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All words spoken by Jesus Christ are in **red text**.

(Hyperlinks are surrounded by parenthesis and are underlined.)

Introduction

A **religion** is commonly defined as a set of beliefs, ceremonial rituals, and moral codes of behavior that are shared by the members of the religion. In addition, a religion often:

- Centers on following established practices and rules.
- Causes a person to believe they must comply with the prescribed behavior to please God or to avoid punishment.
- Leads to legalism—where adherence to rules outweighs faith—which can harden the heart and stifle transformation into righteousness.
- Fails to reveal the loving and graceful heart of God.

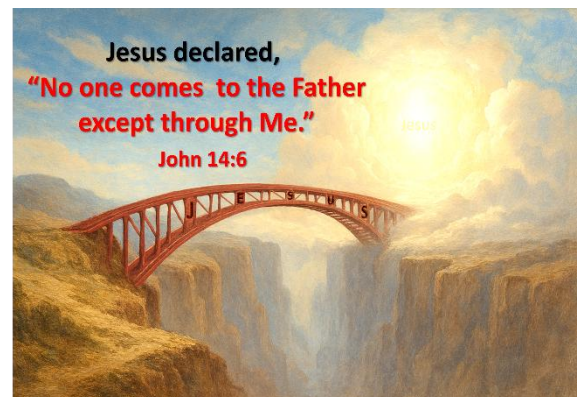
From a Christian and spiritual context, a **relationship** is comprised of a personal and intimate connection with God that transcends religious doctrine, ceremonial rituals and codes of behavior. In addition, a relationship:

- Conveys a willing interaction with God out of gratitude rather than religious obligation or rules compliance.
- Opens our innermost being to experience the loving and graceful heart of God—which changes our heart's desire to obey and repent from sin as an expression of our love towards Him.
- Facilitates validation of His existence and transformation into righteousness.

God is more interested in the desires of our heart than He is with our religious activity. *"For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."* 1 Samuel 16:7 *"I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind."* Jeremiah 17:10

Besides, because of our sinful nature we will never achieve a level of behavior that is "above a minimal standard" God will accept. There is only one person who transcended this standard...Jesus Christ...whom God crucified on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins...to make up the difference (*as a bridge*) between who we are and our inability to achieve what He desires...so that we may be forgiven (by our faith in Jesus) and develop a relationship with God.

- *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* Ephesians 2:8-9
- *"Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* John 3:15-16
- *"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."* 2 Corinthians 5:21



God reached out to mankind by building a "bridge" of forgiveness and a means to develop a relationship with Him. *"In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* 1 John 4:9-10

The purpose of this lesson is to enhance your spiritual understanding that God desires an intimate, personal and loving relationship—and not someone who "checks off all the religious boxes" in an attempt to earn His approval. But more important, the objective of this lesson is to facilitate an evaluation and enhancement of your relationship with God. For it is safe to say that all of us have room for improvement.

God's Eternal Plan

Have you ever read a book and skipped to the last pages to find out what happens at the end? When you know the final outcome, the relevance and importance of things that occur in the book become more evident (and helps to "tie" everything together). The same is true with the Bible. The last 2 chapters in the Bible (Revelation chapters 21 and 22) reveals God's eternal plan: to dwell amongst and love upon those who love Him. All that has occurred in the past, all that is occurring today, and all that will occur in the future is all part of God's plan to fulfill His desire to intimately express His love towards those who believe in Him, those who have faith in Him, those who trust Him, those who obey Him...and most of all...those who love Him.

The reality of God's eternal plan becomes clear when we consider what God revealed to John about the future in Revelation 21:1-4. "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'"

Deeply consider the following...God will cause the present Heaven and Earth to "pass away" (no longer exist), and will be replaced with a new Heaven and a new Earth—all because of God's desire to dwell amongst and love upon those who love Him. When you fully grasp this truth it will transform your perception of God.

When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 22:37-40

For those who desire to know and love God:

- "You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." Jeremiah 29:13
- "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me." Proverbs 8:17

To gain an insight of who God is...we can simply look inside ourselves...because we are made in His image. "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'...So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Genesis 1:26-27

To facilitate His eternal plan, God designed within us with critical attributes: (1) an inherent need to love and be loved, and (2) an inherent need to develop relationships with others.

We Need to Love and Be Loved

Both sides of the love equation—our need to be loved and to love others—play a vital role in fulfilling our emotional well-being and overall happiness. Our need for reciprocal love includes our spouse, but also encompasses our relationships with family members and friends.

Consider how you feel on the inside when you meaningfully hug someone who meaningfully hugs you. There is a fleeting moment of an indescribable feeling of elation as each person's soul connects spiritually. What's more, anxieties and daily issues seem to disappear during the embrace.

