

WD July 8, 2024

“Draw Near to God”

If one is to get more familiar with anything or anyone one must get close to it. Let me illustrate. I drive a Chevy Equinox. The first time one of my headlights went out I had to look on YouTube to figure it out. On my old Dodge Aries, I would loosen easy to find screws in the front. It was easy. Then I would have to pull out the whole headlight assembly, and finally replace the old bulb with the new one. In newer cars it's like a game where you guess how to replace the headlight. Turns out on my Equinox, one has to enter through the front wheel-wells, loosen a sealed plastic fitting that gives me access to the light bulbs and viola, I can see again. The point is that I need to get familiar with the car in order to even change a light bulb.

It's a bit more complicated with people, of course. It takes time together, conversation, working through times of distress, practicing forgiveness, sharing experiences etc. I know my wife, for example, because we have drawn near to one another. I know my children because I have been near to them. Near means more than simple proximity. Being with them is perhaps the biggest part but it is also investing in their talents, strengths, weaknesses, how they might react when they've been happy or sad, etc. A level of intimacy or familiarity is gained in the nearness. They also come to know me and all my idiosyncrasies, my habits, and the way I think, my mannerisms, the way I handle situations and so on.

This does, however, work somewhat differently when it comes to our Lord. James 4:8 tells us, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, you double-minded.” First, God is always near. Psalm 139 is clear that God knows our thinking and our doing and is familiar with all of our ways. Jesus has promised that He is with us always. The question of nearness is in His people not in our Savior.

Sin causes distance with God as it does with each other. Marriages are often left in tatters over disagreements about money and communication. Friendships are lost over things like one being too needy or controlling. Sin puts distance between us and the Lord as it does with one another.

I don't know why but the AM station in my car barely gets a signal where I live. However, as I drive into the city the signal gets stronger and the voices get clearer. Coming home the voices on the radio get harder to make out and the message gets completely lost. Drawing near to God brings clarity to hearing God. And when one finally gets close enough for the static too clear we find Him to be the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, standing there waiting for us the whole time.

To draw near is *eggizo*. It is a word of proximity. In the Old Testament it is a word expected of priests who come to the Tabernacle with their sacrifices to God (Lev 10:3; 21:21, 22) and as one approaches worship (Isaiah 29:13) with more than just lip service. It is about communing with God. The word also implies more than just taking a couple of steps. God is not a seasoning that one puts on a dish. God is the main course, the centerpiece, the reason we gather. *Eggizo* is an all-in word. *Eggizo* is a word that requires genuine humility so that there is sinful static. It's an invitation word to approach Him with all of our sins when we come into worship. “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, you double-minded.”

When Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18 Jesus lays a strong emphasis on the Tax Collector's genuine humility and repentance. Then says, “I tell you, this man rather than the showy religious looking one went home justified before God.” Jesus is demonstrating what *Eggizo* looks like.

Coming near to God as we look at it in James 4 leads us to a few realities. First, being near does in fact imply coming into God's presence in worship. The whole goal of the 3rd Commandment, to “remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy” is at its heart drawing near to God. When Israel camped in the wilderness the Tabernacle was kept in the center of all the tribes. Keep God the center of our lives keeps a lot of other things out that shouldn't be there. The practice of physically going to church is part of the intention of this word.

As second half of this first thought is that our hearts are not divided. It's not good to be in the same place with a spouse but thinking about another person. Neither is it healthy to be in church where we are meant to be communing with the Almighty but instead, we are thinking about our personal idols. That is the double minded stuff that got Israel in trouble. Where our hearts are that's where our treasure actually is. The Lord always prefers true faith over just being around for show.

In speaking to the rebellious Israelites about to go into captivity Jeremiah 29:12-14 offers a promise. “¹² Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.” Whatever has us captive we can be rescued from it by the Lord. It all starts with realizing the Lord never leaves His people. His people leave Him. And yet Jesus stands eager and ready for us to come near to Him and He to us.

Finally, I say again that nearness implies familiarity and a deeper level of knowing the Lord. Like any relationship it will be as deep and as abiding as you aim for. The only reason many Christians do not know the Lord like they could is because they really aren’t aiming for that. They are aiming being too worldly and immediate. On the other hand, when we listen to His Word without static so much of His Word is telling us how much the Lord wants us to be with Him. This the biggest point: Jesus wants us to draw near to Him and know Him fully. He wants an eternity with us. May the Lord bless us to know the fullest measure of His presence. In Jesus.

Pastor Matt Woods
John 3:30