

Isaiah 1:10-20  
Matthew 28:18-20  
John 13:15-19

## A LISTENING GOD

As most of you have realized long since, the world around us tends to emphasize the outside and minimize the inside. What goes on in the overt world is interesting and important. What goes on behind the scenes – in the inside dimensions – does not count for much. We comprehend or connect with the unseen dimensions inside our own minds, hearts, and souls, but those dimensions are vast beyond imagination or comprehension. They are where all our true meaning, love, motives, longings, and hopes come from, yet the outer world continues to assure us that they are of no real consequence, since nothing from the unseen realms can be measured, proved, codified, or defined. It may be “of interest” to you, should you ever notice such realms, but they are of no real consequence. Important news is about vast and sweeping affairs in the outer world: economic trends, wars, political conventions, major disasters. And if we want to make a difference with our lives, we must join some large organization, corporation, or movement that is going to have a huge impact, in some way, on the physical realities.

Feeding one hungry person never makes the news. Losing a puppy you love, or even a child, will never be noticed beyond your own small circle of acquaintances. An earthquake that kills four people will only get a line or two, for one day, in any paper. If the four happen to be your family, it will shake your life, but there are too many people for it to register for more than a moment anywhere else. Quantity is everything. Quality is a subjective issue, and so it doesn't count.

You understand where we are going with this, right? There is something fundamentally different between the Christian view of life and the view of life which is operative in the culture all around us. This difference has enormous – we could even say formative and fundamental – impact on our values, on the principles we trust, on the purposes we hold to, on the way we live our lives. It changes our priorities and our methods – what we live for, where our hope is, what we want in and from our lives.

We have suggested over and over that the reason Jesus is so hard for us to track, follow, and comprehend is because He does not see the

world in terms of the overt, physical realities that we all grow up thinking are important. He sees life from a spiritual dimension that changes the way everything looks. Individuals are important. Jesus spent no time talking about the biggest overt reality of His nation in His time: the Roman Empire, the Roman occupation, the plight of the Jewish people as a whole under Roman rule. All around Him people were talking, thinking, and praying while focused on the big picture. Something must be done! We have to make a difference! We must start or join a new movement: The Zealot Party! The Essene Movement! The Pharisee Revolution! We have to *do* something! It is stunning to contemplate, but Jesus was not part of any of these religious or political movements. Contrary to almost everything you have been taught or told, Jesus did not start or build an organization to help the poor or feed the hungry. The temple ran an extensive welfare system in His time; it had nothing to do with Jesus' focus or His ministry. He cared about internal poverty and internal hunger: A kind of water that if you once drank of it, you would never thirst again. A kind of meal that would feed the soul. A kind of deliverance that would free you from all earthly coercion forever. An EXODUS that could never be repealed or reversed. A PROMISED LAND that would never fade or betray us.

After all these generations, we still barely get it. What He teaches still seems confusing because we constantly try to mix it with familiar truth and warp it back to fit the physical realities. We still find ourselves asking: Was Jesus a lunatic? Did He make up all this ethereal nonsense? Or was He truly the Son of God, the One who came to reveal the truth and the principles that make life worth living – that lead us out of bondage and into the light?

Of course, Jesus *did* do something, or we would never have heard of Him. But most people cannot figure out, to this day, what it was. He went inside, to a personal encounter with God – to an absolute allegiance and obedience to the Spirit of God apprehended within. And in response to the guidance He found in the prayer place – out of the power of His surrender to that Higher Being that nothing in the outer world could ever detect or truly believe in – Jesus came out of His prayers to do what? To call a fisherman to follow Him; to heal a blind beggar by the side of the road; to tell a parable about a dishonest steward, a parable that everyone thought was the strangest, and maybe the worst, parable they had ever heard.

Doing nothing that any human, in their wildest imagination, would have thought could make any dent at all on the political, religious, economic, ecological, or unjust realities of the time, Jesus changed a life here, changed a life there – brought a tiny handful of people into awareness and commitment to the unseen Kingdom that He Himself was seeing and living for. And THAT, unbelievably, is what ended up changing the world. Well, it didn't really change "the world," but some people became aware of a New WAY. And most of the people in the world today at least know Jesus' name.

