Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

There is a Path – Week 3

In the past two weeks you have been introduced to daily study, and daily or weekly getting together for reflection, honest conversation, and creating an environment of trust – real conversation on real topics. This week you are being asked if you have created enough of an environment of trust, even of belonging, that you wish to continue learning, reflecting, and discussing together.

Hopefully the last couple of weeks have helped you understand that some people believe in God, and that God created us to be as His Image. Even so, we rebel against being an Image of God so we can define ourselves separate from (and often at odds with) God. When we do so, history has shown our lives lead to depravity and ruin. To help us understand this, stories have been put into the beginning of the Bible which relate how we are as human beings. We can choose to follow these ways in rebellion against God, or to resist them.

This section of our course reinforces the idea that there is a God, that God intentionally intruded into human history, and that you can have a relationship with God. It introduces the concept that there is a Path or Way which God desires us to follow, and which is open to all.

Day 15: Love

Jesus stressed forgiveness and love. In fact:

Jesus said to him, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40)

By His phrasing "all the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments", He's saying: "all of scripture is basically commentary about loving God and loving your neighbour." Another way of thinking of it is: "the foundation of My path, the path of God, is to love God with everything you are, and love your neighbour as you love yourself."

But what is love? What did Jesus mean?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines love as:

(1) strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties;
(2) attraction based on sexual desire; affection and tenderness felt by lovers
(3) affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests; an assurance of affection
(4) warm attachment, enthusiasm, or devotion
(5) unselfish loyalty and benevolent concern for the good of another
(6) the score of zero in tennis.

There's romantic love, erotic love, benevolent love, affectionate love – all different types of love. When we "make love" we really mean we're having sex.

Thank you, that is a good summary of how our present-day society thinks of love! When Jesus spoke of love, the closest definition to what He meant may be: *"to do what is healthiest."* *To do what is healthiest?* Yes. What may be healthiest for God? *I have no idea.* We'll come back to that question later. What may be healthiest for you? *To have enough to eat, clothes to wear, a shelter to live in. To have good relationships. To have a life of purpose and meaning.* Great answers! What may be healthiest for someone else? *The same, I suppose.* Exactly.

You could rewrite Jesus' words to be:

"Do what is healthiest for God, for yourself, and for others."

That's it? That's the core of the foundational book, the Bible? That's this great "path"?
That's it.

So, our course is over?

No, not at all! In fact, we're just at the end of the beginning. Everything we do going forward will be, basically, exploring nuances of what is healthiest for God, healthiest for ourselves, and healthiest for our neighbour.

Write down your thoughts: What do *you* think love is? Using the definition of "do what is healthiest", what do you think is healthiest for you? For others? What may be healthiest for God (assuming God exists)? Using your definition of love (if you think its other than "do what is healthiest"), what do you think it means to love God? Love yourself? Love others?

Share your thoughts with others you trust.

Day 16: Forgiveness

You are in the image of God. However, you also seek your own way, get jealous, and along with all of us, seek your own pathways to salvation. *As per Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the Tower of Babel?* Yes, exactly! Others also seek their own way, for they too are human in every way, including that. *So, we will get hurt.* Yes. And Jesus taught us that we need to forgive others when they harm us. *What did He mean by that?* That's a great question. A good definition is *"to do what is healthiest for that person, regardless of what they have done to you."* You may think of it, taking what we covered last, as *"to love them, even though they hurt you." Even if they've greatly harmed me, I'm to love them? To do what is healthiest for them? What if I want to kill them instead? Why would I forgive them?* Because you want the best for them. You want them to be healthy. *But I don't! I am angry and hurting and resentful and want to give them what they deserve, not what is healthiest! I don't love them, I hate them!* The emotions you have are because you are human, and they are natural – they are saying "something is wrong here!" You want justice, even vengeance, to "make things right." But our societies have shown, time and again, that when we go down the path of vengeance all it leads to is more death and destruction – it is a vicious cycle of harm. God calls out to us to love instead, just as God loves us so much that He created us and gives us everything we need for life – and continues to do so, regardless of how we behave. God calls us to seek the healthiest way for others, and for us too. Jesus said, "love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you." That is what forgiveness is all about.

