Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

Walking the Path – Week 5

Walking the Path of God is essentially what the Christian journey is all about. We don't walk this path alone however – God walks it with us as we journey, and we walk with each other. The idea of community, first with others and then with God, is central to Christianity – it's all about relationships. Doing God's will in the relationships we have is what we strive to do. Saying God's words in the relationships we have is what we strive to say. Walking the path is all about Doing and Saying.

Day 29: Who is Jesus?

Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad because your reward is great in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets before you in the same way."

Jesus' teaching wasn't very surprising to the people of His day except in two respects:

1. He emphasized that He was talking about right now – not some historical past, and not some far-distant-well-beyond-current-lifetimes future.
2. He claimed that everything was, truly, ultimately about Him.

In what we've just covered:

- "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.
- "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.
- "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.
- "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.",

Jesus is saying, *"Live like this, right now, for God's time is now. Follow Me, and you will realize this."*

Then Jesus adds a twist which would have shocked His hearers:
"You will be greatly rewarded by God when others persecute you because you proclaim and follow Me, <u>just as the prophets of old were likewise persecuted</u>."

The prophets were persecuted because they proclaimed and followed GOD, not a man – who is this Jesus saying He is? What is He claiming?

It's like as if Micah, instead of saying, "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" had said, "what does *Jesus* require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with *Him*?"

Jesus was claiming to be none other than the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed one of God. In fact in a later conversation, He claimed to be One with God, through whom all can come <u>to</u> God and join <u>with</u> God for eternal saving. He lived and spoke God's Kingdom, and He offered that Kingdom to all who would accept it.

Wow. You're really laying it out there, aren't you?

The author C.S. Lewis wrote, *"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse."*

Jesus said and is saying to all people, *"I accept you; I invite you; I welcome you. Lift up the faithful poor. Comfort those who mourn. Welcome and lift up the humble and meek. Seek the narrow right way of living, seek God's path for you. Support those who are also seeking God's path. Give mercy, not expecting it, and rejoice when you receive it. Seek God with total integrity. Strive to make peace with each other. Comfort those who are persecuted. Count it a blessing if you are persecuted because of Me.*

He later added: *I love people and want them to live in that love. Teach others everything about Me. God's revolution is now – help them to join the revolution."*

What is your first reaction to Jesus' claim – your feelings? -- your thoughts?

What do you think about a God who would personally intervene in human history by embodying a human being (God "incarnate")?

Do you have any misgivings about Jesus' directions for how we should live our lives?

We'll get into more regarding how Jesus claimed to be One with God. For now, do you have any misgivings about Jesus' claim for Himself?

Share with others you trust.

Day 30: God can talk with you.

In Doing and Saying you've been encouraged to talk (pray) to God. What if God can also talk to you?
I get really freaked out really fast?

Jeremiah lived about 2600 years ago and believed that God spoke to him. His words and actions are written down in the book of Jeremiah, which is part of the Bible. In that book you will find: I am known as the Lord. I say to you, 'Call on me in prayer, and I will answer you. I will show you great and mysterious things that you still do not know about.' *(Jeremiah 33:2-3)*

God promises us that He will answer us when we pray to Him, and Christians throughout the years have found this to be true. *What? Really? Are Christians sort of delusional then?* One thing to realize about Christians – while Jews (who use what Christians call the Old Testament) and Muslims (who use the Quran) may be called People of the Book (and Christians are often called this as well), Christians are really People of the Person – the person of Jesus (the) Christ. **(Jesus is the Word and the Bible is words about the Word)**
We believe that Jesus is real, that God is real, and that we have a relationship with God. As part of that relationship, we communicate with God, both speaking to God and hearing from God. *I see – so they are delusional!* Are they any more delusional than someone who meditates on a mantra, or talks to themself, or strives for bodily, mental, or social goals despite 'believing' that life is meaningless, and they are nothing but a random collection of atoms? Christians have the experience of talking to and hearing God – and you can have that experience too. *This sounds weird and more than a little scary, but how then can I hear God?*

One thing you can try is, when you are praying, imagine Jesus sitting beside or across from you – and in your imagination, listen to whatever He says to you as you speak your prayers to Him.

Another thing to try is reading the Bible – we have often found answers to our prayers in what is written in the Bible.

A third way is that other people may say or do things which answer your prayer, even though they don't know what you have prayed.

A fourth way is for circumstances you encounter to be an answer to your prayers.

