

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
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**Near to the Heart of God:
Cultivating Intimacy with the Savior of our Souls
Revelation 3:20**

One of the more tragic scenes in the Bible is found in our Lord's letter to the church at Laodicea. You know the story well enough that I don't need to remind you of all the details, other than to say that these Christian men and women had become "**lukewarm**" (Rev. 3:16) in their relationship with and attitude toward the Lord Jesus Christ. They were born again, but there was very little zeal or passion in their daily experience. It was so offensive to Jesus that he actually said to them, "**I will spit you out of my mouth!**"

But all was not lost. Jesus pleaded with them to **repent** of their prideful self-sufficiency. They said of themselves, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing" (Rev. 3:17a). But Jesus said of them, "You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17b).

It is in this context that Jesus said something that has become one of the most widely known verses in the NT. "**Be zealous and repent,**" said Jesus. "**Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me**" (Rev. 3:19b-20). Contrary to what most people have believed, **this is not an evangelistic or gospel appeal**. Jesus isn't speaking to unbelievers but to Christians who had backslidden into a spiritually lukewarm life that was largely devoid of passion for God, a life that was largely devoid of intimacy with Jesus himself.

To these very Christian men and women, Jesus says: "I love you. And I long to reestablish and renew a relationship of intimacy and joy and close spiritual fellowship with you. So repent, and open the door of your individual hearts as well as the door into your local church so that I might come in and we can sit down and share a meal together."

That may seem strange to you and me. After all, we don't think much about eating a meal with other people. It has become so ordinary and routine that we don't grasp how in the ancient world, in which Jesus lived, sharing a meal together with others was both **the sign and substance of close, intimate fellowship**. To share a meal was tantamount to sharing life. To celebrate dinner around the table in the ancient world was to draw near to others and to **commune** with them in something far beyond the food itself. Its purpose was **to reinforce the strong emotional bonds of affection and companionship one with another**.

This promise of Jesus, therefore, to "come in" to a person and share a meal with them, if only they would repent and open the door, is nothing less than **an appeal by our Lord that he might enter into the personal experience of a child of God and commune in close, intimate, sweet fellowship with them**. And that appeal by Jesus to the people who gather in a local church, whether it be Laodicea in the first century or Bridgeway in the twenty-first century, is just as real and sincere and genuine and possible for us to day as it was for them so many hundreds of years ago.

Do you realize what this means? It means that today, indeed every single day of every single week, Jesus stands at the door of your heart and says: "**Will you let me in? Will you do what needs to be done so that I might enter into your life, your heart, your soul, and fill you with my love and peace? Will you do what needs to be done so that we might experience the depths of joy and sweet communion that I died on the cross to obtain for you?**" Will you?

Let me make the point again. Jesus doesn't want to stand outside on the front porch and engage in conversation with you as if he were a traveling salesman or someone who stopped by only to give you a religious tract. He's not to be thought of as just one more manipulative businessman trying to close a sale but as a bridegroom longing to enjoy the company and affection of his bride. Jesus isn't asking to spend a few minutes with you at MacDonald's over a Big Mac. **He wants to commune with you in the dining room of your heart, sharing an intimate candlelit dinner**.

Today we are going to explore what this relationship of intimacy means and how it might be obtained, or if it is something you already experience, how it might be deepened and intensified in your hearts.

The Primary Obstacle to Intimacy

But before we go any farther with this we need to take note of what is without question ***the greatest and most dangerous obstacle to intimacy with our Lord***. And it's right there in this passage in Revelation 3. Jesus exhorts the "lukewarm" hearts in the church at Laodicea to "be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:19b). The greatest threat to your personal intimacy with God is ***unrepentant sin***. Your stubborn refusal to acknowledge your sin and turn from it will invariably keep Jesus at arms' length in your life. We see this in numerous biblical texts. Here are three:

"If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer" (Psalm 66:18-19).

"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isaiah 1:13-17).

"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2).

The Essence of Intimacy

So what precisely do I mean when I speak of our experiencing "intimacy" with Jesus? Is it even possible? What does it look like and feel like? Let me try to answer this by identifying ***ten characteristics*** of what it means to live in an intimate relationship with God.

