

**"The First Activities 2"**  
**Psalm 16:7-11**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I'd like to begin by recounting a conversation between a Christian and a skeptic he knew. The Christian told the skeptic about having a personal relationship with Jesus. That in turn led to this exchange between them. *"Has Jesus ever visibly appeared to you,"* the skeptic asked. *"No,"* the Christian replied. *"Have He ever audibly spoken to you?"* *"No."* *"Has He ever physically touched you?"* *"No."* At which point the skeptic declared, *"What kind of relationship is that?"*

That's a good question isn't it? We talk all the time about having a personal relationship with God. That is our central message in fact. But is it just nice talk? Is it just something that we say because we're supposed to? Or can we truly know Him? The answer is "Yes, we can" and that's what I'm going to preach about today – the second activity of putting first things first - knowing God. Turn to Psalm 16:7-11.

## **GOD'S PRESENCE**

Let's start with verse 8 and the line *"He is at my right hand."* The phrase "at my right hand" connotes "where my right hand begins," that is, "close by me." Let's think about that in terms of relationships.

When it comes to people, we have to be in their presence in order to truly know them. Their presence is a prerequisite of relationship. An old axiom captures the gist of this, *"out of sight; out of mind."* We have to be in people's presence on a consistent basis in order to have a truly personal relationship with them.

That's just as true in our relationship with God as it is in our relationship with people. And therein lies our great advantage. That advantage is that He is literally always with us.

One of God's most astonishing qualities is that He's omnipresent. That means that He is everywhere present with His entire being at the same time. I enjoy the way that A.W. Tozer says it, *"God is everywhere here."* With respect to us, He is within us but not enclosed

and outside us but not excluded. Simply put, He inhabits all the space around us and all the processes within us. Paul says it best in Acts 17:28, "*for in God we live and move and exist.*" We are, in other words, literally immersed in His presence.

Do you realize what that means as a practical matter. No human person is always and everywhere with us. But the divine person, God, is.

That is a critical fact because it dramatically increases the potential we have for knowing Him. Presence is a prerequisite of relationship and God is always and everywhere present with us.

But presence doesn't guarantee relationship. Relationship requires something else - engagement. We must engage the person we're with and he or she must engage us. We must direct ourselves to each other.

Once again, that's just as true in our relationship with God as it is with people. Knowing Him requires engagement. He engages us. He directs Himself to us. And we engage Him. We direct ourselves to Him. You can see that knowing Him has two sides, both of which I want to discuss.

## **GOD ENGAGING**

First, God engages us. I can't impress upon you enough the significance of that. You and I could not know Him if He didn't.

In his book Knowing God, J.I. Packer reveals a vital insight about relationships. That insight is that the quality and extent of our knowing people depends more on them than us. Our knowing them is more directly the result of their allowing us to know them than of our attempting to know them. A young woman once told me that the young man she was dating was and I quote her "shutting me out." She was trying to know him and get close to him but he wouldn't let her. He wasn't engaging her with the intensity and depth that she was engaging Him. People must allow us to know them or we can't.

That's not a problem with God. One of His qualities is that He's personal. That means that He knows and longs to be known – by us.

And because He does, He's never "in a shell" or never "shuts us out" as we say it. He lets Himself be known by us instead. As Jesus said it in John 14:21 about those who love Him, *"I will disclose Myself to him."*

He does that of course by engaging us. He directs Himself to us. You can see that in the opening line in verse 7, *"I will bless the Lord who has instructed me."* Instructing us is just one of the ways that God engages us. There are others, the most important of which are these: He guides and convicts us by speaking to us - primarily through the still small voice; He comes upon us and gives us a strong sense of His presence in and around us; He does things with us by enhancing and empowering our actions; He acts on our thoughts, feelings, and will to create certain conditions of character in us; He manipulates circumstances to meet needs we have; and He supercedes or suspends natural laws to protect or heal us. Those ways and more are how God engages us as most of you can testify.

I know I can. I have had experiences of His presence especially in times of Bible study and solitude that were as vivid and real to me as someone hugging me is. I've counseled people and said things that I know He brought to my mind at that precise moment. I've preached sermons that He partnered with me in preparing. I felt Him inhabiting my mind and hands as I thought about and typed them out. I've asked Him for things and observed Him manipulate circumstances to give or do them, my son Moses' job for one. Getting it was a miracle.

Those samplings illustrate the point. God lets Himself be known by us. He does that by engaging us, by directing Himself to us.

## **ENGAGING GOD**

But there's a second side to relationship with God. We engage Him. We can't know anyone including Him that we ourselves don't engage. So, we engage Him.

We do that by directing our minds and bodies to Him. Using our minds and bodies, we interact with His person and presence with us.

