

KNOW GOD'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

- A. Introduction: In this lesson we want to begin to discuss the fact that, in order to respond rather than react to life's challenges, you have to learn to see God as He truly is and yourself as you truly are in relation to Him.
1. To react means to move in a reverse direction. When you react to something, the thing determines how you act. To respond means to answer. When you respond you answer the situation with words and actions based on knowledge of God's written word.
 - a. We respond to the trials of life by acknowledging God -- by talking about who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do. To be able to do that, you must see reality as it truly is. Reality is everything as God sees it.
 - b. We don't realize it, but much of the way we deal with life is based on misperceptions of reality. We don't see God as He truly is and ourselves as we truly are in relation to Him. These misperceptions of reality add to our difficulties.
 2. The Bible gives many examples of people who responded and people who reacted to life's trials. Consider these examples of people who reacted.
 - a. Gen 42:36--Jacob's sons returned from a trip to Egypt to get food during a famine. Unbeknownst to Jacob or his sons, his long-lost son, Joseph, was in charge of Egypt's food distribution program.
 1. Joseph told his brothers that before they could have any more food Simeon had to remain in Egypt until the brothers brought Benjamin to him. Jacob's reaction to the news was: Everything is against me. His reaction was based on a misperception of reality.
 2. Reality was: Everything was going very well. Jacob would not lose Simeon or Benjamin, was about to be reunited with Joseph, and was going to move to Egypt temporarily, where his descendants would prosper and grow into a great nation.
 - b. Num 14:2,3--Twelve spies brought back a report on the promised land. Ten spies said: It's a great land, but it has formidable obstacles -- too much for us to overcome.
 1. Israel reacted with: Why did God bring us out here? We wish we had died in Egypt or the wilderness! Their reaction was based on a misperception of reality.
 2. Reality was: Because God loved them He had delivered them from slavery in Egypt intending to bring them into this wonderful land to bless them.
 - c. Mark 4:38--When the disciples encountered a deadly storm on the Sea of Galilee their reaction to it was: The Lord doesn't care about us and we are going to die. Their reaction was based on a misperception of reality. Reality was: God did care about them and was willing to exercise His power to help them. They weren't going to die.
 3. We can all relate to these reactions because we've all experienced situations that looked bad. When we encounter troubles it triggers legitimate emotions. If you see something fearful you will feel afraid.
 - a. How you deal with your situation depends on your perception of reality -- if you believe God is for you or against you, if you have any reason to expect God's help etc.
 - b. In the examples given above, their reactions were based on misperceptions of reality. These reactions increased their legitimate emotional and mental anguish in the face of trying situations and, in the case of Israel at the edge of the promised land, it kept them from taking the appropriate steps to possess God's blessings.
 - c. We must learn to see God as He truly is and ourselves as we truly are in relation to Him so we can answer the voices of circumstances and emotions that rise up to challenge us.
 4. The Bible also gives examples of people who responded to the challenges they faced. (We'll look at specific examples in later lessons.) A common denominator among those who responded rather than reacted is that they knew God was for them.
 - a. For is a function word used to indicate an object toward which one's desire or activity is directed.

God's desire for you: He wants you as His son. His activity toward you: He has taken the steps necessary to make that possible.