How do I know these are from God and not just coincidences or made up in my mind? Strictly speaking, you probably don't know – until, over time, it happens enough that you finally realize this can't be just coincidence, and you just can't make some of this up. *How do I know it's really from God and I'm not going crazy?* One rule of thumb is to validate everything you think you hear from God against the words of Jesus (some of which we have covered in the past few days). For example, if you decide "God is telling me to go and kill so and so" (which crazy people have claimed), balance that against Jesus' words "My commandment is this—to love one another just as I have loved you." Remember! God is one who loves you and loves everyone as His Image – He is not out to destroy, hurt, or harm, but to nurture and love. The messages you receive from Him will reflect that.

We've discussed talking to God. As part of this pilgrimage, please intentionally talk to God every day. A time-worn practice is to intentionally set time aside when you first wake up to tell God about your fears and hopes for the day, and just before you go to sleep to review the day with God, thank Him for all that went well and ask for His help with anything that didn't.

WHY SHOULD PRAYER ALWAYS BE CONCERNED ABOUT GRANTING THINGS?

See if you can set aside 5 minutes both when you wake up and when you are going to sleep, each day, to have a conversation with God.

Try speaking to God and watching or listening for any responses. Write down two or three short sentences regarding things you have asked God about.

Write down two or three short answers from God you may have received.

Share your answers with others you trust.

Day 31: Hearing from God … or not…

Well, that was a total waste of time.

Why do you say that?

I asked God a few things but heard absolutely nothing back.

Sometimes, we hear God surprisingly clearly. Sometimes, we hear God murkily – and sometimes, we don't hear God. In many ways, it's like between humans – sometimes we hear and understand each other perfectly well, more often though, even if we think we are understanding the other, we aren't quite. And sometimes, the other person doesn't understand at all.

It may help to consider a parent with a child. Does a parent answer every single query of a child? *No.* Does a child always understand the answers given by a parent? *No.* Especially for a younger child, does the parent have to frame things in a special way so the child understands? *Yes.*

Let's look at some of the questions from Day 5. Some questions we find answered through studying the Bible, like when we looked at the stories in the beginning of the Bible to help us understand what people are like and at least partially answered the questions of "*Why is there so much rotten in the world, like war and starvation? Like people getting hurt, even hurting each other?"*

"Like disease? Like death?" The Bible also reassures us that pain, grief, and death are not part of God's plan, but that He ultimately wants them gone ("Look! The residence of God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more—or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist." -- Revelations 21:3-4). In the Bible there are many examples of Jesus (and his students as well) healing people, so we can infer that disease is not really part of God's plan as well.

"Like mosquitoes?" Some questions the Bible does not answer, but it encourages us nevertheless to give thanks for them if they are part of our lives – there may be good and Godly reasons for mosquitos for example, even if we don't understand what they are ("Always rejoice, constantly pray, in everything give thanks." – 1st Thessalonians 5:16-18).

It may take many days, years, or even your lifetime to get the answers to all your questions – this is something which people in the Bible have written about as well. For example, a man named Paul wrote, "For now we see in a mirror indirectly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known" (1st Corinthians 13:12). He was writing that even though we may not fully understand everything here and now, eventually when we come fully into God's presence we shall know fully as well. The Bible also quite frequently shares "God, I call and call to you – why do you not answer me?" This experience is not unknown. (EVEN JESUS ON THE CROSS (AND GETHSEMANE))

Please continue to talk to God and look for answers – either in your head, through the Bible, through other people, or through the circumstances of your life. Though you may not receive an answer all the time (or as quick as you would like), it is surprising the number of times you may feel God is conversing back with you.

Many people find it helpful to keep a prayer journal, which is a book where they write down each day what they have spoken to God about, and what they feel they have heard back, if anything, or if anything unusual occurred after they had spoken with God. SOME PEOPLE DO NOT FIND A PRAYER JOURNAL HELPFUL. PRAYING FOR REAL ISSUES NOT JUST WHAT THE FAD IS (ex: Ukraine while Ethiopia and many others are struggling)

Make brief notes of your daily prayers.

This morning, God and I talked about:

This evening, God and I talked about:

Share with others you trust.

Day 32: Personifying God.

Christians have a concept of God called the Trinity – which we'll explore later. For now, when Christians want to relate to God, they often think of Jesus. They also often think of God the Father.

Why do you consistently refer to God as "He"? Why do you call God "Father"? Surely, if God exists and God created everything, He is above being male or female, or needing any sexual characteristic (or perhaps God embodies both)?

