

Royal Partners: Learning to Work with God

Chapter 4 – God’s Strategy

Father created us in His image and helps us become mature so we can be like Him and do what He does. He gave us authority and a domain so we can reign as He does, in our limited human way. The authority He gave us allows us to initiate action and speak with authority to make things happen as we choose. Because He gave us free will and authority, He honors our choices but also allows us to experience the consequences of those choices.

Did He do all of this without a plan? Did He put all the pieces in place and then stand back to see what would happen? Not at all.

Because of His foreknowledge, He knew man would sin, be corrupted by sin in every part of his being and lose the dominion He gave him. It’s also clear in Scripture that He had a strategy, which we refer to broadly as redemption. Salvation is the initial redemptive step for us. By making us part of His family when we accept Jesus’ sacrifice for our sin, Father enrolls us in a plan of growth and development to completely redeem us from all the effects of sin. Because redemption is as comprehensive as the effects of sin, whatever sin has corrupted, He will redeem with our cooperation.

So what about life during the redemption process? How involved does Father want to be in our daily lives? When should we turn to Him for help? As we saw in the previous chapters, He has a very clear intent for us, but does He also have a strategy for getting us from where we are to where He wants us to be?

He has a definite strategy and we’re about to discover some of its details. In a very practical way, the strategy involves Him working together with us in everything we do and us working with Him in everything He does.

Engaged in His Kingdom

A lot of Christians emphasize the worthlessness of human works, pointing out that human effort has no value, that we’re to crucify our old selves with its self-reliance. It’s true we stand before God only on the basis of His grace. Our works don’t qualify us, earn anything for us or save us.¹⁷¹ However, He created us to do good works and uses specific people within the church to prepare others for good works.¹⁷² Our works and efforts are natural expressions of our relationship with Father, not the basis for it.

God Almighty chose to do His work through imperfect people — us — as well as through angels. Why? Because He wants us to participate in what He does, to have experiences in common with Him as Adam did, to get to know Him by working with Him, and to learn how His kingdom and spiritual laws work. Passivity and inactivity are not acceptable in His kingdom. Consider the parable of the talents, in which the person who failed to put what was given him to productive use was judged as wicked and thrown out of the household.¹⁷³

Throughout the New Testament we see examples of Father and Jesus working through humans. For example, when Jesus fed the 5000 men and their families, He distributed the five loaves and two fish to the disciples, who in turn distributed the food to the crowd.¹⁷⁴ He used one person's food and involved His disciples to feed the people, but He multiplied the food to make it all possible.

The apostle Paul wrote that he and Timothy were God's fellow workers and that Christ was speaking through him.¹⁷⁵ God not only chooses to work through humans, who are clearly inferior to Him, He deliberately chooses to work through those whom other humans would consider inferior. That way, there's no question in anyone's mind that God Himself is actually producing the results and no one can boast about what they did for Him.¹⁷⁶

Every spiritual gift Father gives us requires us to be actively engaged in its use. How can He do anything through us if we don't at least show up and go through the motions?

I clearly remember an incident that occurred years ago when I was seriously struggling with my circumstances and my attitude was pathetic. Someone came to me for prayer with a major pain in his elbow. I really wanted to tell him to just go away, but knew that wouldn't be appropriate. So instead, I put my hand on his elbow and stumbled through a brief, half-hearted prayer without any expectation of results. I simply was fulfilling my obligation, nothing more. I was so self-absorbed and miserable I didn't want to be bothered.

I was so uncertain about the effectiveness of my relationship with God I fully expected nothing to happen. But that was one of the few times He immediately and completely healed someone I prayed for. He probably healed the man in response to his own faith — obviously not mine — but if I had refused to pray, He clearly would not have worked through me. I did my part rather ineffectively but Father did His with characteristic grace and mercy. The key was that I did my part and He worked through me.

Although we cannot produce the needed results, we do have control over our willingness to serve. As imperfect as we are, Father chooses to work through us.