(1) Intimacy with God means that ***you know his heart***. You know *him*, and not just things about him. I'm not talking about theoretical knowledge, as if all that is needed is an ability to define God's attributes or the insight to rehearse all that he's done in human history. I'm talking about knowing God's heart: his personality, his likes and dislikes, his desires, what he loves and hates, why he does what he does (i.e., his motivation for his actions), etc. To be intimate with God you must know what makes him tick!

(2) Intimacy with God means that you are happy and hungry ***to be known by him*** without fear or embarrassment. When you are intimate with someone you are open, honest, and vulnerable. Nothing is hidden. Consider the countless ways that you try to hide your true self from others. You do it because you are terrified that if they could see and know you as you really are, with all the false images stripped away, they would be offended and disgusted.

It's amazing how we try to do that with God, in spite of such passages in Scripture as these:

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether" (Ps. 139:1-4).

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:12-13).

True intimacy comes about when we not only acknowledge the truth of these texts but happily and honestly ***invite*** God into the depths of our souls and are unafraid for him to see and know everything: every secret, every impulse of heart and mind and spirit (see Ps. 139:23-24). Apart from this, real intimacy is impossible.

(3) Intimacy with God means that you are *desperate to hear his voice and quick to obey his Word*. When young Samuel was lying down in the temple, near the Ark of the Covenant, the voice of God called out to him repeatedly. Finally, Samuel responded: *“Speak, for your servant hears”* (1 Sam. 3:10). Notice that Samuel doesn’t just say “speak” but identifies himself as the “servant” of God, indicating that he is willing to do whatever God says. Are you attentive to the voice of God? Do you immerse yourself in his written Word, the Bible, and listen closely to every syllable? If not, intimacy will forever elude you.

(4) Intimacy with God means that you are *able to feel his love and affection*. You’ve heard me say this before, that in Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 he asks that the Holy Spirit would strengthen the inner being of the believer so that he/she might be able to “comprehend . . . what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (vv. 18-19). Again, to speak of comprehending something that is beyond comprehension is Paul’s way of saying: “I’m talking about the ability to feel and enjoy and be emotionally refreshed by the reality of God’s love for you.”

For me personally, this became a vital and daily reality in my life the moment I first set eyes upon Zephaniah 3:17 and plumbed the depths of what it means when God says he loves me so much that he *sings* over me!

(5) Intimacy with God means that you take great delight to seize every possible opportunity to *express your love for him, especially in times of personal and corporate worship*. Let me be blunt: you cannot experience a close, intimate, personal relationship with the Lord while you continue to close your heart and your mouth to him in corporate praise. God has chosen to communicate his presence to us when we sing to him in celebration and thanksgiving and ascribe to him the glory due his name. There is no possibility of intimacy in the heart of the man or woman whose heart will not worship with passion and zeal.

(6) Intimacy with God means that you *enjoy his presence and are miserable without it*. I’m talking here about the “manifest” or “extraordinary” presence of God, when he actually works in us to enable us to sense and feel and rest satisfied that he is near to us and we are dear to him. When was the last time, aside from a Sunday morning, that you shut your door, turned off your TV, computer, and cell phone, and simply sat quietly in the presence of God? If that sounds strange or distant or weird to you, then you need to reflect long and hard on Psalm 16:11 where David declares that it is only in God’s “presence” that he finds “fullness of joy” and only at God’s “right hand” that he experiences “pleasures forevermore.”

(7) Intimacy with God means that you regularly *experience his power*. I’m talking about being a recipient of his power to resist temptation, his power to pray for others, his power to conform you more and more to the image of Jesus. Let’s go back to Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3, where he closes with this doxology: “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to *the power at work within us*, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever, Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21). Are you hungry to experience this “power at work within” you? Do you pray for it? Do you humble yourself so that you might be a fit instrument through which God’s power might work?

(8) Intimacy with God means that *your hope is altogether and exclusively in him*. You choose not to place your hope in your skills or intelligence or wealth or career or physical appearance or ability to speak or any other human achievement. All your hope is in Christ: who he is and what he has done and what he has promised to do and be for you in the future.