Excellent questions! The simple answer is because God requested it. *Really? You're not just being presumptuous based on some patriarchal or societal bias?* You're right that our society for much of its history had a definite patriarchal orientation – and many societies around the world still do. However, if we look at our Foundational Document (the Bible), we find the following:

The Lord is His name. Rejoice before Him. He is a father to the fatherless and an advocate for widows. (Psalm 68:4-5)

(The Lord said) … call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the protector who delivers me.' (Psalm 89:26)

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on his faithful followers. (Psalm 103:13)

"I (God) thought to myself, 'Oh what a joy it would be for me to treat you like a son! What a joy it would be for me to give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful piece of property there is in all the world!' I thought you would call me 'Father' and would never cease being loyal to me." (Jeremiah 3:19)

and Jesus taught:

"Whenever you pray, go into your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you. When you pray, do not babble repetitiously like the Gentiles (unbelieving outsiders) because they think that by their many words they will be heard. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. So pray this way:

"Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we ourselves have forgiven those who owe us. Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:5-13)

So though God, as Creator Of All, does not need any sexual orientation (as far as we know), we call Him Father (and refer to Him as "Him") because He desires it, at least according to the Bible. The Bible was created over a few thousand years, and has many, many differing

viewpoints in it – if God wished to be called "Mother", or "She", it would say so. However, this does not mean that we can't think of God as being Motherly or having a Mother's love for us! The Bible also contains

- Isaiah 42:14 speaks of God "cry[ing] out like a woman in labor" with gasps and pants.
- Isaiah 46:3–4 describes God as having carried the house of Jacob "from the womb."
- Numbers 11:12, Moses tells God that having birthed Israel, God should "carry [the nation] in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child" to the Promised Land.
- Isaiah 66:13, the Lord tells Jerusalem, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."

(Isaiah and Numbers are different books within the Bible).

God is our Creator; God is the Creator Of Everything. God is our closest friend; one we can trust. God loves us like a Mother and loves us like a Father. The traditional Christian way of referring to God is as Our Heavenly Father, because the Bible itself (especially in the words of Jesus) refers to Him so. When you pray, feel welcome to call God 'Father', such as "Father, help me with …"

Write down your thoughts on calling God "Father" vs. calling God "Mother." What other titles would you think would be appropriate to call God? Why?

Share your answers with others you trust.

Day 33: How does God want us to live?

You can talk to God. God can talk to you. The two of you can have grand conversations! God desires you know His love, the love of the most strengthening of Fathers, the most nurturing of Mothers. God wants you to trust Him above all else. With that strengthening, that nurturing, that trust, that *love*, God wants you to have a life of:

Seeking the healthiest for God and for each other:
"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 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.'** *(Matthew 22:36-39)*

When you think you are hearing from God, reflect: 'is this the healthiest for God, for others, for me?' If not, check with others you trust, for it may not be from God after all. Examples of living God's Way are given through Jesus, some of whose sayings you've already experienced.

God wants us to seek the Country of God, where we have an open and loving relationship with God and with each other, seeking to learn and live the ways of God, be His Image, more and more:
… don't worry saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For unbelievers pursue these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But above all pursue His kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So then, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Today has enough trouble of its own. *(Matthew 6:31-34)*

What do you think the healthiest thing for God would be? The healthiest thing for others? The healthiest thing for yourself? What do you think is involved in pursuing the "Country of God"?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 34: Seek God's Country

What if I don't want to live the way God wants me to? The question you raise is real – and many people choose NOT to live in the healthiest way possible, but rather a way of fruitless searching, of despair, and even death, just to try and define themselves apart from God. A base question which everyone needs to answer is, "am I going to pursue my way (like Adam and Eve, etc.), or God's way?"

Starting with Jesus, Christians identified a Way or a Path in how God wants us to live. In fact, the earliest Christians called themselves "Followers of the Way." However, this Way is not easy, nor is it cheap. It is important that you know there is a cost: it involves sacrifice. Jesus Himself said:

"Enter through the narrow gate because the gate is wide and the way is spacious that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it! *(Matthew 7:13-14)*

… and …

"Whoever does not carry his own cross (painful death) and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, wanting to build a tower, doesn't sit down first and compute the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? … Or what king, going out to confront another king in battle, will not sit down first and determine whether he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one coming against him with 20,000? … In the same way therefore not one of you can be my disciple if he does not renounce all his own possessions." *(Luke 14:27-33)*

Write down your thoughts: what do you think about there being a "cost" to following God? What kind of cost do you think you would be willing to pay? Did you find a cost when you tried to enact Jesus' commands last week? Is there a limit to what you would do? Why? What kind of cost do you think God might ask for? What do you think Jesus meant by "carry your own cross" or by "renounce all your possessions", for example? What are the ramifications if you choose NOT to follow God's Way?

Share your answers with others whom you trust.

Day 35: 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.