

People often want to be close to God, but they want to do it in their own way. Because how many times have you heard someone say something like they are spiritual but not religious? What they mean by that, of course, is that they feel very close to God. They feel like they believe in him, but they have no use for the Church. They don't want anything to do with it. They feel close to God in their own way. And even if you haven't heard someone personally say that, I know it's something that you've encountered out in the world today. Or maybe someone who says that they feel close to God through music. Music really moves them. It really makes them feel really close to the Father. So that whether they're in their car listening to a Christian radio station or singing their favorite hymn at church, that's how they feel close to God. Or someone who says that they feel close to God through nature. You go out and you see the beauty of creation around us, the majesty of the stars up above, and you say, "I really feel close to God in that moment. I know that he is with me." Or someone who just says they feel close to God through their actions. "If I do this or this, then I know that God is with me."

But the problem with all of these, Christians, is that they are all focused on me. I become the center. I become the standard by which everything else is judged. And when you focus on yourself in this way, you can feel really close to God. You can feel like he's with you. But in reality you may be nowhere near him. Jesus himself says, Matthew chapter 7: "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" I never knew you, he says! You can feel so close to God, to have done such mighty things in his name, and yet be nowhere near him. So we need to know, then, how to actually come near to God. We need to know how we actually come to him.

Because the Galatians in our reading certainly wanted to be close to God. And that's a good thing. We should all want to be close to God. We should want to be like him more and more. But the problem was that the Galatians wanted to come to God through their actions, through their works. Specifically, they wanted to keep the Law of Moses, and in that way come to God. "If we are circumcised," they said, "then we will know that God is with us. Then we will know that we are doing what God wants us to do. We will be with God if we are circumcised, because then and only then will we be truly Christians!"

But Paul is pretty frustrated with this, and he asks them a question: how did you come to be Christian in the first place? In fact, he says, chapter 3, verse 2: "Let me ask you only this: did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" Did God come to you the first time because of your actions? Did you come to believe in God because of your works? Was the Holy Spirit given to you because you had done all of the right things? Or was it because you came to him by hearing with faith? Now, of course, we would say, "Well that's an easy answer! We came to him by faith. God made us Christians in the first place. This is a Sunday School kind of answer. It's the easiest thing in the world. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ." Paul asks the Galatians: then why does it seem like you've forgotten? Verse 3: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Do you think something has changed, Galatians? Do you think something changed from when you first became a Christian until now that your works are suddenly the most important thing? Do you

think that something changed so that you would be able to come near to God through your actions, if you didn't come to him that way when you first began to believe?

Because the Spirit is not found through the flesh, Christians. The Spirit is not found through my own actions or my own feelings. I did not become a Christian through them, and I do not continue to be a Christian through them. But how easy it is for us to think that we do! Because for the Galatians, it was through that Law of Moses. If I just do everything that the Old Testament tells me to do, then I will be a Christian. Then I will know that I am truly with God. And certainly there are some today who do the same thing. As long as I do this or as long as I do that, I know that the Spirit is here. I know that God is with me.

But the Spirit is not to be found in that way, Christians, because the Law can only bring a curse. Verse 10 of our reading says: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, and do them.'" So go ahead, Paul says! Go ahead! Try to find God through your actions. Go ahead! See how well that'll work out for you. Because it won't work. We'll never be able to find God in that way. Because if you're going to find God through your actions, they've got to be perfect. Because even one sin, Christians, one sin is enough to keep us away from an all holy and perfect God. And if that one sin can keep us away from God, how can we think that we will come to him in that way? Who among us can honestly say that we have not sinned, even just today? We will not find God or come near to him through our actions, because they'll never be good enough.