Our innate need to be loved begins during infancy. For example, there are numerous studies on the significant physical ill-effects upon infants caused by deprivation of maternal care—which continue on later in life in the form of severe emotional and psychiatric problems. Sources:

- (<https://drdavidhamilton.com/why-children-need-love-to-grow/>)
- (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2014/06/neglect>)

As a child grows, the human need for parental love continues because it shapes multiple aspects of our persona—including our emotional stability, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and an improved ability to manage difficult situations in life. Sources:

- (<https://www.thehealthychildco.com/blog/the-science-behind-love-and-child-development>)
- (<https://ejsit-journal.com/index.php/ejsit/article/view/672/614>)

As a child transitions from early youth into adolescence and adulthood, the need to develop relationships and loving others becomes increasingly important—and is essential for emotional and mental well-being, and in developing healthy relationships. Sources:

- (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7416486/>)
- (<https://academic.oup.com/psychsocgerontology/article/76/2/391/5943916>)
- (<https://medium.com/@perveenahida895/the-power-of-mutual-affection-why-reciprocity-matters-in-love-729ded8181a7>)

4 Different Types of Love: Agape, Phileo, Eros, and Storge

Love is an emotion that may be simply described as an internal feeling of connection, warmth, and compassion towards another person. In addition, it is possible to identify 4 different types of love that we experience with others. Each one is important because they facilitate our emotional and social well-being. As you read, determine if you have experienced each type of love with someone.

- **Storge** refers to the affection within families, such as the bond between parents and children, among siblings, and with close family friends. (Romans 12:10; Eph. 4:2; 1 Peter 4:8; Gal. 5:13)
- **Phileo** is the type of love that exists between friends. It is characterized by mutual respect, trust, and companionship where individuals share common interests, values and experiences. (John 11:35-36; 21:15-17; 1 Sam. 18:1-3)
- **Eros** conveys a marital love characterized by physical and emotional intimacy. (Eph. 5:25; Gen. 2:24; Proverbs 5:18-19; Mat. 19:6)
- **Agape** is considered the highest form of love because it is unconditional, occurs without expecting anything in return, and is based upon a core desire for the selfless well-being of others. (John 3:16, 15:13; 1 Cor. 13:4-7; Rom. 5:8)

Agape love is unlike storge, phileo and eros. Agape love is not innate and is not naturally expressed by humans because of (1) our sinful nature, and (2) because the source of agape is God. It is only through the sanctification (cleansing) process—driven by the Holy Spirit—that we are transformed into a vessel that God can use to express His agape love with others.

For more information read “8 Steps to Spiritual Maturity” on UniqueBibleStudies.com. This lesson will provide you with a greater insight into yourself, and an improved understanding of your stage within the sanctification process.



We Need Relationships With Others

We humans are social beings because God designed us with an innate need for relationships. Medical studies have identified how human interaction positively affects our brain chemistry, cognitive development and physical health. Studies have also identified the negative consequences of social deprivation. Sources:

- (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2527715/>)
- (<https://biologyinsights.com/why-man-is-a-social-animal-and-needs-connection/>)
- (<https://psychology.tips/love-and-belonging-needs/>)
- (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/06/cover-story-science-friendship>)

God also designed this behavioral attribute within the animal kingdom. Our need for social interaction is evidenced by considering our own needs and actions, and by watching human and animal behavior.



The human need for interpersonal relationships involves much more than survival in the animal kingdom—because our need for others foundationally supports God’s desire for each of us to seek and love Him, and to love one another.

Satan's Eternal Objective

Satan's desire is to circumvent God's eternal plan by using lies that redirect persons from placing their faith in Jesus Christ, lies that magnify the darkness of sin to restrict spiritual sight that is enabled by the light of Jesus, and by using lies to create conflicts that destroy relationships. Jesus declared regarding Satan:

- "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy." John 10:10
- "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." John 8:44

Satan cannot force someone to sin because God has designed us a free will. Therefore, Satan's method of operation is to steal, kill and destroy by using lies that deceive and draw someone into darkness, willful sinning, and separation from God.

Here is a truth that will help to open your spiritual eyes: All wars, all battles, all skirmishes, all arguments, all divorces, all destroyed lives, and all sin...began as a lie.

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." Ephesians 6:12

We all have varying degrees of traumatic scars (caused by the consequences of our sin and by the sin of others) that have grown over wounds within our soul. These scars influence our persona as restrictive barriers, defensive mechanisms, and protective shields that constricts our ability to love and personally connect with others.

A worst-case and most extreme example of how Satan's lies can cause traumatic wounds that affect our behavior is the "thousand-yard stare" that occurs within military personnel who have experienced the psychological impact of war. The invisible injury to their heart and soul is evidenced by a dissociation and emotional detachment from their environment.



We are all victims of Satan's lies and have suffered the consequences of our willful disobedience. God's grace and His love is the only means to overcome the consequential damage caused by our sin and by the sin of others. It is only through faith in the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus, we are forgiven and are able to be healed from the scars that distort our perception of ourselves and those around us. In addition, because we are forgiven we have a justified reason to forgive others. For how can we judge and not forgive someone for the very thing we were once guilty of committing.

