

Ten ways to deepen our relationship with God

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Over the years I've heard from many good people who want a closer relationship with God. But they're stymied by what they perceive as God's silence. What they often mean, without knowing it, is that they'd like God to do something dramatic in their lives; something with a hint of Mount Sinai that proves his credentials.

Here are a few steps – in no particular order – that can help us draw closer to God.

First, start by listening to him. Faith isn't a 12-step action program. Nor is it an algebra problem that needs to be "solved." It's a love affair. As with a spouse, the most important thing we can do is to be present and listen. This requires the intentional investment of our personal time and focus.

Second, cultivate silence. We can't listen when our world is filled with noise and toys. C.S. Lewis often said that noise is the music of hell. Our toys – those things we choose to distract us – keep us diverted from focusing on the main questions of life: *Why are we here? What does my life mean? Is there a God, and if so, who is he, and what does he ask of me?*

Third, seek humility. Humility is to the spirit what material poverty is to the senses: the great purifier. Humility is the beginning of sanity. We can't really see – much less love – anyone or anything else when the self is in the way. When we finally, *really* believe in our own sinfulness and unimportance, many other things become possible: repentance; mercy, patience, forgiveness of others. These virtues are the foundation stones of that other great Christian virtue: *justice*. No justice is ever possible in a spider's web of mutual anger, recrimination and hurt pride.

Fourth, cultivate honesty. Complete honesty is only possible for a humble person. The reason is simple. The most painful but important honesty is telling the truth to ourselves about our own motives and our own actions. Modern life is too often built on the marketing of half-truths and lies about who we are and what we deserve. Scripture praises the honest woman and man. Honesty allows the mind to breathe and think clearly.

Fifth, seek to be holy. Holy does not mean nice or even good, although truly holy people are always good and often – though not always — nice. Holiness means "other than." It's what Scripture means when it tells us to be "in the world, *but not of* the world." And this doesn't just miraculously happen. We need to choose and seek holiness.

God's ways are not our ways. Holiness is the habit of seeking to conform all of our thoughts and actions to God's ways. There's no cookie-cutter model of holiness, just as piety can't be reduced to one particular kind of prayer or posture. What's important is to love the world because God loves it and sent his Son to redeem it, but not to be captured by its habits and values, which are *not* godly.

Sixth, pray. Prayer is more than just that portion of the day when we advise God about what we need and what he should do. Real prayer is much closer to listening, and it's intimately tied to obedience. God certainly wants to hear what we need and love and fear, because these things are part of our daily lives, and he loves us. But if we're doing the talking, we can't listen.

Seventh, read. Scripture is the living Word of God. When we read God's Word, we encounter God himself. Reading also serves another, simpler purpose: It shuts out the noise that distracts us from fertile reflection.

Eighth, believe and act. Nobody "earns" faith. It's a free gift from God. But we do need to be willing and ready to receive it. We can discipline ourselves to be prepared. If we sincerely seek truth; if we desire things greater than this life has to offer; and if we leave our hearts open to the possibility of God — then, one day we *will* believe, just as when we choose to love someone more deeply, and turn our hearts sincerely to the task, then sooner or later we usually will.

Feelings are fickle. They're often misleading. They're not the substance of our faith. We need to be grateful for our emotions as God's gifts, but we also need to judge them in the light of common sense. *Falling* in love is only the first taste of love. Real love is both more beautiful and more demanding than the early days of a romance.

In the real world, feelings that endure follow actions that have substance. The more sincere we are in our discipleship, the closer we will come to Jesus Christ. This is why the Emmaus disciples only recognized Jesus in "the breaking of the bread." *Only in acting in and on our faith, does our faith become fully real.*

Ninth, nobody makes it to heaven alone. *We all need friendship and community.* A friend of mine who's been married more than 40 years likes to say that the heart of a good marriage is *friendship*. Every successful marriage is finally about a deep and particular kind of friendship that involves honesty, intimacy, fidelity, mutual sacrifice, hope and shared beliefs.

Every successful marriage is also a form of *community*. Even Jesus needed these two things: friendship and community. The Apostles were not simply Christ's followers; they were also his brothers and friends, people who knew and supported him in an intimate way. All of us as Christians need the same two things. *Friends* are vital. *Community* is vital. Our friends both express and shape who we are. Good friends sustain us. Bad friends undermine us. And that's why they're so decisive to the success or failure of a Christian life.

Tenth and finally, nothing is more powerful than the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist in leading us to the God we seek. God makes himself available to us every week in the confessional, and every day in the sacrifice of the Mass. It makes little sense to talk about the "silence of God" when our churches are made silent by our own absence and indifference. He waits for us in the quiet of the tabernacle. And he loves us and wants to be loved wholeheartedly in return.

If we're willing to give that love, these steps will lead us to him.