

## Why is God Always Mad at Me?:

Changing How You Experience God Through Understanding, Practical Exercises, and Prayer

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## Two Parts

- Thank you to Joel Ladd of Student Services
- Part I: Discovering Your God Image (6:30-7:30)
- Break (7:30-7:40)
- Part II: Changing Your God Image (7:40 - 8:30)
- Presentation Style - Emphasis on the Head and the Heart

## Opening Exercise

Draw a picture of You and God

Draw a picture of how you FEEL you and God look after you have done something wrong.

## Ask yourself these questions about your second picture:

- How is God feeling?
- How are you feeling?
- How close to, or distant from, God do you feel?
- Distant 1 2 3 4 5 Close
- If you feel distant, what do you usually do to feel close again?

## Definitions

- God Concept – the intellectual idea of God. It is shaped by Sunday School, catechism, Bible study, and sermons. It exists more as an abstract concept than an immediate emotional reality (Rizzuto, 1979, Lawrence, 1997).
- God Image – the personal, emotional, experience of God. It is shaped by our experience of our parents and enables us to continue earlier learned relational patterns (Rizzuto, 1979, Lawrence, 1997). If people had loving parents, then they will have a loving God image. On the other hand, if people have rejecting parents, then they will have a rejecting God image.
- God Image is a type of transitional object (Winnicott, 1971). Beans is a good example of a Transitional Object.

## Main Ideas

- Consciousness, Preconscious, Unconscious – Iceberg metaphor
- Attachment/bonding is one of our main needs.
- Problems are learned in the past and repeated in the present.
- We need a corrective emotional experience to change – cognitive understanding and emotional experience.

## Development of Negative Problems

- Abuse, Neglect, Rejection, or Emotional Distance in Childhood
- Anger at Parents Turned Toward Self
- Unconscious Switch – Need to change self to win love from parents (McWilliams, 1994)
- Replaying of interpersonal patterns with others and God (Jones, 1991)

## The Coloring of Christianity: Common Themes

- Head Knowledge not Heart Knowledge
- Sense of Worthlessness - do not feel fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139) or like God is deeply in love them. Instead, feel like an accident or mistake.
- Guilt - healthy guilt vs. unhealthy guilt; often extends past I have done something wrong to I *am* wrong; God image focuses on the misdeeds and negatives; emphasizes the fall rather than redemption

## Common Themes continued...

- Fear of Rejection - great radar; smile and volunteer for church duties, even when exhausted; God image is like a needy parent who only wants to hear about positives and grows cold when the person expresses sadness, pain or frustration
- Perfectionism - grace is a different language that is difficult to understand, have to earn God's love and acceptance; the same God of the Pharisees

## Perfection Sin Cycle

1. Sin
  2. Feel Intense Pain of Rejection
  3. Work their way back into God's approval
  4. Experience Acceptance.
  5. Attempt to maintain God's acceptance through efforts at perfection
- Sin – and the cycle starts again

## Therapy Example: Bob Williams

- 37 y/o Caucasian clergy person
- Multiple depressive and people pleasing symptoms
- Feels like he cannot win God's approval and senses that God often rejects him
- Father abused alcohol and was rejecting
- Wife is very domineering and rejecting
- Works too many hours and tries desperately to please church members, but often feels rejected by them

## Bob continued...

- Triangle of Persons (Menninger, 1958)



- Square of Persons (Strength, 1998)



- Triangle of Persons:
  - Past – Rejecting Father; Present – Rejecting Wife; Therapist – Expects me to Reject Him
- Square of Persons:
  - Past – Rejecting Father; Present – Rejecting Wife; Therapist – Expects me to Reject Him-God Image – Rejecting God

## What are your interpersonal patterns?

- Can you see any similarities between how you:
  - Experienced your parents or caregivers
  - Experience your spouse, partner, or friend
  - Experience God
- What are they? Take 10 minutes to think about it.

