

God's Courtship - God's Dating Game

Romans 3:21-26, 5:1-10; Matthew 26:26-29;
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 15

Several years ago a paper on the eastern coast of the US reported this story. One evening a woman was driving home when she noticed a huge truck behind her that was driving uncomfortably close. She stepped on the gas to gain some distance from the truck, but when she sped up, the truck did too. The faster she drove, the faster the truck did.

Now scared, she exited the freeway. But the truck stayed with her. The woman then turned up a main street, hoping to lose her pursuer in traffic. But the truck ran a red light and continued the chase. Reaching the point of panic, the woman whipped her car into a service station and bolted out of her car screaming for help. The truck driver sprang from his truck and ran toward her car. Yanking the back door open, the driver pulled out a man hidden in the back seat

The woman was running from the wrong person. From his high vantage point, the truck driver had spotted a would be rapist in the woman's car. The chase was not his effort to harm her but to save her even at the cost of his own safety. God is like the truck driver. God comes after us to help us, to protect us, to keep us safe.

Let's spend some time today reflecting on the God who chases after us. What was God doing before we even became disciples? What is the activity of God that affects our lives before we even recognize Jesus Christ? What was God's work before I turned my life completely over to him?

The answer to these questions is that God was taking divine initiative in offering us a relationship. In a sense this is the first act of God's grace. Before we even know there is a God and before we even recognize Jesus, Jesus was offering you and me a personal relationship. Jesus is reaching out to us. Jesus woos us. Jesus courts us.

The concept of God's grace is based on the fact that he wants our friendship. Almighty God wants to be our friend and through his Son Jesus provides a way that we can be. This is grace. Theologically this is called prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is what God does between our birth and our acceptance of his Son. Prevenient grace is God working in our lives before we even know him. Prevenient grace is God wooing us toward the relationship of grace. Prevenient grace is God courting us to come to a personal relationship with him. Prevenient grace is God trying to date us, trying to catch our attention, so that we can enter into friendship together.

Our Creator in many ways, often before we are even born, has plans underway to seek us out. Offering us the Bible to help us follow Jesus was undertaken long before we were a twinkle in our parent's eyes. The biggest plan was sending Jesus to conquer sin, to be an example for us, and to be our personal friend. Then after our birth he reaches out to us through people, circumstances, the church, and even the beauty of creation. God woos us into a personal relationship with him. God offers us a fresh, alive, personal relationship.

This is the main theme of Scripture. The Bible is the story of God trying to reach, trying to call, trying to communicate the Almighty's love to us. God's grace is relationship and the wonder is that it's offered to us. This is done through covenants.

Today we define all kinds of relationships by contracts. These are usually for goods or services and for hard cash. When I've rented a house or apartment I sign a contract. So does the owner. Each of us has agreed to certain stipulations in writing. So contracts, formal or informal, help specify the relationship. A contract also helps specify failure in the relationship.

But God did not establish a contract with Israel, the church or us. Our Creator created and committed to a covenant. There is a difference between contracts and covenants. Contracts are

broken when one of the parties fails to keep his or her promise. If a patient fails to keep an appointment with a doctor, the doctor is not obligated to call the house and inquire, "Why didn't you show up for your appointment?" She simply goes on to her next patient and has her appointment secretary take note of the patient who failed to keep the appointment. The patient may find it harder the next time to see the doctor. He broke an informal contract.

According to the Bible, however, the Lord asks in Isaiah 49:15: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" This is a different relationship than a contract. The Bible indicates that a covenant is more like the ties of a parent to their child than it is a doctor's appointment.

If a child fails to show up for dinner, the parent's obligation, unlike the doctor's, isn't canceled. The parent finds out where the child is and makes sure he or she is cared for. One family member's failure does not destroy the relationship. A covenant puts no conditions on faithfulness. It is the unconditional commitment to love and serve. Almighty God commits to love you and me.

