

DO YOU KNOW THIS MAN?

Actor Tony Randall, famous for his role as Felix in the Odd Couple, once had an experience that surely was the inspiration for a current credit card commercial. Randall was in a jewelry store in New York City. The store owner recognized him and became very excited. He declared that Randall was his all-time favorite actor. What a treat it would be for his wife, the man said, if she could talk to Mr. Randall. Randall graciously agreed. So the man called his wife and Randall had a short, pleasant visit with her as she gushed on and on about how wonderful he was. Finally, Randall came to the point of his visit to the jewelry store. There was a gold necklace in the window that had caught his eye. He'd like to buy it. Would the store accept a personal check? The store owner hesitated, then asked, "Do you have any Identification?"

Recognition only goes so far. The store owner was ready to idolize Tony Randall; he wasn't ready to trust him. You see where this is leading, don't you? Is it possible for someone to come in this house today and worship Jesus but still not trust him with their lives? Think about that while I share another story with you.

French Lick, Indiana, is well known to basketball fans as the boyhood home of basketball legend Larry Bird. In fact many basketball fans come to take pictures of the street that is named in Bird's honor, Larry Bird Boulevard. One day a couple of tourists came out to take pictures of themselves in front of the basketball-shaped street sign for Larry Bird Boulevard. They paid no attention to a jogger who passed by, and who probably caught on the periphery of some of their photos. That jogger was Larry Bird. He was going through his daily work-out in the off season. But these two tourists were so focused on the Larry Bird sign that they didn't even notice when the real Larry Bird

passed by.

Many people encountered Jesus and saw nothing special. Others were wowed by his miracles, but once Jesus starts talking, telling them that the source of his miracles is God, the people stop listening and start arguing. You know what an argument is, don't you? It's when two people shout conflicting opinions at one another without listening to one another. Pastor John Kramp reports that his grandmother had a unique way of ending arguments with her spouse. When Grandma got tired of listening to her husband, she would just turn off her hearing aid. As he said, "Grandmother refused to hear anything she didn't want to hear. I know people like that, don't you?"

The people around Jesus don't want to hear that he is God in the flesh. They don't want to hear that he is the true bread of life and the only way to salvation and eternal life. They have turned off their "hearing aids" at this point because the information is too radical. They ask, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know. How can he now say I came down from heaven?" It's a reasonable question. If a kid from our neighborhood claimed to have visited heaven, most of us would laugh in his face. Remember, Jesus wasn't just claiming he saw a vision of heaven. Many respected prophets of old claimed that. No Jesus was saying that he had actually come down from heaven, and was therefore, qualified to speak about it. That's the part that is difficult to swallow, then and now. Jesus changes our ideas of God. After they had been with Jesus and heard him teach, then saw him die and on the third day rise from the dead, the disciples could never again think of God in the same way. God wasn't the God they had been taught about as little children. Having been with Jesus, God now had a human face for the disciples-the face of Jesus.

Some of you remember the movie Erin Brockovich. The movie told the true story of one woman's battle for justice for a small community that had been poisoned by a corrupt industrial plant. In the movie, Julia Roberts plays the strong-willed character. But the real Erin Brockovich appears in one small scene. She is a waitress at the diner. Her name is Julia. Don't you think that's interesting? Julia Roberts is playing the title character. Meanwhile the real-life person about whom the movie was made is playing a tiny bit part as a waitress named Julia. Doesn't that scene remind you a little bit of the incarnation? Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, takes the role of a servant on our behalf.

Why would the God of power and might limit himself with human flesh? How could the awesome and eternal I AM be contained in a weak and decaying body? The people Jesus was speaking to lived hard lives of constant physical labor. They dreamed of being released from the prison of the human body. Why would God dignify the body by taking up residence in it? And the answer is, of course, to save us. In order to save us from this body of death, God took on the same limited body. He knows our aches and pains and weaknesses. He is sympathetic to our struggles. In Jesus, we see how much God loves us and how far God would go to communicate that love. And in this way, Jesus changes not only our ideas about God, Jesus changes our relationship WITH God. Up until now, the people of Israel have been worshiping and serving God. Now it is time to know God.