(9) Intimacy with God means that you have reached a point in your relationship with the Lord where you are truly *able to enjoy his enjoyment of you*. I realize that to speak this way feels arrogant and presumptuous: after all, what is there in me that God would enjoy? What is in you that God enjoys is what God has himself by his grace and through the Spirit produced in you through faith in Christ! We must learn to be changed and energized by the joy that comes from God’s delight in us, his children.

(10) Intimacy with God means that your highest aspiration in life is to *advance his cause/glory*. Simply put, God will not draw near to anyone whose highest aim in life is anything other than God’s own glory.

Steps to Cultivating Intimacy with God

So, how might we cultivate a deeper intimacy with the Lord? Here are several steps/suggestions:

- The Word of God: study it, memorize it, cultivate a life in which the truth of God's written revelation flows through your spiritual veins as readily and consistently as blood does through your physical veins.
- Read good books about God.
- Prayer: consistent with fasting.
- Eliminate obstacles that are hindering you from Jesus. One example would be the countless hours you sit watching and listening to the degrading, superficial, banal, sexually charged trash that appears on TV, your cell phone, or computer.
- Creation: spend time gazing on the wonder of God's physical creation; meditate on the majesty of what he has made.
- Communion: commit yourself to always be at the Lord's Table when it is set.
- Community: stay in touch with other believers and remain genuinely accountable to them.
- Worship: saturate yourself in the praise and celebration of God.

The Dangers of Intimacy with God

The pursuit of intimacy has often led people into unbiblical and dangerous waters and the possibility of drowning in a sea of subjectivity is very real. However, the fact that mistakes have been made should not in any way diminish our passion for a love relationship with the Triune God of heaven and earth. It simply means that we must pursue God within the parameters set forth in Scripture.

(1) It is possible, in our pursuit of intimacy with God, to allow our familiarity to degenerate into flippancy.

Job certainly came close to making this mistake. In his zeal to defend himself before God and vindicate his name, he came perilously close to speaking to God in a careless and flippant way with little regard for his majesty and glory (see Job 38:1-2; 40:1-5; and Job's recognition of what he had done and his quick repentance in 42:1-6). Holy familiarity with God should lead to affection, adoration, confidence, trust, peace, and joy, but never to a disregard for the fact that "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).

Three ways in which flippancy may appear is in:

1) *Our attitude to the Lord's Supper* (cf. 1 Cor. 11:20-34). We must be careful lest we treat as common that which is sacred; to treat the elements with indifference or to partake in a spirit of frivolity is to pour contempt on that, or rather on him, to which they point.

2) *Our worship*. Certainly joy and celebration are appropriate responses to the grace of God revealed in the gospel. But no less essential is the *fear of God* rooted in the recognition of his majesty and holiness. We must be careful that our emotions and physical displays in times of worship are conscious expressions of gratitude, awe, love, and devotion, rather than an unconscious reaction to the mood or rhythm of the music.

3) *The terminology we use to describe God*. Terms of endearment such as "Abba" are certainly appropriate. But we must be careful lest our intimacy with the Lord causes us to violate the boundaries of propriety (as seen, for example, in the "good-old-boy" and "the man-upstairs-is-my-buddy" language of many in the church today).

(2) It is possible, in our pursuit of intimacy with God, to fail to remember his transcendence by placing extreme emphasis on his immanence.

By *transcendence* I have in mind God's absolute and supreme greatness, his exalted loftiness, his infinite otherness that the Bible typically refers to as *holiness*. God's transcendent holiness points to the infinite distance that separates him from his creation (see especially Isa. 55:8-9; 66:1-2; and Acts 7:46-50). For the proper balancing of transcendence with immanence:

“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isa. 57:15).

(3) It is possible, in our pursuit of intimacy with God, to overemphasize the subjective fruit to the exclusion of the objective foundation.

We must be careful lest we become so infatuated with the internal experience of nearness to God that we forget the external work of the cross on which it is ultimately based. Our nearness to God is free to us, but it cost God everything: his only-begotten Son. Our focus is first and fundamentally outward, towards Calvary. Observe Paul's words:

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered himself up for me" (Phil. 2:20).