In Scripture we have various covenants. For example God had one with Noah, another with Abraham, a separate one with Moses, and so on. Each of these were to offer and create a relationship. Each of these covenants show God's courting, God's wooing toward us. In Jer. 31 God promised a new covenant and said - It will not be like past covenants - cause people broke those. In this new covenant, in this new relationship, I'm going to do something new. God promised, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

So this new way God courts us, dates us, and relates to us, is more than just a set of laws. It's something that God puts inside of us to help us recognize and even more, understand, that God wants to be our friend. Our Creator goes on to

say in Jeremiah, "We won't have to teach each other or talk about knowing God, because we will know that God forgives our sins and even better, doesn't remember them." Isn't this awesome? God gives us a covenant, a promise, that's a binding contract on himself, but not on us. And we are made with this inner desire to be in a bond with Jesus.

In Matthew 26 (26-29) Jesus with his disciples took bread, broke it and passed it saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup and said, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Jesus is the bringing of this new covenant God promised back in Jeremiah. Prevenient grace is the grace on which other aspects of God's grace are built. This is because the Almighty offers you and me a covenant in which he commits himself - even if we ignore him, turn our backs on him, and work against him. But he still comes after you.

It's almost impossible, in fact it is impossible to talk about God reaching out to us, God chasing after us, God searching for us, and God anxiously waiting on us, without mentioning Luke chapter 15. These are just priceless examples of how much God treasures each one of us. The shepherd with the lost sheep left the 99 to go find one out in dangerous territory. The woman lost a coin and went to a lot of work to turn her house upside down to find it. The Father hoped and waited and kept looking anxiously and expectantly for the son to wake up to what he had rejected. And the punch line in each story is what?

PARTY TIME!!! The sheep was found! The coin was found! The son came back! God really wants our friendship. Our Creator seeks us out and waits eagerly for you and me. Even when we are in hiding like Adam and Eve, our Savior comes looking for us. And when we show up - it's party time! God offers this grace as a free gift. He knows we are sinners. Everyone here. But to make it possible that we can be on

friendship terms with Almighty God, he sent his Son Jesus to take care of the barrier of sin between us. Romans 3:24 says, "They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

This gift is through and from Jesus. John wrote in chapter 1, verse 16, "From his fullness, Jesus, we have all received, grace upon grace." This gift of grace through Jesus Christ is all we need. II Corinthians 12:9 tells us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." God promises us all this in covenant which means he offers us Jesus Christ as a free gift that is sufficient for us. And he cannot change his mind or refuse us or back away from this promise.

In January of 1973 I was part of a group from Goshen College that went to Jamaica for 3 months. During that time I noticed a young lady who was in the same group. My eyes really zeroed in on this lady. My mind went yes. Whenever she paid attention to me, my heart beat a little faster. She knew I was interested in getting to know her and she wasn't interested in me at all. But every once in a while she would spend some time with me, within the larger group. This felt good!

When we got back to Goshen College, I asked her out on a date. When she agreed, my heart said, YES! Then after a few dates it worked out that I could live near her for the summer and she even helped arrange this and again my heart went, YES! Then it turned out we found jobs in the same factory, on the same shift, and drove to work together. YES!

Over the next year we dated quite a bit and our relationship went real well but then by the beginning of the next school year it went downhill. We broke up against my wishes. I wanted to get even more serious and she did not want to. So we went our separate ways but I kept track of where she was and visited and sent her a letter a few times over the next 7 years. She seldom responded.

When I finished my work in Papua New Guinea, I thought seminary was a good place to go while I figured out what to do with the rest of my life. I also knew that this young woman was attending seminary. So I had two good reasons for going to seminary. When I arrived at seminary from Papua New Guinea, I discovered that this young woman was in Switzerland at an ecumenical convent. So I waited for her to return. Sure enough when I saw her at seminary and she invited me home for tea, my heart said YES! Then, despite her stated resistance, we spent a lot of time together. YES! We even talked about what our expectations were of marriage, but not to each other, of course. And again I was going YES! But not in front of her and definitely not out loud.