Author Bruce Wilkinson claims that most Christians fall into one of two categories: those who have a relationship with God and those who have a responsibility to God. Those Christians who have a relationship with God look to their faith for the

answers to life's questions. They don't let peer pressure dictate their morality. They worship sincerely and joyfully. They find fulfillment in serving others. Those Christians who have a responsibility to God approach their faith as an obligation. They attend church because it is the right thing to do on Sunday. They serve on a committee because they think it is expected of them. Their faith does not make a significant impact on their priorities, their relationships, or their lifestyle.

There is joy and fulfillment in having a relationship with God. We were made to know God and be filled with God's glory. Anything less than that divine relationship leaves us restless, discontent, empty, and anxious. Jesus knew that every human heart is filled with the longing for communion with God. He was there when the human heart was conceived, and none of its complexities surprise him. He is offering what we really want. And the way to God is through Jesus, for he says, "Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me." Everyone who truly wants to know God will come to Jesus. He is the full revelation of who God is and what God desires. But to truly know God, God's Spirit must live in us. No amount of studying, learning, praying, or striving will help us to know God. Charles F. Kettering once said, "There is a great difference between knowing and understanding: you can know a lot about something and not really understand it."

The people who followed Jesus knew a lot about God, but their reaction to Jesus' words shows they didn't understand God. Jesus shocked them when he said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Bread serves no purpose unless it is consumed, and then it serves to nourish and give energy to our

bodies. It is not enough to know that Jesus is Lord. The Bible tells us that even Satan acknowledges that truth. To truly know him, we must take him into our own lives and let his Holy Spirit transform us from the inside out. We must go beyond knowledge to experience. His Spirit in us must give our life new energy, new purpose, and new power. This is the promise of abundant life now and eternal life later.

I want to close this morning with an amazing story. On September 11, 2001 many thousands of people were trapped in the rubble after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Among those trapped was Stanley Praitnath, an assistant vice president for Fuji Bank. Brian Clark, an employee with Euro Brokers in the South Tower, heard Stanley calling for help and dug through a wall to rescue him. Now keep this in mind: Stanley is the one trapped. Brian is the potential rescuer. As soon as Stanley heard Brian's voice, he called out the first thing on his mind. Now what do you think it was? If it had been me, I would have screamed, "Help me!" But that is not the first thing Stanley said to the man who was digging through the wall to help him. Stanley asked a question. He said to Brian, "I have to ask you-- do you know Jesus?"

You see, neither man knew if they were going to make it out alive, and so Stanley wanted to make sure that he shared his hope in Jesus with someone while he had the chance. That was more important to him than his personal safety. Stanley was overjoyed to hear Brian's answer. "Yes, I go to church every Sunday." Brian pulled Stanley through a hole in the wall. Both men made it out safely. These two men paint us a different picture than we might expect of two highly paid men in New York City's financial district. You may not have the same theological views as Stanley Praitnath, but is there anyone who doubts that he is a man who truly knows God through Jesus

Christ? He understands what abundant life is. He has taken Jesus into his life, and has been changed from the inside out. And because he knows the joy of a true relationship with God, his most pressing desire is to share that joy with others. The only way to know God is to experience a new birth through Jesus Christ. And it is through God's Spirit living in you that you can know abundant life now and eternal life in the future.

Do you know this man? If he came to you in the flesh, would he have to give some identification or do you know him so well that you could recognize him anywhere? Jesus changes our ideas about God, and Jesus makes it possible for us to know God in such a way that we can share him with others. I believe that if we will open ourselves up to receive God's Spirit, we will discover it is far more rewarding to have a relationship with God than simply having a responsibility to God.