- b. To respond rather than react you have to know that God is for you because He loves you. If you have misperceptions about the love of God you cannot possibly see God as He truly is or yourself as you truly are in relation to Him, and you will react rather than respond to life's difficulties.
- B. We look to the wrong sources of information to try to determine if God loves us or not: Our feelings -- We don't feel loved by God. Our circumstances -- If God loved me this wouldn't be happening to me.
 1. By looking at the wrong sources of information we wrongly conclude that God's love for us is contingent upon our behavior, upon something in us.
 - a. We mistakenly think that if I am good, God loves me more. If I am bad, He loves me less. God would like to help me, but, there is something intrinsically wrong in me that keeps God from loving me as much as He does other people.
 1. God's love is not a response to something in us. God does not love you because you are good or not not love you because you are bad. God loves you because He is love. I John 4:8,16
 2. God's love for you is unconditional. That means there is no condition you must meet to have His love. And, there is no condition you can meet that will cost you His love.
 - b. We mistakenly think that the circumstances in our lives are indicators of God's love for us. If things are going well, that means God is pleased with us. If things are not going well, God must be upset with us or must be punishing us for something.
 1. The good and bad circumstances of life are not expressions of God's greater or lesser love for you. Bad things don't happen because God does or doesn't love you.
 2. Bad things happened because we live in a sin cursed earth -- an earth that has been adversely affected by sin. Rom 5:12-19; Gen 3:17-19; Gen 4:1-9; Rom 8:20,21; etc.
 2. If you are getting information about God's love for you from your performance or your circumstances your view of reality will be skewed. We have to get our information from God's word.
 - a. God created man for relationship, for sonship. Love was the reason for the creation of man. Eph 1:4-6--He has done what in His kindness He planned to do: Before He made the world, He who loved us appointed us to be His sons by Jesus Christ. In Him he chose us to be holy and blameless before Him in order to praise the glory of the love He gave us in His dear Son. (Beck); Eph 1:5-- He destined us in love to be his sons through faith in Christ. (RSV)
 1. God loved you before you existed so His love cannot be a response to something in you.
 2. If God's love for man was conditional, surely He would have started over in the garden when the first man disobeyed him. But, He came looking for man with help. Gen 3:15,21
 - b. God made man knowing men would sin. But, he had a plan in mind that would make men holy and blameless. From the beginning, God's goal has not been to punish man for sin but to remove sin from man -- every trace of it, even the memory. Rev 13:8; Heb 9:26; Heb 8:12
 1. At the Cross God took the penalty, the punishment, of our sins on Himself, fully satisfying the demands of justice against us in regard to our sin.
 2. Your bad circumstances are not God's punishment for your sins. It's not enough. The full penalty of sin is eternal separation from God. The value of the Person of Jesus Christ was such that His suffering at the Cross was equal to the debt owed by the entire human race.
 3. The Cross was and is the supreme display of the unconditional love of God for man. I John 4:9,10
 - a. The Cross was not inspired by something in us -- our goodness, our deservingness. Jesus died for us while we were sinners, enemies of God, in full rebellion against Him. Rom 5:8-10; Eph 2:1-9
 - b. The Cross is God's expression of his love for you at your worst. If He loved you on your worst day (which was any day before you were saved) and His love motivated Him to meet your greatest need (salvation from your sins) why would He not love you or love you less now that you are His son or daughter? Why would His love now become conditional?
 - c. The Cross of Christ is the objective (outside of ourselves) answer to the circumstances and

feelings that rise up to say we are not loved by God.

- C. While Jesus (who is God and shows us God) was on earth He regularly ate with sinners and publicans (Matt 9:10-12; Luke 15:1,2; Luke 19:1-7). Jesus was called a friend of publicans and sinners (Matt 11:19). Publicans were Jews who served as tax collectors for Rome.
1. Such behavior scandalized the Jewish leadership. In first century Israel it was forbidden for Jews to mingle with sinners outside of the Law (Gentiles). Gal 2:11,12
 - a. In Jewish culture, to share a meal with someone meant more than simply eating with them. It symbolized entering into relationship with them. Jesus' table fellowship with these sinners would have meant acceptance of them. By His actions Jesus was showing that they mattered to Him, that they were important to Him.
 - b. That doesn't mean that Jesus was saying it was okay for these people to keep sinning, that men don't have to repent and turn from sin, or that sin doesn't matter. By dining with sinners and publicans Jesus was showing God's heart toward men.
 2. Luke 15:1,2--That is clear from some things Jesus said to the Pharisees when they criticized Him for eating with sinners (Accepts and receives and welcomes (Amp)). Jesus answered the Pharisees by telling three parables about a lost sheep (v4-7), a lost coin (v8-10), and a lost son (v11-32).
 - a. In the first two parables the owners searched diligently until they found the lost items and then rejoiced greatly when they found them. Why the searching and the rejoicing? Because lost items don't lose their value simply because they are lost.
 - b. Jesus made it clear that this is the response of heaven to a sinner who repents. Jesus connected sinful men with lost items. That fits with Luke 19:10. Jesus, in the context of going to a publican's house for dinner said He had come to seek and save the lost.
 1. Sinners are called "lost" because, in their fallen condition, in their rebellion, they are lost to the purpose for which they were created: sonship, relationship with God.
 2. Eph 1:4,5 applied to those publicans and sinners sitting with Jesus day just as it does to us. God loved them before the foundation of the world and God came to die for them.
 - c. Heaven rejoices over a sinner who repents, who is found to God, because he is restored to his created purpose.
 3. Then Jesus related what is known as the parable of the prodigal son. It is more accurately called the parable of the prodigal's father because it is about the father's response to his lost son returning home.
 - a. v20--Notice how the father greeted his returning son. He saw the son coming. That means he was looking for the son. His father was moved with compassion (lit: to have the bowels yearn).
 1. The father ran to greet his son, showing his eagerness to be restored to his son. He kissed him again and again, showing great tenderness and affection.
 2. This is the dirty, stinky son who wasted the father's money on harlots. The son is the kind of people the Pharisees criticized Jesus for eating with. The father's love for his son was unconditional. The son's behavior did not cost him his father's love.
 - b. The son wanted to talk about his sin. But the father blew right over it. The Pharisees would have been horrified by the father's actions. They didn't forgive until there was revenge and restitution. But God wants to remove sin -- even the memory of it
 - c. Then the father directed the servants to dress his son. v22--Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him (Message Bible). Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him (Living Bible).
 1. The best robe has the idea of the chief garment -- a special robe used only on birthdays or festival times. "The best robe -- the festive, honor robe" (Amp). The Pharisees and the Jews who heard this parable would have been familiar with Zech 3:4, from a vision Zechariah had of the Angel of the Lord (Preincarnate Jesus) where a change of clothes meant removal of sin.
 2. Rings were given in ancient times as a mark of honor and dignity (Gen 41:42). "Put the family ring on his finger." (Message Bible). Ps 8:4-6--God made men for dignity and honor.

