

*“New York City, center of the universe, home to 8.6 million people . . . a diverse melting pot of culture, everyone searching for meaning and answers. I thought I had it all figured out, but then something happened, and it changed my life forever.”* Those are the opening words of a new TV show that debuted last Sunday. It is titled God Friendened Me, and it is the story of a young man named Miles. In the pilot episode, Miles received a friend request on Facebook from God.

Since Miles is an atheist, he declined the request, assuming it was a prank. A few minutes later, he received a second friend request from God. This one had a profile picture of an odd shaped cloud in a bright blue sky. When Miles looked up from his phone, he saw that same odd shaped cloud - and only that cloud - floating in the bright blue sky above him.

Then he turned around, and saw a potted bush on fire. Having been raised in a pastor’s home, he instantly remembered Moses, and for the briefest moment questioned his lack of belief. Then he saw a store owner with a fire extinguisher chase off the kids who had just set the bush ablaze. Safe from his momentary spiritual crisis, Miles grinned and turned to go - only to receive another friend request from God. This time, however, he clicked “accept.”

God Friendened Me isn’t the first show to use the theme of God unexpectedly speaking to someone. A few years ago, there was a show titled Joan of Arcadia. Further back, there was Highway to Heaven and Touched By an Angel. But none of those shows are the creators of the theme of God unexpectedly speaking to people. The creator of the theme of God unexpectedly speaking to people is the Creator Himself, who not only created Adam and Eve, but spoke to them. We see this in the beginning of the Bible, with God speaking not only to Adam and Eve, but also to Cain, Noah, and Abraham. We see this in the middle of the Bible, with God speaking to Moses, David, and the prophets. And we see this at the end of the Bible, with God telling the Apostle John about things to come. We see this most fully, however, in God speaking through His Son in the gospels. The book of Hebrews even notes this, saying *“in the past God spoke . . . at many times and in various ways . . . but in these last days He has spoken to us by his Son.”*

The reason God has done all this speaking is so we humans might experience the joy and contentment He intended life to possess. For in the fall that Genesis 3 describes, that reality was shattered. As a result every one of the descendants of Adam and Eve down through the ages (including each of us) has been burdened with that same fallen and sinful nature, which makes it hard for us to hear God’s voice, and even harder for us to therefore experience the joy and contentment God intended to exist.

In order to respond to the Fall, God began speaking through carefully selected spokespersons like Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Eventually, as Hebrews says, God sent His Son to speak for Him. After His Son ascended back to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to speak for Him. And finally He created the Church as the channel through which He would continue to speak to all those willing to listen.

We fallen and sinful humans do not easily hear God's voice, however. Instead, we hear the voices of the people around us, inviting us to spend time with them rather than God. We hear the voices of the false gods of this world, inviting us to worship them instead of the one true God. And we hear the voice of sin, tempting us to listen to our own whims instead of God's will. To hear GOD'S voice in the midst of that cacophony of voices, we need to discipline our wild and restless hearts to listen for God's voice above all else. To hear God's voice, we need to discipline our easily distractible minds to focus on God's thoughts instead of our own thoughts. And to hear God's voice, we need to discipline our soul to seek its satisfaction in the ways God says we should live instead of what the voices of this world say are the ways of life.

We heard this in what Mary Ellen said in the video we just watched. She said, "*discipline is practice,*" and "*discipleship is practicing our faith.*" Unfortunately, as children of Adam and Eve we can be tempted to resist putting discipline into our walk with God. For it may seem odd to us that our relationship with God can be deepened through planned involvement in particular tasks. But that is precisely how relationships grow. If we are married, we grew in our relationship with our spouse through spending time with each other in the daily interactions we developed by choosing to live together in the same house. If we have friends, we grew in our relationship with them by eating together, attending activities together, and spending time talking with each other.

In both situations, we had to discipline ourselves to regularly do certain things, participate with someone else in particular ways, and force ourselves to think about someone else - and their needs and desires - instead of just our own needs and desires. And doing that required that we not only plan to do such things, but then followed the plan, and did such things. To grow closer to God, we must do something similar; we must discipline ourselves to regularly participate in the kinds of spiritual growth activities God uses to speak to us. These spiritual growth activities have even been given a name by those who have gone before us: "spiritual disciplines." We see two of these spiritual disciplines in the passage from Matthew.