We don't build or advance His kingdom. His kingdom is Himself, all kingdom work is His and He does it. We're privileged to participate in what He's doing. It's like a man who builds a cabinet and asks his young son to help by carrying the wood and sweeping the floor. Afterward, the boy runs to his mother and announces, "We built a cabinet!" Likewise, Father invites us to work with Him, so we do our part and He produces the desired results. The apostle Paul described a simple example of this when he declared God will crush Satan under our feet.¹⁷⁷ Obviously, only God can crush Satan, but He invites us to trample on him so we can participate.

An historic example of God engaging people in His work, which changed church history forever, appears in Acts Chapter 10. The first Christians were all Jews and they believed Christianity was only for the Jews. An angel of God appeared to Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army, and directed him to send for Peter. It's interesting that God had the angel tell Cornelius to send for Peter. Why not tell Cornelius what he needed to know, or tell Peter directly

to go to Cornelius' house? Instead, God gave specific instructions to Cornelius, but gave Peter a baffling vision he could only understand when Cornelius' men told him what the angel said. In this one incident, God provided the gospel message to Cornelius' household and guests through Peter, changed Peter's perspective about interacting with Gentiles, and changed history by including Gentiles in the church.

There are other scriptural examples of God giving specific instructions about what He wants people to do. For example, an angel of the Lord told Philip to go to a certain road and when he arrived he saw a man riding in a chariot. The angel told Philip to go to the chariot. Philip then discovered the man was an Ethiopian eunuch and had questions about what he was reading in the Book of Isaiah. Philip began talking with the man and led him to the Lord.¹⁷⁸

In another incident, God told Ananias to go to a certain house and pray for Saul's sight to be restored. The result was Saul's conversion to the faith and he eventually became the mightiest apostle of the first century.¹⁷⁹

In other cases, God's instructions were more general. For example, God commissioned Paul and Peter as apostles to different people groups.¹⁸⁰ They understood the role of an apostle, so they knew what God intended them to do.

Father wants us actively engaged in His work, cooperating with Him in His kingdom business. The more general His instructions to us, the more He allows us to exercise initiative in our responses.

A lot of teaching today emphasizes that God does everything for us as an expression of His grace but also because only He can do things of eternal value, that whatever we do is an act of the flesh and has no value. On the contrary, Scripture clearly shows that Father actively engages us in what He's doing, but not just for the thrill and satisfaction we might enjoy. He uses absolutely everything for our benefit, and the greatest benefit — from His perspective — is us being transformed into His image. But transformation is not the result of sitting back and enjoying the ride. Rather, we change and mature when we apply godly spiritual principles to overcome opposition from the enemy, the normal difficulties caused by the world we live in and by our own sinful thinking. We grow through effort and it's His intent for us to grow.

So if we're doing Father's will, can we expect Him to do everything for us or will we have to exert ourselves? The answer may depend on whether He's demonstrating how great and trustworthy He is or He wants us fully involved in the work for the satisfaction, fulfillment and growth it will produce in us. It's possible He'll do something for us without our involvement if we're spiritually immature, or we need to discover the greatness of His love, or He simply wants to bless us with a gift. Normally, however, we can expect Him to have us do our part for the benefits it produces for us.

Another aspect of being engaged in Father's kingdom and doing His work is representing Him as an ambassador and acting in His name. Specifically, He gave us the ministry of reconciliation, telling people He reconciled them to Himself through Jesus' sacrifice so their sins

won't be counted against them. This makes us Christ's ambassadors because God makes His appeal through us.¹⁸¹ In effect, Father has made Himself dependent on us by giving us this ministry, allowing us to act in His behalf.

Paul the apostle wrote often about this perspective. He described himself as an ambassador in chains.¹⁸² He acknowledged that his message was the Word of God, not his own or the word of men, and that God entrusted men with the gospel message.¹⁸³ Peter also wrote that the apostles delivered the Lord's Word.¹⁸⁴

Jesus told His disciples that whoever received them received Him.¹⁸⁵ The same is true for us as we represent Him to the world. Representing Him involves doing His work in His way with His resources. As God's children, not only are we His image and likeness, we literally represent Him and act in His behalf. That's a result of being *huios*, a mature family member.