We have to be careful with phrases like "changed the world." The world went right on being the world. The zealots fought, the Pharisees taught, and the Roman Empire flattened all of Israel a few years later. It would be almost three hundred years before the Roman Empire officially turned Christian, and even then, it would be more a political, overt thing than what Jesus showed and what He was about. The world did not really change; it just changed in the eyes of His followers. They lived more and more for the unseen Kingdom He had made them aware of. They loved Him, and when the world caught them and challenged their New WAY, they died for Him, as He had died for them. But they were not trying to do all the overt, huge, and showy stuff our world so loves to think is really important. They just wanted to live the WAY He had revealed: prayer and obedience; a personal connection with God, on the inside; a day-by-day commitment to living their own lives by His guidance – the guidance of His Holy Spirit.

Really and truly they did not care what the results were in the outer world. That was no longer their focus. If it brought benefit, well and good. If it brought anger and hostility, even got them killed, well, that was sad, and certainly unpleasant, but not very important.

Big Christian movements followed, but they were never the WAY. They only got *in* the way. Organization always tends to get drawn back into the physical principles and overt purposes of the world. True followers connect on the inside. They always have. They find each other and form tight family bonds – faith families of support and affection and shared understanding. Jesus' followers have always found themselves drawn into such support groups. And these support groups always threaten to get too big and successful, and forget what they are really for and about. Still, they are wonderful, and necessary to the Path.

What is the big difference between the Way of the World and the WAY of the Christ? There are many, many differences. But one of the simple, huge, and clarifying differences is this: The WAY of the Christ is always personal. The Way of the World is always impersonal.

In the Way of the World, you don't matter, except insofar as you may serve the world. Even then, you don't matter; just the way you serve the world matters. Individuals don't count; trends count. There may be some thought that if economic benefits increase, individuals will benefit. Yet nobody really knows or cares how any of these individuals are experiencing life; what they are living for; what sort of hope makes life worth living for them; what sort of morals or values govern their lives. Trends are what matter. Trends have a bigger impact than any individual choice or purpose. If an economic trend puts an extra fifty dollars a month into the pockets of every working American, that will have huge benefits. That's obvious. Well, it may be obvious, but it's not true. Fifty dollars does not increase or improve quality of life, except for those who already have some quality in their lives. And that quality does not come from money. Those with real quality will use the money well. Those without will not. *"For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away."* That is not a political saying; that is a Jesus saying. (Matthew 13:12) And He does not say it from the perspective of the overt world. He says it from the perspective of the unseen, spiritual world.

If it is the WAY of the Christ, it is personal. YOU matter. What YOU do matters. If you lie, cheat, or betray somebody, it matters because of the way that conflicts with the principles of the Kingdom, and because of the way it impacts your soul. It matters because of what it does to the relationship between you and Jesus. It may have repercussions in the outer world too, but that is never the primary consideration. The interior world and the unseen Kingdom are far more important, and they will have far more impact in the long run. That is what is hard, if not impossible, for the world to understand.

If it is the WAY of the Christ, it is personal. If you look at the moon and the stars, it is personal. If you sit and watch the ocean, it is personal. If you look at the birds of the air, you are part of a Creation that was personally wrought by a personal God – who sees you as an individual, precious child; who cares if you are hurt; who rejoices when you do well, or learn, or grow, or help a friend. To the worldly person, the sky is impersonal. Hunks of rock and balls of fire are "out there,"

but it doesn't mean anything. Some think it's interesting; some think it's threatening, because sooner or later a stray bit of debris may blow us to oblivion. But it doesn't matter. It is not personal. It is just the way it is.

For some birders, I am discovering that there are no real birds, just statistics: How many? Are they endangered? Let's go on a crusade to make everybody more aware so we can save this or that species. It's as close as they can come to caring. But they no longer see the birds, except as information for the crusade. They are too busy being angry and getting upset to enjoy the birds. Of course, they would reply: "If we don't save this species, nobody will ever enjoy this kind of bird again." That is: In some far-off future, when we have righted all the wrongs, they imagine they will have time to enjoy the birds again. So maybe they believe in Heaven after all. Only, like many Christians, their Heaven has nothing to do with now. It is not a realm they have already entered. It is for later, for after, and so is the peace and the love that come from it.

Our world loves to say to us, "You can make a difference." That is the call to come join the crusade, to support the movement. You can make a difference: Give your money, give your time, and we can make a change in some trend or another. Together we can save the world, or some part of it. Jesus would never say, "You can make a difference." That puts everything on the wrong level, with the wrong motives, and running on the wrong principles. And it is not personal. The implication is that we are fine but something is wrong out there; that we can band together and change what is wrong out there, if we can just get enough of us together – if we can get enough overt power to force the change.