Clearly, the basis for Christ living *within us* is his act of self-sacrifice *for us*. Paul's gratitude is first for what Jesus did for him on the cross and then, only after that, for what Jesus is doing in him through his indwelling presence.

This can also reveal itself in *the tendency to grant revelatory authority to our experience*. All experience must be interpreted. All subjective states of mind and emotion must be brought under the searchlight of the objective principles of God's written Word. Tragically, many have become so enamored by their intimacy with God that they interpret their subjective states of mind and emotion as infallible indicators of truth. Worse still, some have concluded that because of the depths of intimacy they experience with God that objective revelation is no longer essential; it can be discarded in favor of the immediacy of communion and communication with God. ***We must have an external reference point or standard of objective truth by which feelings may be evaluated and judged: the cross of Christ and the written Word of God.***

(4) It is possible, in our pursuit of intimacy with God, to fail to come to him on his terms.

Perhaps the best example of this is the tragic incident involving Moses' nephews and Aaron's sons, *Nadab* and *Abihu*, as described in Leviticus 10:1-3. Nadab and Abihu were the two eldest of Aaron's four sons (Exod. 6:23). They had accompanied Moses and Aaron up Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:1), and along with their two younger brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar, had been ordained as priests (Lev. 8:30). Undoubtedly Aaron must have experienced tremendous pride as he watched his sons follow him in ministry.

But scarcely had the heavenly fire descended in mercy to consume the sacrifice (9:24) when it again descended, this time in wrath, to consume those who made the sacrifice (10:1-3)! They are said to have offered up "strange fire" (10:1). What made it strange? Incense was produced by mixing aromatic spices together which were then vaporized by putting them in a censer containing glowing lumps of charcoal. Leviticus 16:12 says these coals had to be taken from the altar. Had Nadab and Abihu taken them from somewhere else? Perhaps. All that is said, all that matters, is that they sought to offer strange fire "*which the Lord had not commanded them.*"

They arrogantly presumed upon their relationship with God and their position as priests, thinking that it gave them the freedom to approach God on *their* terms rather than his. God invites us to draw near, but *on his terms, according to conditions he has established, in conformity with the pattern set forth in Holy Scripture*. It is dangerous, perhaps even lethal, to think that "anything goes" when it comes to drawing near unto God.

(5) It is possible, in our pursuit of intimacy with God, to lose sight of the distinction between Creator and creature.

This is perhaps the greatest error among the mystics, whether they be from the medieval period of church history or our own day. Many of the mystics emphasized "oneness" or "union" with God to such a degree that they blurred the fundamental distinction between a human being and God. Our "oneness" with God is of a moral, not a metaphysical, nature. In other words, we are not destined to "become God" but to "become *like* God" in terms of moral character and thought and behavior. In our desire to get close to God we must never lose sight of the fact that he is God and we are not!

(6) It is possible, in our pursuit of intimacy with God, to presume upon his grace.

We know that our familiarity with God has gone too far when we find ourselves thinking that we *deserve* such a relationship. *Intimacy with God is the fruit of divine mercy.* Our attitude in relationship with God is one that must always be governed by the realization that we deserve only hell.

Intimacy with God in the Life of Sarah Edwards

The experience of Sarah Edwards (d. 1758), wife of Puritan pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards, is not normative for every believer. But it is one instance of one soul “being filled to all the fullness of God.” As her husband was to describe it, God had filled Sarah with “joy unspeakable and full of glory” (I Peter 1:8). Sarah’s experience began with *a renewed sense of the assurance of her salvation*, evoked by a meditation on Roman 8:34. Here are but a few citations from the lengthy description she wrote of her experience:

“My safety and happiness and eternal enjoyment of God’s immutable love seemed as durable and unchangeable as God Himself. *Melted and overcome by the sweetness of this assurance, I fell into a great flow of tears and could not forbear weeping aloud.* It appeared certain to me that God was my Father, and Christ my Lord and Savior, that He was mine and I His.”

