and I don't mean this in a creepy way - but almost an erotic relationship between themselves and the Divine, because they are in a marital type of relationship with God. They have given God everything, the same way we hand over our whole being to the one that we marry.

You see that, for example, in this painting. (Scott points to a painting of a nun on the big screen.) Here is the mystic marriage of St. Catherine Siena with Jesus. You can see her hand is out. I think it is the wrong one, but I think they are giving artistic license so that her shoulder isn't turned away from the people. But, she is literally holding out her hand to have the ring placed upon it by Jesus. Of course, Jesus wasn't alive then. St. Catherine of Siena died in 1380 CE. But it's the artistic understanding that when someone is married to God - look at the longing in her face and the longing in Jesus for her - that intimacy may have not been a sexual thing, but it was certainly an intimate, close relationship. And that is what God is calling us to. An intimate relationship with God is fundamental to our development of faith.

In I John 4:16, *"So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them."* How do we share love with God? That is the question. If we can answer that we can develop that relationship with God that is held in our hearts, so we have to learn how to love God. It is difficult because when you are in a loving relationship with another person that is easy: You see each other, you talk to each other, you argue with each other, you get over it together. But with God there is this distance, so it is more difficult to get that positive affirmation from God.

And, yet, in another way the same rules of love apply. So, I went out and found a book on relationships and I tried to see which ones would work in our relationship with God, and if they have some of the same similarities as loving relationships between two people in a committed relationship. So, let's find out how those work. (I'm not recommending the book because the author, although I think he did a great job, I didn't see where he had the medical or mental health skills and the background, so I didn't recommend the book, but I am stealing this unknown author's stuff.)

We can learn how to love God from the example of healthy, loving human relationships. Love has to be kindled and rebuilt every day. It has to be invited in, nurtured and cultivated. Well, so, does our relationship with God. How many times I think that God's sitting there waiting for you or me, and we are the ones who don't show up. Every day God sits and waits for us to communicate in prayer - waiting - and we don't show up. So, who is at fault for not having a deep relationship? God is sitting there waiting. We are the ones that don't show up, every day that we don't pray. The more love you give, the more love there is to give. But we get that love in that prayerful relationship with God. And, if we are the ones not going back, we are the ones who don't get refilled by the Holy Spirit.

Now, functional relationships compete rather than cooperate? As teenagers, our main challenge in life is to sort ourselves out and find our own identities; refine what we believe in, and work on our own life code and world view. In adulthood, we are expected to start caring more about others and expanding our worldview farther from ourselves. And in

Church, we are guiding adolescences and adults on that same task: to think and learn to care about somebody else and not just about ourselves; to move beyond the narcissistic, because if you are narcissistic, you can't focus on anyone but yourself and that is part of that guidance. When in a relationship with God, we learn how to see beyond ourselves in that moment.

[In] Parenthood, our main focus becomes someone else's wellbeing: the child's. It's another avenue in which God is helping us see beyond the self. In partnered relationships, there is necessarily a degree of compromise; again, learning to move beyond ourselves.

Unhealthy relationships lack the sense of cooperation. But, God always wants to be in a cooperative relationship with us. They are unable to mold their individual plan together with the plan of anyone else. Yet God is continually seeking to call us, to mold us, to put God's plan and our plan together, which will provide happiness and joy.

Deep recognition of each other's being is vitally important for faith, happy long-term couples look at one another - warts and all - and embrace the full package. Now, this is easy for Jill because I have no warts [laughter], but for others of you this can be a tough situation. [Laughter.]

The neat thing about God is, God already knows us. If there are things that you can't take to God in prayer, I'm sorry, guys, God already knows it. You can't hide anything, God already knows your warts and, you know what? God wants you anyway. God called Ava [who was baptized during worship] to that font today and Ava may not be perfect, but God wants her anyway. And God called every one of us to the font - most of us as infants and others of us as a little older - but God has the wisdom to know us even before we knew ourselves and God called us here anyway, warts and all.

Loving partners know when to call the other person on their bad behavior and they don't tolerate it. God's loving, because God doesn't put up with our garbage. God sees it, names it and sometimes God even kicks us in the rear end, and that part of the law is important as well.

Relationships, where there is a lack of affirmation of one another, leave both feeling drained and uninvested. The same thing applies with God, only God doesn't get drained. I think, when we continually ignore God and leave God sitting there waiting there day after day, instead of God taking it and draining God's self, God drains us because somehow God has to help us see that the more that we ignore God the worse it gets for us. So God says, "Alright, I'm going to drain you." So, if you are at a place where you are totally drained, and you can barely get yourself out of bed in the morning, perhaps - just perhaps - God is saying, "Get your priorities right. Get back to me, and let me fill you with energy and hope and life."

Such a relationship always feels like an uphill battle. The kind of ordeal that has you asking "What is the point?" Just about every relationship has that, at some time or other, but if you are asking that about your faith: Is it God's fault that you [are] at this place or [is it] because you haven't showed up in so long. that God is letting all of that spew away until you have nowhere else to turn. except back to God.