But for many today, Christians, I think they try to find God through their feelings, through their emotions. As long as I really feel like God is with me, then I know that he is. My feelings are what count the most, so I try to find him in that way. Because maybe some people try to experience God through music. I hear some song on the radio that I really, really like, and it really moves me. It really makes me feel close to God. Or when we sing my favorite hymns in church, I get really excited, because then I really feel like God is near. But when we sing a hymn I don't really know or don't really like, then God doesn't feel quite so near. Or, God forbid, if I feel bored, then I really know that God isn't near, because my feelings are the most important thing. And in fact, there are Christians out there today who will leave churches simply because they feel bored. They say they aren't getting anything out of it, because they aren't having the experience that they want. And so they'll go to a church that maybe teaches poorly or even falsely simply because of how the music makes them feel. And there are also Christians, unfortunately, who will stop going to church altogether, simply because they feel like they're not getting anything out of it. And so I can just watch something on the TV or maybe on YouTube whenever I feel like it, but I really feel close to God because I can feel that he is near. That's the most important thing.

But Christians, the Spirit does not come to us in that way either, because our feelings will never be good enough. They will never be strong enough. Because if feeling God near depends on how I feel right now, that's going to be different next week. That's even going to be different tomorrow. And yes, I can feel that kind of spiritual high, to really be excited for God. But when I'm trying to chase that again and again, it's not going to work. I'll never feel the same way again. I will never know that God is truly with me if all I have is how I feel.

Because, Christians, seeking God through our emotions is the same way as seeking God through our works, because ultimately it relies on me. It is centered on what I'm doing. It is centered on what I am feeling. I become the standard for all things. But that's not good enough. Because if I'm relying on myself to know that God is near, then I'm never going to be able to truly know. Because I will never be able to do enough, I will never be able to feel enough to know that he is here. The Spirit is not to be found through what I do or through what I feel. The Spirit cannot be found at all in that way.

So how, then, do we find God? How do we know that he is near? Through faith in Jesus Christ. Because, Christians, that faith is not based on what I'm doing or what I'm feeling. That faith is based on the promises of God. And God once made a promise to Abraham, Genesis chapter 12, verse 7: "The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'" God did not say: "To your offspring I will give this land if you do all the right things." God did not say: "To your offspring I will give this land if you really feel like you're close to me." God said: "To your offspring I will give this land." The promise did not depend on Abraham, because God said it. God said it, and he will not change his mind.

Which, of course, is Paul's point in our reading for today. Paul basically says that even though God gave the Law to Moses 430 years after Abraham, that did not change the original promise. That original promise is still in force, like a will that cannot be changed. God is still going to do that. And that promise is Jesus Christ. He is the promised offspring of Abraham. Through him, we are brought near to God. Through him, we are saved from our sins.

Why then, Paul asks, did God give the Law at all? If he was keeping his original promise, why did he add something else later? We might even ask: then what's the purpose of our actions and our feelings if God's promise was there all along? Well, he says, the Law was added because of transgressions. The Law was added to show that we are, in fact, sinners, to show just how much we need God. As verse 22 of our reading says: "The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe." We are in prison, so to speak, so that we see just how guilty we stand before God. The Law shows us just how much we need a Savior. And all of our sinful actions drive us towards the cross.

Now, it's true, the actions and the feelings we have as Christians are good things. Absolutely. Now that we have been reborn and regenerated, our actions and feelings become pleasing to the Lord. But they're still not perfect. And because they're not perfect, they continue to show us how much we need Jesus. It continues to drive us back to him time and time again. So that when we know that we are saved through faith in him, then we know that nothing that we do will ever save us. And then we can see that our actions and our feelings become pleasing, not because of ourselves, but because of Jesus in whom we now live. It drives us back to him in everything.

So then, Christians, how do you know that you are close to God? Don't go to your actions. They will never be good enough. Don't go to your feelings. They will never be strong enough. Go to Jesus Christ, and he will give you the Holy Spirit. And in that way, you can know that you are close to God.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to forgive us our sins. Help us always to trust in him alone, so that we know that all that we say and do in him are pleasing in your sight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.