Prepared for Life's Work

As mature members of God's family, we have responsibilities that correspond to our authority. This shouldn't surprise us, because stewardship and faithfulness are strong themes in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. Father wants us engaged in what He's doing and has definite expectations of us.

One way to identify His expectations is to examine the abilities He gave us. He gave each of us the abilities or spiritual gifts He wants us to have and prepared specific works for us to do with them.¹⁸⁶ He gave us everything we need for life and godliness, so each of us is fully equipped to be effective in His kingdom and in life.¹⁸⁷

For us, there's no distinction between spiritual and secular. We are spirit beings with psyches or souls, temporarily living in physical bodies. We're not just physical beings have occasional spiritual experiences. We're spiritual beings all of the time. We're God's children all of the time. We have the Holy Spirit within us to help us all of the time. Wherever we are, whatever we do, we belong to God and not ourselves because He bought us with the sacrifice of His own Son.¹⁸⁸ To limit our relationship with Father to one or two hours a week is a gross abuse of what He's done for us.

When we think of spiritual gifts, we often think they're only useful in ministry or God's kingdom, but that's not true. Our spiritual gifts are key elements of who we are and relate to everything we do. A few of the gifts clearly relate to everyday life, such as administration, craftsmanship, encouragement, generosity, helping or hospitality. Some of the gifts that seem inherently "spiritual" also have "secular" applications, such as apostle/executive, deliverer/warrior, evangelist/salesman, healing/medical and intercessor/advocate. We really cannot segment our lives into spiritual and secular compartments, because we are who we are, regardless of where we are or what we're doing.

Father gave each of us a purpose and a destiny, our destiny being the ultimate fulfillment of our purpose. And because we are spiritual beings temporarily living in physical bodies, our

purpose and destiny relate to both the spiritual and physical realms. Most of us aren't aware of the spiritual realm because we're spiritually handicapped and virtually dysfunctional. But our lack of spiritual awareness doesn't change the reality of our spiritual existence.

Father equipped us with the traits and abilities we need for life and our life experiences help us become mature so we can be skilled and effective. As we mature, He can include us in more of what He's doing and give us greater responsibilities in His kingdom, in both the physical and spiritual realms.

God Engaged in Our Work

We understand that God wants us engaged in His kingdom and in what He does. However, we usually don't realize He also wants to be engaged in everything we do. We exercise authority in our domains and reign in life, and that is where we see Him following our lead and honoring our choices.

While Jesus was on earth, He frequently responded to people's faith. When some men brought a paralytic to Him on a mat, He saw their faith, forgave the man's sins and healed Him.¹⁸⁹ A woman subject to bleeding for 12 years believed if she touched the edge of His cloak she would be healed. Jesus said her faith healed her.¹⁹⁰ Two blind men called out to Him and asked for mercy and He restored their sight according to their faith.¹⁹¹ A Canaanite woman begged Him to drive a demon out of her daughter. He initially rejected her request but she persisted, then He freed her daughter from the oppression.¹⁹² These are only a few of the recorded instances of Jesus responding to people's faith and honoring their requests.

It's significant the apostles sometimes referred to God working through their ministries.¹⁹³ This shows they had accepted ownership of what He called them to do and He worked through them to confirm their message and make their efforts effective.¹⁹⁴

Likewise, our faith is critically important. For example, we received salvation by God's grace through our faith.¹⁹⁵ In a broader sense, as we trust Him in every part of our lives, He credits our faith as righteousness.¹⁹⁶ We're victorious over the world through our faith.¹⁹⁷

Our faith must be based on Father's nature and not on ourselves or what's happened in our past. Our results will be proportional to our faith, not because our faith actually produces the results, but because greater faith gives Him more room to work. Our decisions to act outside our comfort zones, or to reach for "impossible" goals, or position ourselves for extraordinary results opens the door wider for Him to do His supernatural work, which is typical of the way He does things. The more we stretch, the more He acts like Himself. The more we risk, the more glory He receives. The more we implicitly depend on Him, the more faithful He proves Himself to be.