Write down your thoughts: What do you think of forgiveness? Some people say, "forgiveness means to forget what happened." Others say, "forgiveness means to not want vengeance or be resentful towards." Still others say, "forgiveness means to assume/hope/pretend that the person won't hurt you again." How do those three definitions compare to the one given above?

Are there times when you should not seek what is healthiest for another, even (or perhaps especially) if they have hurt you? Are there boundaries to it? What do *you* think forgiveness really means? Are there things you need forgiveness for? Are there things you need to forgive others of?

Share your thoughts with others you trust.

Day 17: Changing our lives

Forgiveness is key to living how God wants us to. Jesus told us to change our lives – this is one important aspect He was speaking of: forgiving, instead of resenting and striking back. It is key to creating and maintaining good relationships with each other. We all make mistakes, and we all hurt others – if we were penalized for every mistake we make, it would be a very painful, despairing, and hopeless world – not shalom at all. Likewise, if we are to remain in good relationship with God, we need to seek forgiveness from Him as we do wrong – every day. Forgiveness is a key to shalom; talking to God when we aren't in shalom is important. *We can talk with God?* Yes. For example, if you realized that you were doing things wrong compared to how God wanted you to, here is how you could talk to God to ask Him for forgiveness:

"Father, God Almighty, I believe You created me to be an Image of You, representing You to all of creation.

"I believe You created me to walk with You and share my life with You in intimate relationship.

"I acknowledge that like Adam and Eve, I desired my independence, and went astray.

"I acknowledge that like Cain, I was jealous of my brother and sister, and their blessings.

"I acknowledge that like the Tower of Babel, our society seeks its own ways to heaven.

"I acknowledge that like the people of Noah and the Flood, humanity is always turning to seek darkness, hurt, and evil.

"I thank You, Father, that You never stop chasing after us, to bring humanity back into Your household.

"I thank You that You came incarnate in Jesus the Chosen One, the Anointed, the Christ, to:

- teach us Your way
- give me a personal invitation into Your household
- sacrifice Yourself for us, killing our sins in dying for us,
- defeat death in Your resurrection
- mediate for us at the right hand of God our Father.

And through this, You broke the barriers between us and Your Kingdom.

"Through the Anointed One, I am now accepted as a full member of Your family, O God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and those who live with You in faith.

"I believe that You are still working to fully reconcile all creation to You. I believe that You call me, as a member of Your household, to work with You towards this reconciliation.

"I believe that You are active in bringing healing, and health, and wholeness.

“Right now, I apologise for how I’ve missed the mark of Your holiness.

“I forgive those who have hurt me.

“I recommit to being Your servant, a brother / sister of the Christ, a follower of the Holy Spirit, a representation of You, to work towards reconciling all with You.

“Please forgive me.

“In Jesus’ Mighty Name;

“Amen.”

There’s a lot of details in there that I don’t really understand. Fair enough – we’ll get to them ☺. The main idea I want to share is that we can talk with God, and the importance of forgiveness to understanding God and His Way. Another, equally effective prayer is:

“Father, forgive me – I’ve done wrong. Please help me to make this right and do what is healthiest from now on. Thank you.”

Share your thoughts with others you trust.

