



Being, Doing, Knowing

The Connection To Our Creator

Niki Parks

How do we get to know God? Let's consider how we get to know anyone. From birth, we get to know our family by mirroring. We reflect what we see in them. Our facial expressions, reactions, tone, and mannerisms are all a developing process of mirroring what we see. Getting to know others and becoming ourselves are an intricately linked affair—a dance of sorts. Back and forth, we see what they do, process that information into our own bodies, and then reflect it back to them. In a sense, and in our own unique way, we become “like” them. The very journey of becoming ourselves is

a journey of *knowing another*. Later in life, this back and forth dance becomes more external. We begin to think, feel, and intuit, and we develop skills for asking questions to get to know others. But early in life, we “know” only by mirroring.

If that is the way our Creator established the early development stages in our physical bodies, would the same principle be something to consider for the early stages of our spiritual development? We cannot see God with our eyes, but perhaps we can also get to know Him by mirroring. When awareness of God begins to germinate in young children and grow

tentatively in teens, let's ask ourselves: *Are we introducing our children to a mirroring process with their Creator, or asking them to jump directly into concepts and theological constructs? Are we inviting them to become a God-reflecting people, or simply wanting them to believe and assert the right things?* While the options are not mutually exclusive, there is quite a difference between them. Anyone who works with students has seen, at times, the discrepancy between what students say they believe and the life they are growing into. And far too often, that gap widens until there is a break, which can lead to a complete separation from the faith of their youth.

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A part of our role as influencers is to foster culture. A school or family culture, and even a peer culture that accurately reflects the nature of our wonderful God, is something worth mirroring. How do we reflect that nature? Love for the disenfranchised, restoration of the broken, quiet time with the Father, healing of bodies and minds, and unity among His followers: these are among the things that consumed the time of our Lord Jesus while He walked this earth as a man. And as hard as it is to admit, we live in and often reflect a society that promotes comfort for ourselves, quick fixes, chaotic schedules, possessions to manage, and a consumer mentality, even in our church families. It is imperative that we bridge this gap for our young generation. We cannot rely on ideologies to bear the load of our students' knowledge of God. As true as they may be, they are simply not strong enough. Theology is crucial, but perhaps it is not actually the foundation.

Because of how we process life as adults, it's easy to think we must first *know*, then we start to *do* what we know, and then we naturally begin to *be* who we know we should be. But early development progresses in the reverse order. First we start *being* like the people we see. We internalize and reflect minutiae; our mirror neurons fire like crazy until we have adopted everything from facial expressions to attitudes—but there is no understanding of the “why” behind it. Then we start *doing* more overt things like the person we are mirroring. As children, we begin to make the conscious choice to act like Mom, Dad, or the superhero on TV. Then, after years of that process unfolding, we finally begin *knowing*. Our capacity for understanding why they do what they do increases, and we know how to make judgments and decisions like our mentors even when they aren't there to show us the way.

We've got to incorporate that process into a young believer's understanding of God. As our students mature, they may be able to grasp intellectual concepts about math, science, or literature, but it seems that spiritual development operates on a different timeline. Perhaps we are offering them the framework of ideologies before the foundation of who God is.

Building a strong foundation of knowing God begins with mirroring. As youth pastors, we discovered that giving young people an opportunity to mirror God by serving the poor, laying down their own desires for another, and making sacrifices—“taking up their cross” to follow Jesus—brought about a change in attitude and heart that endless preaching and teaching hadn't even come close to. Inviting students into action—into mirroring the stories of love, sacrifice, and mystery that God embodies—seems to be an important step in the process of spiritual development. It's not sacrifice for the ego's sake; it's practice for the obedience that faith requires in the more mature years.

At Heartwork, we have seen previously self-absorbed students sell their electronics, sleep on the floor, eat beans and rice for a week, and take cold showers: all as “empathy challenges” designed to engage their minds, emotions, and bodies in mirroring our extravagantly generous God. We've seen this invitation to love sacrificially soften even the most disillusioned hearts.

Challenging young people to spend themselves for others as described in Isaiah 58:10 seems counterintuitive when we can't get them to do their homework or clean their room. But they are truly capable of great things; we just have to start in the right place. Inviting them to mirror God in their actions may be that foundational piece to build upon. We are created to be like God. It's in our bones. From Jeremiah 22:16 to James 1:27, God calls us to action on behalf of the marginalized. Defending and caring for the poor and distressed is considered a pure form of acting out our faith.

Maybe it's not only because He wants us to care for them on His behalf, but also because it's an integral part of *how we actually get to know Him*. Whether it's serving in a local shelter or giving part of their spending money to international relief and development, there are so many things students can do to participate in redemption even while they are young. It's not only practice for when they have greater resources to give; it's foundational, action-oriented faith that challenges the cultural norm of self-focus and entitlement. And standing up to that monster called entitlement is always a good thing.

Niki Parks is the director of Heartwork, a nonprofit committed to teaching students the joy of spending themselves for others. She graduated from Oral Roberts University, and since then has loved working in full-time youth ministry with her husband, Jeremiah. They are enjoying raising three wonderful kids in Colorado.