Father will do far more than we can ask or imagine because His power works in us.¹⁹⁸ That power isn't our own, but that of the Holy Spirit. However, that power often is in proportion to our faith.

Just as Jesus responded to people's requests, God answers our prayers and honors our desires. He loves us far more than we could possibly imagine, so it's natural for Him to want to know what we think or want.

Several of Jesus' statements sound like what we would call blank checks with certain conditions applied. For example, He said if we remain in Him and His words remain in us, we'll receive whatever we ask for.¹⁹⁹ Then He said the Father will give us whatever we ask for in His name.²⁰⁰

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke record a familiar statement Jesus made: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."²⁰¹ The grammatical tense of the verb "ask" indicates a continuing process, so we're to ask and keep on asking, then at some point, what we ask for will be given to us. If we examine the context of this statement, we discover the only condition is our persistence and there are no limits to what we can ask. The same is true of the verbs "seek" and "knock."

Jesus made other "open-ended" promises, such as, "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven."²⁰² And, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."²⁰³

Why would Jesus commit the Father with such promises? Because He knows Father's love for us and His desire to honor us. It's only appropriate that we would never want to abuse His love by asking for frivolous or self-indulgent things. In fact, such promises become increasingly meaningful as we become more like Him. In an intimate relationship, such as the one we're developing with Father, our desires and motivations become more like His. We get to know what He wants so we very naturally want to please Him, and He very naturally wants to please us. Likewise, He wants us to tell Him our dreams and desires, and He tells us His. As we become more spiritually mature, our relationship with Him becomes closer and more intimate.

This is the kind of relationship Father wants with us. So as we grow into it, He gives us the freedom to make mistakes, knowing that we'll learn from them and our relationship will improve. He doesn't condone our self-centeredness, but loves us in spite of it and helps us become more like Him. His unimaginable love for us makes Him pleased to give us the kingdom.²⁰⁴

Even as we mature to adult sons and daughters of God, *huios*, we retain the attitude of servants and the qualities of small children. We've seen that He gives us latitude, allows us to exercise personal initiative and responds to our faith. He wants us to be receptive to any specific guidance He gives us, act in a manner that conforms to His nature and ways, and operate within the spiritual laws and principles He defined.

If we've had a strong servant perspective based on Scripture, we understand that cooperating with God involves His power, *His* purpose and our faith. This is always the right

place for us to begin. Now let's consider what our perspective might become as we mature spiritually; that is, a *huios* perspective: His power, *our* purpose and our faith.

As we've seen so far, Father gave us free will, delegated authority to us and honors our decisions. We're beginning to realize we can initiate something by doing our part and relying on Him to do His.

The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus making the same statement twice on separate occasions, one of which we've already quoted. He said that whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.²⁰⁵ Whether we consider the proper translation "will be bound" or "will have been bound," the main point in this study is that we initiate the action on earth. We do our part on earth by exercising our authority in our domain and Father does His part in His domain. Our involvement completes the work for us on earth.

It's easy to see how we could misuse this for our self-centered purposes. Where there is great authority to act, there also is great potential for abuse. But notice that Jesus didn't surround these statements with warnings not to abuse them. It's as though Father recognizes that we are capable of misusing anything He gives us — as we know our children will almost certainly misuse anything we give them — but He chooses to give it to us anyway and allows us to learn to use it appropriately. After all, He's omniscient and omnipotent, so He's able to offset our mistakes.

We begin to see it's Father's intent for us to learn to use the authority He gave us. It becomes clear, however, that we cannot learn all this by receiving step-by-step, detailed instructions from Him for everything we're supposed to do. He gave us free will, knowing we occasionally would get in trouble by choosing the wrong things, but He enabled us to voluntarily choose the right things and learn to function the way He does: seeing what needs to be done and making it happen. He made us in His likeness and wants us to function as He does, in our limited way, of course.