- "As Christ forgave you, so you also must do." Colossians 3:13
- "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." Ephesians 4:32

God's forgiveness is more powerful than we realize...because His grace and love operates within the spiritual realm, heals the painful scars within our heart and soul, and radically transforms how we perceive and relate to others.



For more information on forgiveness read "The Power of Forgiveness" on UniqueBibleStudies.com.

God Desires an Intimate, Personal and Eternal Relationship with You

The Bible consistently reveals God's desire for an intimate and personal relationship with humanity...for God:

- Created us in His own image. (Gen. 1:26-27)
- Sought a relationship with Adam and Eve but they sinned against God. (Gen. 2:7-25, 3:1-24)
- Made a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17)
- Dwelled amongst His chosen, the Israelites. (Exodus 25:1-9)
- Was heartbroken (as a husband is with an adulterous wife) because the Israelites continued to sin against Him. (Ezekiel 16)
- Made a New Covenant via His Son as a means to be forgiven for our sins. (Jer. 31:31-33; Luke 22:20; Eph. 1:7; 2 Cor. 5:21)
- Gave us the Holy Spirit. (John 14:16-18, 26; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:22-23; Titus 3:5; Rom. 8:11)
- Provided us with eternal promises. (John 14:3; Mat.28:20; Rev. 21:4, 22:1-7; Isaiah 41:10)

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." Revelation 3:20

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." Ezekiel 36:26

"And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. Then he said to me, 'These words are faithful and true.' And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place. 'Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.'" Revelation 22:1-7

"The Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you." Deut. 31:6

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." Proverbs 3:5-6

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Isaiah 41:10

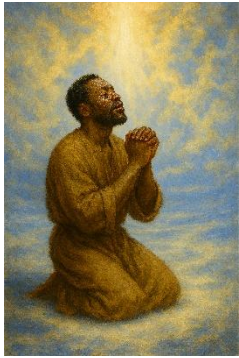
"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with His hand." Psalm 37:23-24

"O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off." Psalm 139:1-2

Jesus declared:

- **"Your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."** Matthew 6:8
- **"The very hairs on your head are all numbered."** Matthew 10:30-31



What To Do

Realize we can't do this thing called "life" on our own.

Recognize we are sinful.

Replace pride with humility.

Request forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ.

Repent for every sin is a lie that is designed to impede our relationship with God.

Read the Bible.

Relate with God in every aspect of life, and with other Christians.

Remember God desires a relationship with you...now and for eternity.

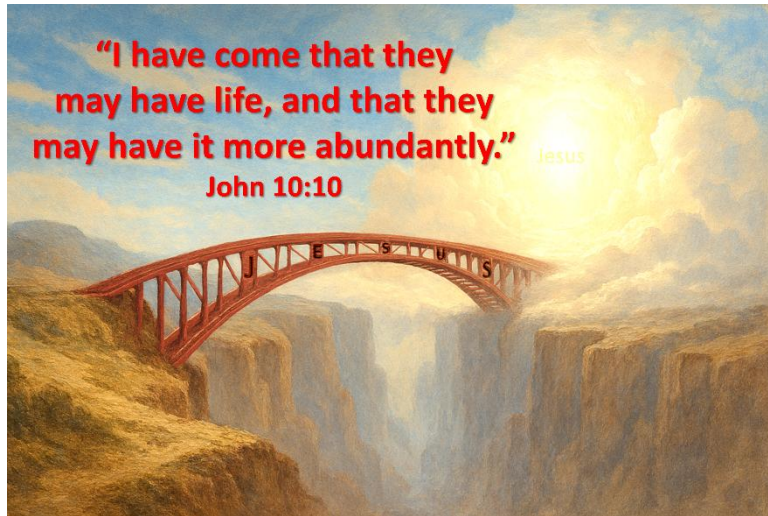
If you have not accepted Jesus as your Lord...any reason to delay a decision for Jesus is a lie. Here is an example of what you may pray. However, it is important is to use your own words as you speak from your heart.

Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus I pray. I am a sinner who humbly seeks your grace, love and forgiveness. I believe in the sacrificial death of your Son, Jesus Christ. I open the door of my heart to You. I ask Lord that you come into me and change me into the type of person You want me to be.



"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." John 3:16

Imagine the tears that you will shed; the indescribable elation you will experience; and the depth of agape love that you will have towards Jesus once we are on the other side. All because He gave His life as a sacrifice for our sins and as a bridge of forgiveness that enables us to have a relationship with the Father for eternity.



"As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Psalms 103:12

"I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins." Isaiah 43:25

I pray this lesson has opened your spiritual eyes to the truth and reality of God's existence, His desire for a relationship with you, and that you grow closer to God.

All for His Glory

Harold D. Thomas