That summer I took summer courses and she took a summer internship at a church. We wrote letters to each other and with each letter I received, I said, YES! Then she agreed to let me visit her so I bought a car. I was so excited that I couldn't sleep so I left in the middle of the night and stopped to sleep on the way. I arrived about mid morning to her surprise and my whole being was going YES!

When she told me that she had my favorite meal planned, inside I went YES! During the weekend we got engaged and set the wedding date and I was going YES! But it still wasn't real until I asked her parents. So she got some time off and we showed up at her parent's house and with her parents approval I went - YES! Then our wedding day was a big day of YES!

Telling the story of Rose's and my courtship from my point of view, I hope gives you some idea of how God feels as he courts us. We can only imagine how much God wants to hear our YES to him. We can only imagine how excited the Creator feels when we say yes to him. It is like we feel when we are courting someone - but much more. God wants our love and adoration and seeks us out hoping we will respond in love. The Almighty has committed to love us and hopes we respond with YES! God wants his YES to us in Jesus Christ to receive our

unreserved, wholehearted YES in response. I believe God feels bad when we reject him. And we are free to reject his grace. However that grace keeps after us. Our Savior keeps trying to woo us. The Holy Spirit keeps courting us. Yahweh keeps trying to get us to date him, and then go with him.

In a church in Copenhagen, Denmark, there stands a statue of Christ. The sculptor, Thorwaldsen wanted to convey that Jesus is tender and benevolent by making Christ's hands raised up in benediction. The clay model of the statue conveyed what the artist intended. But Thorwaldsen was not satisfied. He thought and thought. He struggled and struggled. Then in a flash of inspiration he lowered the arms of the model into a posture of hopeful appeal, craving supplication, almost desperate petitioning. The inscription at the base is, "Come to me." This refers to Matthew 11:28. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." And the statue was made that way. Prevenient grace is God reaching out to us, inviting, urging, crying out for our love, honor, adoration, obedience and worship.

God's grace can be experienced through parents, relatives, friends, and even certain events. God tries to influence us through the body of believers. The church shares God's love by faithfully administering the Word.

God's grace touches us through the Holy Spirit who tries to influence us by speaking to our minds and hearts as we face the decisions of everyday life. We are touched through our consciences. The Holy Spirit does not force us but courts us, woos us, so that we might repent of our sins and receive the free gift of God's eternal life in Jesus Christ. The very nature of love means it cannot be forced and God will not force us to love him. So he woos us. We are courted. We are sought out. We are anxiously waited for. God not only provides salvation through Jesus Christ - God does everything possible to bring the gift of the Son to our attention and to imprint the holiness of the Almighty on our being.

I suspect that most of you can share about a time when you became aware of God pursuing you. Think back to what led you to accept God's grace at conversion. (Pause)

Think back to a time when God was nudging you and you were resisting. (Pause)

Think back to a moment when you recognized that God's grace was breaking through your resistance. (Pause)

And think back to a time when God's love was so real and present that you were just overwhelmed. It's impossible to describe in words. (Pause)

God is Good. He stubbornly keeps looking and waiting for us. His steadfast love endures forever. He stoops to meet us. He woos us. He courts us. It is the nature of God that he seeks us out - much more than we seek him out. He is passionately committed to this. It is the nature of God that he wants to be intimate personal friends with each one of us. He wants to be our God and wants us to be his people. It is the nature of God that he loves us - even though we do not deserve his love. It is the nature of God that he wants to walk with us as he did with Adam and Eve in the Garden. It is the nature of God that he covenanted, promised to be our friend. When we stop and think that Creator Almighty God made us in his image and wants us to call him Father - what can we say and do except, accept his grace and say YES?

How is your relationship with God today? Are you basking in his grace? Are you soaking in it? Are you running toward it? Are you wanting more grace? Are you overwhelmed with God's mercy and love? Are you saying YES! to Jesus?

Being in God's grace is better than basking in the warm waters of Manitou Beach.