With this in mind, let's consider similar Scriptures that can be both exciting and scary. Consider the fig tree incident, in which Jesus spoke to a tree that had no fruit and the tree immediately withered. The disciples saw this happen and were astounded, but then He made an astounding statement.

"I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."²⁰⁶

Whenever Jesus said, "I tell you the truth," we need to pay very close attention because what He's about to say is extremely important, violates our current thinking, or both. If we have faith and do not doubt, we will receive whatever we ask for in prayer. Some might protest that Jesus was speaking figuratively, or that this only applied to the first 12 disciples. But there are no qualifiers in His statement or in the context. Instead, Jesus later told His disciples to make other

disciples and teach them to obey everything He commanded them.²⁰⁷ Even if His statement about throwing a mountain into the sea was a figure of speech, it represented doing the impossible, so it still means we can do what seems impossible to us. It should be evident that believers who are maturing spiritually and learning to fulfill their role as *huios* in Father's kingdom will see greater and more consistent results.

As we've said, if we have faith and do not doubt, we can take the initiative and Father will produce the results. It's not our faith that produces the results; rather, it's God supporting us with His power that makes things happen. This is not limited to fig trees and mountains.

Is that just a little scary to you? It should be awe-inspiring to realize the extent of our authority on earth and the extent of Father's commitment to us.

Some commentaries state that the only way for us to believe when we pray and receive answers is for the Holy Spirit to clearly show us God's will so we know how to pray. While I agree we can believe absolutely for results when the Holy Spirit shows us what to do, that interpretation of this passage discounts or ignores our authority on earth. Clearly, we should try to determine Father's will, then act and speak accordingly. But this passage clearly demonstrates Him allowing us to exercise initiative. It's our domain, so what do we think should be done?

No, we don't have the power to do the impossible, only God does. But if we do what is appropriate in our domain where we have authority — for example, commanding something to be done — He will do what we cannot. If we act in faith, Father will produce the results. This is a glimpse of our cooperative, interdependent relationship with God. More on this in the next chapter.

Jesus made another statement that's easy to read yet overlook the significance of what it says: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."²⁰⁸ Without getting into the spiritual process of having one's sins forgiven, let's realize this verse affirms the initiative-response relationship we're examining. If we decide to forgive someone, Father responds to our initiative and forgives them. That is both an exciting possibility and a scary responsibility!

One of my favorite Scripture verses is part of a prayer, that God may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by His power.²⁰⁹ The question becomes, "Whose resolve for good and whose work of faith?" The prayer is that God may fulfill them by His power, so it can only mean our resolve for good and our work of faith. Again, this clearly speaks of Father responding to our purpose or initiative. The apostle Paul wrote this prayer to people whose faith and love for each other were growing more and more, and who were suffering for God's kingdom.²¹⁰ I suggest that as we increasingly become like Jesus, especially if we're harassed for our faith, we can expect Father to honor our intentions, desires and acts of faith more and more.

Some Christian leaders may see the potential for immature believers to misuse Scriptures like these, so they emphasize the importance of following God's will. However, as we mature spiritually, Father grants us increasing latitude and discretion. Immature believers may not

always get what they expect from Scriptures like these because He may stress the importance of step-by-step, detailed instructions for everything they do. Spiritually immature believers need to develop an attitude of servanthood and develop childlike qualities before God entrusts them with greater authority. Father's primary emphasis is on our growing into His image, not on making our lives on earth more fulfilling or pleasant.

Several Scriptures show that Father responds to our purpose and faith, meaning He allows us to exercise personal initiative then uses His power to produce the needed results. This is an important aspect of our working relationship with Him, which is a true partnership.

Personal Application

- To what degree are you emotionally committed to and engaged in Father's kingdom, not merely fulfilling your obligation to Him?
- Do you think Father has given you specific instructions about something He wants you to do? What's your attitude about that? Do you feel He's imposed on you or are you happy He asked you? Are you looking for opportunities to do it or ways to ignore it?
- Each of us has spiritual gifts, abilities, skills and motivations. In what new ways can you use yours to serve people as an expression of God's love for them?