“Under a delightful sense of the immediate presence and love of God, these words seemed to come over and over in my mind, ‘My God, my all; my God, my all.’ *The presence of God was so near and so real that I seemed scarcely conscious of anything else.*”

“*My mind was so deeply impressed with the love of Christ and a sense of His immediate presence that I could with difficulty refrain from rising from my seat and leaping for joy. I continued to enjoy this intense and lively and refreshing sense of divine things, accompanied with strong emotions for nearly an hour; after which, I experienced a delightful calm and peace and rest in God until I retired for the night; and during the night, both waking and sleeping, I had joyful views of divine things, and a complacent rest of soul in God.*”

“Mr. Buell then read a melting hymn of Dr. Watt’s concerning *the loveliness of Christ, the enjoyments and employments of heaven, that I leaped unconsciously from my chair. I seemed to be drawn upwards, soul and body, from the earth towards heaven; and it appeared to me that I must naturally and necessarily ascend thither.* . . . After the prayer, *Mr. Buell read two other hymns on the glories of heaven, which moved me so exceedingly and drew me so strongly heavenward that it seemed as it were to draw my body upwards, and I felt as if I must necessarily ascend thither.*

“*I was entirely swallowed up in God,* as my only portion, and His honour and glory was the object of my supreme desire and delight.”

“That night, which was Thursday night, Jan. 28, was the sweetest night I ever had in my life. *I never before, for so long a time together, enjoyed so much of the light and rest and sweetness of heaven in my soul, but without the least agitation of body during the whole time. The great part of the night I lay awake, sometimes asleep, and sometimes between sleeping and waking. But all night I continued in a constant, clear, and lively sense of the heavenly sweetness of Christ’s excellent and transcendent love, of His nearness to me, and of my dearness to Him; with an inexpressibly sweet calmness of soul in an entire rest in Him.* I seemed to myself to perceive a glow of divine love come down from the heart of Christ in heaven, into my heart, in a constant stream, like a stream or pencil of sweet light. At the same time, my heart and soul all flowed out in love to Christ; so that there seemed to be a constant flowing and reflowing of heavenly and divine love, from Christ’s heart to mine; and I appeared to myself to float or swim in these bright, sweet beams of the love of Christ, like the notes swimming in the beams of the sun or the streams of His light which come in at the window. *My soul remained in a kind of heavenly elysium.* So far as I am capable of making a comparison, I think that what I felt each minute, during the continuance of the whole time, was worth more than all the outward comfort and pleasure which I had enjoyed in my whole life put together. It was a pure delight which fed and satisfied the soul. It was *pleasure*, without the least sting or any interruption. It was a *sweetness* which my soul was lost in. It seemed to be all that my feeble frame could sustain, of that fullness of joy which is felt by those who behold the face of

Christ and share His love in the heavenly world. There was but little difference whether I was asleep or awake, so deep was the impression made on my soul; but if there was any difference, the sweetness was greatest and most uninterrupted while I was asleep.”

“So conscious was I of the joyful presence of the Holy Spirit, I could scarcely refrain from leaping with transports of joy. I had, in the meantime, an overwhelming sense of the glory of God, as the Great Eternal All, and of the happiness of having my own will entirely subdued to His will. I knew that the foretaste of glory, which I then had in my soul, came from Him, that I certainly should go to Him, and should, as it were, drop into the Divine Being, and be swallowed up in God.”

“After I had felt this resignation on Saturday night, for some time as I lay in bed, I felt such a disposition to rejoice in God, that I wished to have the world join me in praising Him; and was ready to wonder how the world of mankind could lie and sleep when there was such a God to praise and rejoice in, and could scarcely forbear calling out to those who were asleep in the house, to arise and rejoice and praise God.”

Knowing the negative and critical response that would inevitably come, Jonathan Edwards appended this statement to his wife's story:

"Now if such things [as Sarah experienced] are enthusiasm [Edwards' word for "emotionalism"], and the offspring of a distempered brain, let my brain be possessed evermore of that happy distemper! If this be distraction, I pray God that the world of mankind may all be seized with this benign, meek, beneficent, beatific glorious distraction!"