Dysfunctional relationships are fear based. In an unhealthy relationship, the driving force behind the connection is negative. Now a lot of church people develop negative relationships with God: "Any minute God is going to throw me into hell!" "Anything I do, God will tear me down." "I'm not worthy."

Well, is that God saying that, or is that our human dysfunction keeping all relationships at bay - and we are just doing that to God as well?

I think those denominations and those theologies that are so negative, and make God so brutal, are human-made by people who cannot feel comfortable with intimacy and so they keep God at bay - the same way they do with every other relationship in their lives. That is why there is so much negativity in the Gospel that doesn't belong there.

"I can't imagine anyone ever finding me attractive." We say that all of the time in relationships. God finds us attractive even when we don't find ourselves that way. It goes back to that baptism. God called you even when you don't feel that anyone thinks you are worthy.

"My relationship benefits those around me more than it benefits me." That idea that, "I'm the one doing all of the work and the other person isn't doing anything. And, why isn't God helping me when God seems to be blessing everyone else and forgetting about me, nine ways to Sunday, over and over again." We have gotten on the wrong track. We are not seeing, because our relationship with God has somehow become off track, and we need to find our way back and that attitude will improve.

"Sometimes, you just have to settle." We say it in relationships and sometimes we say it about God: "Well, God is distant," "Well, God doesn't care, but I just go through the motions." We are off track in our faith when we get to that place - whether it's in a relationship or a relationship with God.

What is a heart-centered relationship?

In the book "Anna Karenina," Tolstoy says that all families are all alike. But unhappy families are unhappy in their own completely unique way. Here are the ways happy families are alike, so that we can model them:

Respect. Never calling your partner names, belittling them or undermining the value of what they believe or do. And while that may happen in your family, God doesn't do that to you. A respected partner is not even necessarily one who you always agree with; only that you respect their ability to hold different opinions. We have really ruined that one in our society today. We can even argue with God. Job certainly did. God doesn't throw us away or ridicule us, but guides us in wisdom and understanding.

Honesty. Without trust there can be no real depth of connection and, again, you might as well trust God because God knows it all anyway. Honest partners go above and beyond simply refraining from lying. They actively try to be transparent with their relationships, communicating their experiences and not hiding things that their partner would prefer to know. You can't hide it from God anyway. Honest partners do not support each other's denial.

And then, trust. Relationships with heart do not operate with mistrust or suspicion. Trust is given freely and not as some sort of a reward or bonus - the same way with relationships. With God that is our free will. That is why God is saying, "Go do it. And, if it doesn't work out I will be there to pick you up. And, if it is really messed up, I have a lot of work to do, but I will do that because I want you to choose me. I want it to be free and not manipulated." That is why we have so much of a mess in this world, because so many of us are choosing not to trust God, and want to do it all on our own.

And then, there is encouragement. The right partner will love to see you happy and successful, and God wants that for you, as well. They'll push you to be the best version of yourself, because they believe in you - and God does that for you and me as well. This kind of love is selfless. Such a partner cares about what you're doing with your life, for no reason other than that they want you to live well. It's not just a good personal relationship, that is how the Great Relater wants you to feel as well.

There is variety and spontaneity. Routine is the death for a relationship. The same thing applies with your relationship with God. There needs to be mixing it up. Do your prayers differently. If you kneel all of the time, go for a walk. If you do something else, try a labyrinth for a while. Figure it out. That's why we offer different things here at different times. Go out of your comfort zone. It's good in a relationship with another person, and it is certainly great with God because it will take you to a deeper and more intimate place. In a strong, healthy relationship, both partners constantly strive to try new things, go places, learn things and rediscover their partner over and over again. We are supposed to do that with God as well.

The art of communication is being lost - especially with God. What is a relationship other than a long string of small conversations? You can't play an instrument well if you only do it [practice] once a week for four hours. I would rather have you do it 30 minutes every day, than cram out four or five hours once a week. You will never learn to play that instrument. If you only spent four hours at a time with your partner, and ignore them the rest of the week, it doesn't work as well in your relationship. The same thing applies with God. It can't be Sunday alone with God or your relationship will suffer.

Communication is not just verbal. Make your intentions known - all of these ways we communicate. You don't have to say a word in prayer. Once in a while it's just good to listen. Learn the other's mutual goals and expectations. You can tell God what you want, but you have to listen to what God wants from you. Becoming more perceptive means we can also tune into the messages of those around us. That is the reason we worship together. We can't do this God thing alone; we need mutual support and care from each other.

Become a more conscious communicator. Pay attention and listen for God. Inside your own heart and mind God is trying to speak to you right now. Notice the rise and fall of emotions - that often is God nudging you or poking you. God doesn't speak in full sentences. Often God speaks through your own emotions, and you are supposed to be listening. Turn your antennae towards the outside and really listen to what your partner is communicating. We need to be doing that with God as well.

Our relationship with God is not like our relationship with other people. Nourish your faith by making a commitment to your Divine partner. Here is a woman [pointing to another picture on the big screen] who has dedicated her whole life to God, and look at how frustrated and incredibly sad and bored that woman is, because she had God right in front of her and she is ignoring him. That is the way we perceive God, with love continually feeding that relationship, and that is what God is calling us to now and always. Amen.