## Questions?

## Part II: Changing Your God Image

- Big Theological Picture
- Thoughts and Feelings
- Automatic Thoughts
- Thinking Errors
- Prayer

## Big Theological Picture

- We all have imperfect parents
- This causes us to feel incomplete and not fulfilled
- Which, in turn, causes us to look for Someone who is perfect (cf. St. Augustine) to fill our “God shaped whole” or existential vacuum.

## Thoughts and Feelings

- Brief Exercise - Recall something that you regret doing - something that was moderately emotionally painful. Shut your eyes and imagine the event for approximately 10 seconds. How do you feel?
- Now, recall a positive memory that made you feel wonderful. Again, shut your eyes and fully go there. How do you feel?

## Thoughts and Feelings

- Thoughts-->Feelings-->Behaviors
- Apostle Paul - Meditate on true and lovely things (Phil. 4:8); Renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2).
- St. Ignatious; St. Theresa
- Aaron Beck - Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

## Automatic Thoughts

- Self-talk that we are not aware of; frequency is on a different channel and the volume is turned down too low
- Learning to drive a standard; Rain Metaphor
- Sense of consistency; if you think negatively about yourself, then you will probably think God thinks negatively about you.
- Need to re-wire our thoughts so that they are more God-based
- Automatic Thought Record - Boss Example

## God Image Automatic Thought Record (GIATR)

- Bob's Example
- Description
- Fill out for the next 10 minutes

## Cognitive Errors (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1997)

- Filtering - occurs when a person filters out the positive and looks only at the negative; happens when a person's God image focuses on their weaknesses and mistakes rather than their strengths and victories. Solution - Shift the focus. Example - Bob's God image was emphasizing what Bob thought was a poor sermon. Bob switched the focus to the other things that went well and prayed about those events.

## Overgeneralization

- Bob's God Image told him he was a "complete mess" for having a lustful thought and that he would "never make progress" in that area. Solution - Quantify. Bob realized he had unhealthy sexual thoughts about 20% of the time and healthy sexual thoughts 80% of the time. He also realized that he was more able to challenge and change his unhealthy sexual thoughts. Bob was making progress and was not a complete mess in this area.

## Catastrophizing

- This occurs when your thoughts snowball (e.g., "I got a C, I'm going to fail out of the program.") After Bob argued with his wife, his God image told him, "You are a failure as a husband and you are going to get divorced. If you cannot manage your family, how can you expect to guide your congregation?" Solution - ask, "What are the odds?" Bob and his wife had overcome many difficulties and there was little chance that they would get divorced. An outside observer would not bet against them.

## Prayer

- Spiritual Formation History – St. Teresa, John of the Cross, St. Ignatius – “Application of the Senses”
- Meditating on scripture – lost sheep, prodigal son (Luke 15), psalm 23 etc.
- Again, just as we may have learned negative ways of experiencing God, we can learn positive ways of experiencing God.

## Discernment

- How do you tell know if you are hearing from God or your God image?
  - God will line up with scripture
  - God will leave you feel loved and accepted; you may feel guilty about doing something wrong, but you are not going to feel rejected in your person.
  - Healthy vs. unhealthy relationships.

## Resources

- Psychological Services Center
  - 226-4488
  - Reasonable Rates
- God Image Institute – 3 Levels of Training
  - [www.godimage.com](http://www.godimage.com)
- If you would like more information, then you can order my upcoming book by calling 1-800-HAWORTH

## Questions?

## God Image Automatic Thought Record

<b>Situation</b> Actual event leading to feeling God's disappointment	<b>Feelings</b> Specify sad, anxious, angry etc.  Rate 0-100	<b>Automatic Thought(s)</b> Write irrational God image automatic thought(s) that preceded emotion(s).  Rate belief in irrational God image thought(s), 0-100%.	<b>Real God Response</b> (Drawing on your own experience of prayer and scripture)  Write real God response to irrational God image automatic thought(s).  Rate belief in real God response, 0-100%.	<b>Outcome</b> -Re-rate belief in irrational God image automatic thought(s), 0- 100%. -Specify and rate subsequent feelings, 0-100.

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