"*When you give to the needy,*" Jesus said, "*do not announce it.*" He then added "*do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.*" His point wasn't to say that we shouldn't know the amount of what we are giving. He was saying that our motive for giving shouldn't be to have people see how much we give. We see this in the fact that Jesus spoke in several places in the gospels about tithing, and you can't figure out if you're giving 10% if you don't pay any attention to how much you give. We also see this in the fact that if giving is - as Jesus says it is - a "spiritual discipline," and if our involvement in such things are meant by God to grow over time, as Jesus again said is the case, we can't grow in our giving if we do it haphazardly or arbitrarily. To grow something, we have to develop a plan as to how we will grow it, and then we need to stick to that plan so the growth can actually occur.

Jesus went on to say "*when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray.*" His point was that prayer is not something we do to get attention from others, but to be in conversation with God. And just as the desire to be in conversation with a friend shouldn't include the desire to be seen by other people as we do so (so those other people think we are a nice person), the same reality applies

to God. If we want to be in relationship with God, and if we want to have the BIG FAITH we need to live our lives in joy and contentment, we need to be in regular conversation with the only One who can give us such faith. Speaking in private does not require that we take Jesus literally, and begin each day in a closet, however.

What Jesus was saying was that we should find a place where we are not distracted. In saying this, Jesus wasn't talking about our physical location, but our mental focus. As a result, we could pray as we go to work. We could pray as we do housework. And we could pray as we exercise, shop for groceries, or do the many other solitary things we do each day. The point is to take certain moments of each day to privately be in conversation with the One person in the universe that needs to be at the center of everything we seek to be and do. For only God can give us the BIG FAITH we need to grow in our relationship with Him, and thereby experience the joy and contentment He intended life to give us.

Going back to the television show God Friend Me, Miles tells a friend why he didn't believe in God. In that explanation, he said that when he was eight years old his mother was diagnosed with cancer, and given six months to live. He prayed for her, and she miraculously recovered. The Cancer just disappeared, and the doctors had no explanation. But then, on the way home from the hospital, his mother was killed in a car accident. *"I tried to make sense of it," Miles said, "And the only way I could was that there was no God. Because if there is, it means that He is cruel. And I don't want to live in a world that is governed by someone like that."* But then God friended him on Facebook, and odd things began to happen.

I won't spoil what those things were so you can watch the show for yourself. But I will share that at the end of the show, Miles does a voice over in which he states that *"people say that God has a plan for all of us, that we're all part of a grand design. Well I never believed that to be true. But then God friended me and it kind of turned my life upside down."*

Miles then goes on to say that *"in these crazy times we live in, we owe it to ourselves to ask the tough questions and to open our minds to a new way of seeing the world, a place where we can find our voice again, where old wounds can heal and new relationships can begin, where we finally understand our purpose and find love in the most unexpected place. It's not going to be easy. Change never is. We just need to have courage to take the first step."*

As we ponder the idea of Private Disciplines today, I invite you to consider doing just that: taking the first step. I invite you to evaluate what you are currently doing in terms of spiritual disciplines. Do you pray each day? Do you regularly read more than a verse or two of your Bible? Have you made the commitment to be in worship every Sunday, unless prevented? Do you give generously? Have you made the commitment to work toward tithing, giving an extra percentage point each year until you get from where you are to where God says we should be?

In the passage that was read from 2 Peter, we are encouraged to add to our faith “*goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.*” And the reason, Peter says we should do this is that “*if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

In your bulletin, there is therefore an insert again this week. It has 7 questions listed on it, one for each day of this next week. On each day this week, I therefore invite you to read the listed question, ponder it. Then speak to God about it in prayer. At the end of the week, read the paragraph at the bottom of the insert, and ponder the questions in the two bullet points. Then speak to God about it. As you speak to God, ask Him if there is a spiritual discipline that He wants you to begin doing that you are not doing now, or if there is a spiritual discipline that you are doing from time to time, but which He wants you to go “deeper and wider” in practicing.

For the answer to those questions might just change your life, sending you off in a direction you might never have imagined, BUT which may change your life in positive and joy-filled ways.

But there is a second reason I am inviting you to do these things. God never stops with what He is doing in just our lives. God always is always seeking to do things in the lives of other people through what He does in our lives. That’s because God wants each and every one of His children to experience joy and contentment. We hear about this reality in a video statement by Lynnette Wray about the spiritual discipline of prayer.