Day 18: You can talk with God

Yesterday we shared an example of a speech to God – this is traditionally known as "prayer" (from the Latin word precari which means "to ask earnestly, beg, entreat"). *I know what prayer is. It's when that person who thinks he's holier-than-me stands up and says all those fancy words which no one understands to impress us and make us think he's next to God.* Actually, that's what Jesus explicitly said prayer **isn't.** *He did?* Yes. He said when you talk to God, keep it simple and to the point – God knows what you need even before you do. Don't try to impress others by how you talk to God because that doesn't impress God. A **great** prayer is "Help!" *Why would I want to talk to God?* Well, if it is true that God created you to be an Image or Representative of Him, He *may* know you even perhaps better than you know yourself. He knows all the hard times you have, all the challenges you face, all your worries and anxieties. And, if He views you as His Image, He wants you to be able to be that – which means equipped and capable, healthy enough for the role. He cares that you are well. *Umm… what should I pray then? How do I pray?* Prayer can be out loud with our voice, or inside with our thoughts. Our example prayer of last week was an unusually long one, going through in detail the state of our condition and asking to be brought back into relationship with God. When you pray, picture yourself having a conversation with someone who is like you, and who loves you, wants the best for you and for the world, and whom you can totally trust – because that is what God is like. You may say a short prayer about anything you need help with, would like to talk over, or would like to say thank you about – in fact "Thank you" is another great prayer.

What do you think of talking with God?

Write down two or three short prayers, brief words or sentences that you would like to say to a friend you can trust, who knows you better than you know yourself, and wants the best for you, for all people, and for the world.

Share your prayers with others you trust.

Day 19: The Poor in Spirit

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them."

The "kingdom of heaven" is how Jesus sometimes referred to "God's Country." Jesus is saying two things here:

1.) If you are materially poor and have strong faith, or if you are struggling with your faith (both interpretations can be made), you are welcome into God's Country. God wants to invite you, welcome you, and make sure you are provided for. God also wants to walk with you and share His faith in you, His love for you, His acceptance and validation of you.
2.) If you are already living in God's Country (ie: you are a disciple of Jesus, one today known as a "Christian" (which means "little Christ's")), then God looks to you to work with Him and represent Him. In this case, it means either:
    a. helping to provide for any in His Country who do not have enough to eat, a room over their heads, etc.
    b. reassuring those who are struggling in their faith with God's love, acceptance, and validation of them, by providing such to them in His name, and reminding them that God loves them more than we can possibly show.

Note that Jesus is saying "belongs", not "will belong" – these are things we can do right now. The revolution of God has begun.

What if I try to reassure someone but it backfires? What if I can't do this?
That's where the ideas of love, forgiveness, talking with God and changing our lives come in – striving to do what is healthiest, forgiving ourselves when we fall short, asking God and whomever we may have harmed to forgive us, and then, learning, we try again ☺.

Are you in need, materially or spiritually? Do you have questions you can ask; someone you can pray with? How can the church (followers of Christ) help you?

Can you think of someone who is striving to walk with God but struggling (materially or spiritually)? Are there any ways you can help them? Say a prayer for them, and then with God try to help them in some tangible way.

Share what you found with others you trust.

Day 20: Comforting

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Here, Jesus is saying:

1.) If you are grieving, if you are mourning, God wants to you to be reassured of His love for you. He recognizes and honours the love which that grief signifies. He walks with you in your grief, for God is love unbound. He wants to reassure you of His intention of shalom for you, and for the one(s) you are grieving over. He invites you to look forward to living in full Shalom with Him and with all of creation.
2.) If you are a Christian, or want to be, God wants you to comfort those who are mourning, as His representative.

I don't know how to comfort any who mourn!

There are four main components to comforting people who mourn:

1.) Pray for them. Pray with them if they are open to that.
2.) Sit with them. Spend time with them and join in their grief.
3.) Listen to them. Don't try to have answers, don't try to explain, just listen. If they ask questions or for your opinion, answer as honestly as you can. "I don't know" is a very valid answer. Also, "I can ask 'so and so' and get back to you."
4.) If they need something, provide it. This may be prayer, or it may be food, child-care for an emergency, the name of someone who can help, etc.

Can you think of someone who is mourning? Say a prayer for them, and then with God try to help them in some tangible way. Are you in mourning? Is there someone who can pray with you and listen to you?

Share what you found with others you trust.

Day 21: Rest

We come again to the seventh day, so today we rest. Reflect on the past week and care for your needs (body and spirit). In the evening get together with a group you trust and share what you would like to from the previous week – good points, hard points, what you've learned, what you've struggled with, etc. Decide again if you wish to continue journeying together or want to stop.