

Hollywood sure loves a good love story, where two people can't help themselves. But we all know, **that's not how healthy relationships work**. If we can't help ourselves, it's not healthy. Healthy relationships always have space. Psychologists tell us healthy space in a marriage can be even more important than sex.<sup>1</sup> Space allows people flourish. It allows relationships to stay fresh. Healthy space preserves our sense of identity & purpose. [As an aside, can I also tell you how nervous it makes me to learn that an infant's attachment to their parents will influence the amount of space they need for the rest of their lives. As if parenting wasn't stressful enough....]

Healthy space is important. Too little space and relationships become suffocating. Too much space and they become lifeless or hollow. Learning how to manage healthy space is a lifelong journey. So here's the question. If healthy relationships always have space then **how do we think about healthy space in our relationship with God?** Because the God of our faith is intensely personal. Our God is not some abstract idea or principle. Our God walks in a garden with Adam & Eve. Our God shows up at Abraham's tent for a meal in the desert. Our God becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus. Our God always wants to be near us & with us & in us. Maybe he even sounds kind of clingy... . What does it mean to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/forget-sex-the-secret-to-a-longlasting-relationship-is-space-20121105-28tle.html>

have healthy space in our relationship with God?

Before you get anxious or excited, I'm not going to suggest you need more space with God. If that was true someone would tell you because you'd probably think you were God. Short of that, we could all use less space. But today we're not going to focus on the amount of space in our walk with God. **We're going to focus on what to do with the space that's already there; the space that's always there between us & God.**

None of us are going to experience the same kind of intimacy with God that Jesus experienced with the one he called Father. We're always aware of some space between us & God. What do we do with *that*? We could **ignore** it and treat it as a fact of life because God is God and we're not. We could **embrace** it, and be glad that at least God's not breathing down our neck. We could **attack** it and assume that space with God is always bad. How do we approach the space that's always there between us & God?

That's one of the questions in today's readings. Each reading is exploring a different possibility, for "healthy space" with God. Here's how. **They consider healthy space by exploring the role that words play in our relationship with God.** They don't talk about the similarities & differences between God & us; how big God is and how small we are. They're focused on how we relate to words in our relationship with God. How close are we to God's words, or how far are we

from our own words? Healthy space isn't about how near or far we feel to God. It's about how we're related to God's words & our own words. In **Proverbs**, Lady Wisdom "cries out," for those who pass by (Prov. 1:20). In **James**, our "tongue is a fire," (Jas. 3:6). In the **Gospel** Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27-31). We're not going to talk about the Psalm but even in our **Psalm**, "The heavens declare the glory of God," (Psa. 19:1).

They're all about the role of words in our relationship with God. That's how we're going to figure out the meaning of healthy space with God. We have an unfortunate saying in our culture: "it's just words" – which usually means words don't matter. But they do. **Words are the lifeblood of any relationship**, whether spoken words, signed words, or read words. When we say, "it's just words," what we really mean is this. We mean **words become lifeless when they're detached from relationship**. That's when they become *just* words. But as long as we're in a relationship with God, and our neighbor, there's no such thing as "just words." Words are the lifeblood of our relationship.

So let's see what our readings have to say about words in our relationship with God. **Proverbs** is about God's word to us. And according to Proverbs, whenever the topic is God's word, there's **no such thing as healthy space**. Proverbs would be horrified at the idea of healthy space from God's word. Because God's word is God's wisdom. And whenever we create space between divine

wisdom and ourselves we're not more healthy. We're less healthy. It's kind of like spiritual physics. Whenever we separate ourselves from God's wisdom it's like we're heading toward a cliff. If we're heading toward a cliff it doesn't really matter how fast we're going. We're still heading for a hard landing. Just like gravity takes over when we step off a cliff, so in Proverbs, calamity takes over when we create space between ourselves and God's word.

Maybe we walk away from God's wisdom by objectifying other people or using them for our own interests. If that's how we make space between us & God, then eventually we end up being objectified and used by them too. We end up feeding a cycle that increases calamity in our world. Proverbs wants us to know there's no such thing as healthy space between God's word & our lives

**James** is about our words. For James there's no such thing as healthy space between our words and our hearts. He says, don't pretend you can use words to hide what's happening in your heart. It always comes out. It's foolish to think we can get away with it for very long. It's foolish, he says, to use the same tongue for blessing God & cursing others (Jas. 3:9); just as foolish as expecting fresh water & salt water from the same spring. For James there's no such thing as healthy space between our words and our hearts. If we think there is, we're just playing with fire (Jas. 3:6).

Proverbs is about God's words. James is about our words. The **Gospel** is

about both. It's about a dialogue with God. In the Gospel Peter's failure is a failure of dialogue; honest & open dialogue. Peter's failure is suffocating God's word with his own words. His failure is using Jesus for his own ends. It's a failure of using his tongue to bless Jesus and rebuke Jesus in the same moment. It's a failure of dialogue.

**And Peter's failure is also what helps us finally understand what healthy space even means when it comes to Jesus.** Healthy space with Jesus isn't about staying away from church to keep our relationship fresh & exciting. It's the opposite. It's about allowing Jesus to have a voice. Healthy space is allowing an honest & open dialogue with Jesus. Healthy space is our willingness to follow Jesus on a different journey than we expected; a journey of self-giving love.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas offers a great summary. When he was invited to give his advice to some college graduates last year, this is what he said. He said: "do not lie."<sup>2</sup> Pretty simple, right? And because he's Stanley Hauerwas, one of the world's great theologians, he explained it like this. He said:

*Most of us, are moderately good people but because we are only moderately good self-deception is [a constant] problem. Genuinely bad people often have less illusion about themselves and the world than those of us who try to be morally*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tokensshow.com/blog/hauerwas-do-not-lie>

*pretty good people. We discover, for example, that in our [relationships] with [those we love] it is quite difficult not to lie. I suspect ... many of you already discovered, that in your most serious relationships ... you will fear telling the one you love the truth because the truth will threaten [your] fragile intimacy .... That is why I have never trusted declarations by couples that claim they have always had a happy marriage. That just tells me someone lost early.<sup>3</sup> There's no dialogue.*

Christianity doesn't invite us to become better people – even moderately better. **We're not invited to become better. We're invited to follow Jesus.** Because following Jesus is how we learn to be at home in the truth.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is the truth of God's love. And following Jesus can be a struggle. Healthy space with Jesus means we always have an open & honest dialogue. Following Jesus means we can't ever put ourselves at the center of our lives. Following Jesus means joining him on a journey of self-giving love.

In the end, this is how we treat the space that's always there between us & God: we listen to Jesus. It's challenging. It can be a struggle. But here's what Hauerwas suggest in the end. He says, "To live in the truth [of Jesus] will give you a life which may be difficult but one that will make possible your ability to look back and want no other life than you have lived." *Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*