That involves specific activities the most important of which are these: practicing solitude and silence, worshipping, celebrating, telling Him things, asking Him for things, reading His written word, obeying His commands, fasting, practicing the Sabbath rest, and practicing His presence. Those are relationship specific activities. They by their very nature engage God. They cause our person and life to interact with His.

So, learn and do those things. To get started on that now, read Richard Foster's book The Celebration of Discipline. Or attend our next Wednesday night class. After I finish our current topic, *The First Aim*, I'll begin a new topic that explains all of those activities to you.

## **PRACTICING GOD'S PRESENCE**

I do want to explain one of them now though because David does in Psalm 16:8. He writes, *"I have set the LORD continually before me."* That is one of the most significant statements in the Bible. It means that David thinks about God all the time. Or to say it another way, he practices His presence.

I have in my hand a little book. Apart from the Bible, this is probably the most widely read book of the last four centuries. More of these books have been sold than all the books of novelists John Grisham, Tom Clancey, and J.K. Rowling put together.

Can someone tell me its title and author? That's right. It's The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a monk who lived 400 years ago. He spent the last 25 years of his life washing dishes and scrubbing floors, thinking continually about God as he did. This little book of his has profoundly impacted the lives of many including Elroy Stimpert, who introduced it to me, and me.

It is about the same thing that verse 8 is about. It's about setting God continually before us. Or as Brother Lawrence said it, *"practicing the presence of God in one single act that does not end."*

That is our call today. Continually open our consciousness to God. Think about Him all the time in all the activities and experiences of our

lives. Doing that is a matter of decision and intent. We make and then carry out the decision to think continually about Him.

But what does "continually" mean. How often can we think about Him and still function well? World acclaimed literacy expert Frank Laubach asked and answer that question 70 years ago. He experimented for years practicing the presence of God. He then concluded that we can think about Him at least one second out of every minute during the day no matter what we're doing.

But were David, Brother Lawrence, and Frank Laubach right? Isn't it unrealistic in our complex world to think continually about God? Must there not be long periods of time when other things push Him out of our minds? The answer to that question is "no." Don't get me wrong. On occasion, something may need to so intensely occupy our mind that we can't think about God. But in most of the activities and experiences of our lives, we can bring Him into our minds if we choose to.

In his remarkable little booklet *The Game with Minutes*, Frank Laubach teaches us how to do just that. It's easy reading that offers a practical methodology for thinking continually about God. Read and apply it. Your person and life will never be the same if you do.

I do want to enlarge though on what Laubach teaches. I've asked you to do two things in our *First Things First* Campaign. One is to build a vision of God. Learn the details about His person and work that He reveals to us. The other is to memorize Scripture. Learn specific verses if not by rote than at least by remembering the gist of what they say. Now, what you do with those details and verses is this. Purposely bring them to all the activities and experiences of your everyday lives. That's what I do at least and I call it "triggering."

The best way to explain it is to illustrate it. Taking a shower every morning trigger thoughts of Lamentations 3:22-23 and I recite it, "*The Lord's lovingkindnesses and compassions are new every morning.*" Walking into Marc's triggers thoughts of God's omnipresence – that this store is literally a holy place because His presence fills it. The

bargains aren't bad either. Hearing someone setting a date triggers thoughts of God's eternity – that the date being set is present not future to Him. Being tempted to look twice at a woman triggers thoughts of our memory verse today, 1 Corinthians 9:26, ***"But I discipline my body and make it my slave."*** Eating a Whopper triggers thoughts of God's self-existence – that He unlike I do needs nothing outside Himself to exist or live, especially a Whopper. Someone criticizing me triggers thoughts of Proverbs 9:8, ***"Reprove a wise man and he will love you."*** And so on.

That's enough to explain what "triggering" means. We learn all the details about God and all the verses of Scripture that we can. We then purposely bring those details and verses to all the everyday activities and experiences of our lives.

Doing that take a great deal of conscious effort at first. We're actually compelling and training our mind to think about God. But the longer and more consistently we do it, the more natural it becomes. We will eventually get to the point that we think continually about God as effortlessly as we continually breathe. I would caution you though. It took Brother Lawrence 10 years to get to that point. So be committed but patient and don't expect too much of yourself too soon.

## **CONCLUSION**

I close by putting what I just discussed in its context. Last week, I preached about the first aim. Our first aim should be to love God with our whole being. Our part in achieving that aim is to do two things. First, understand God. And second, know Him, which is what I preached about today. Our part in knowing Him is to engage Him. That involves specific activities, the primary of which is to practice His presence.

And that's how I end today. In his newest book Dallas Willard writes about practicing God's presence, ***"This and nothing else is our 'business as usual."*** That is a radical statement but it's true. Our most important business this and every week is to practice God's presence. So let's leave this place and just do it!