3. Shoelessness was a sign of slavery. Captives had their shoes removed. When they were set free their shoes were returned (II Chron 28:15). God's plan frees men from sin and its curse.
 4. Adam, and the human race in Adam, went into the pig pen of sin. God lost His family. Jesus came to seek and save God's lost family. The point of salvation, the purpose of the Cross, was to make men what God always intended -- holy, blameless (spotless) sons living in loving relationship with Him.
 - a. Those sinners, publicans, prostitutes Jesus ate with on that day many centuries ago, their history with God did not begin when they were born into a fallen race or committed their first sin.
 - b. Their history with God began in eons past. God, in His foreknowledge, knew each one and chose them for sonship. When God man Adam He made a race of sons in Adam. Gen 5:1,2; Heb 7:9
 - c. Every sinner who sat at that table with Jesus in Luke 15 was in Adam before Adam sinned. God's first pronouncement about them was: Very good (Gen 1:31). God knows a perfect you, a fearfully and wonderfully made you (Ps 139:14), the you He made in Adam.
- D. Conclusion: We haven't said everything we need to say, but consider these points as we close.
1. Through the Cross of Christ which was and is an expression of God's unconditional love for man, God is restoring you to the picture He has always had in mind for you -- a perfect son.
 - a. Rom 8:29--For those whom He foreknew -- of whom He was aware and loved beforehand -- He also destined from the beginning (foreordaining them) to be molded into the image of His Son [and share inwardly His likeness]. (Amp)
 - b. God knew when He created you in Adam that you would go into the pig pen of sin. But Jesus' words and actions both in His earth ministry and through the Cross make it clear: I love you. I'll clean you up, clothe you with my righteousness, restoring you to the position of sonship, honor, and dignity for which I created you.
 2. God is for you because He loves you. God loves you because He is love. In His love, He has met your greatest need -- salvation from your sins. That must be the starting point for developing an accurate picture of reality.
 - a. If God loves me, why do I have all these problems? Because that's life in a sin cursed earth. Because, even though our hearts have left the pig pen and we are back in Father's house, we still live in the pig pen. We are in the world but not of it.
 1. The fact that the Father didn't relieve the son's suffering in the pig pen didn't mean He didn't love his son. God's primary goal right now is not to make life better in the pig pen, but to draw men out of the pig pen back to father's house.
 2. We aren't saying there is no help or provision for this life. But many of us are so bound by fear and doubt or anger at God that we block His help. He works through faith or trust.
 - b. The first step in accessing the power and provision of Father's house in the midst of the pig pen is learning to respond rather than react to the "junk" in the pig pen. That comes out of knowing that God is for you because He loves you and becoming persuaded that God is at work. He has, He is, and He will help me make it through life in the pig pen as an overcomer. More next week!!