In the Christian perspective, you cannot make a difference; you can *be* different. It is a broken realm, separated from God. However faithful and powerful you become, you do not have the power to change "The Fall" – the separation from God. You cannot heal the world of the PRIDE that is ruining everything. You cannot make a difference, but you can *be* different. That is the interior WAY. Jesus says: If you know me, feel my love, and feel the quality and reality of the life I live and the Kingdom I serve – and the God I live for. You can drop your earthly ways and come be mine – come belong to my Kingdom. Turn your life toward me, and *you* will be different.

What comes from that is none of our business. If we start focusing on the results, we will not be able to stay focused on Jesus. Nobody can look both ways at the same time. If we look to the results, very quickly

the world will have our attention and own our lives again. Don't try to *make* a difference – ever! BE different. Don't try to change or control or coerce anybody else – into anything. But if you are truly different, some people will get curious. Then you get to tell them about Jesus. Don't try to make them change; just bring them to Jesus. He can love them better than you can. And He knows who they truly are better than you do. Sometimes, because He truly loves them, He will be harder on them than you would be. And the transition from the Way of the World to His WAY, as you yourselves now know, is often tougher than people want to pretend.

I never know how much connection there is between what you are hearing and what I am saying. The personal relationship – the personal connection – between each of us and Jesus is the real power and excitement and delight of the Christian Life. It is far more dynamic than most people know, and far more dangerous, from a worldly perspective, than most people want to know. But it is obscured by our efforts to keep one foot in the worldly perspective while at the same time trying to take baby steps into the spiritual domain. We cannot finesse our way safely and comfortably into the Christian WAY. We can delude ourselves into thinking we have managed that, but it only cheats us out of the true joy and terror of putting Jesus in charge of our lives.

What is the false, or counterfeit, way of comfort and finesse that so often goes under the name of Christianity in our time? That God is always sweet and nice; love is always soft and gentle (and unconditional); justice is always replaced by grace and mercy. So there is no need for repentance and there is no desire for forgiveness. I mean, all of us have already been forgiven, right? And we can count on always being forgiven, whether we repent or not, right? We cannot for the life of us explain why we don't *act* like we are forgiven, but let's not get picky ...

Most of you no longer believe in the pablumy Jesus or the good-buddy God – not because you don't like such notions, but because of your own personal encounter. And it is borne out by the encounters of all those we admire who have gone before us. Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and all the rest were unable to finesse their way into a true and personal relationship with God, try as they might – and try they did. But it came down to a difference so vast that they had to choose: choose between seeing life and reality in the normal ways, or moving to a very new and altogether different WAY and kind of life. You have heard it so often, why do I keep saying it? Because you know very well that it is possible to hear it without hearing it.

And so we think we can do anything we want, as long as our motives are good. We think that God will never punish or be angry; that's the old fundamentalist, primitive religion – hellfire and damnation. So we can drink our way into oblivion; eat our way into disease; regress our way from love to sex until our lives are blighted by loneliness; do good deeds that make no difference to any real human's life ... and God will never care. God is only interested in the big picture.

Around here, at least, we believe that God wants each one of us personally, not generically. God cares every moment of our lives – about what we are doing, and how we are doing it. And God cannot really begin to make of us what we are intended and designed to be until, in trust and love, we turn will and life over to him. Therefore no two patterns will be the same; no two of us will get the same guidance at the same time. And therefore we cannot follow each other; we must follow the Holy Spirit of Jesus our Lord. That makes it even more fun to be interested and supportive of each other's journey, but if we all start looking and talking and thinking like each other, that does not mean we have Christ. It means we are pretending. Somebody made up a "Barbie doll" image of what obedience was supposed to look like, and it got easier for us to try to look good rather than for each of us to keep going to our own prayers every morning.

Choosing this way of prayer and obedience is never a turkey-shoot – never easy or automatic. While we often suspect that we can see each other's path more clearly than we see our own, we learn to be a little cautious about such opinions. One of the problems with the unseen Kingdom is that it is unseen. Where and how Jesus is working on the inside will often come to light weeks or even months later. So we make our honest comments and voice our opinions, but with ever-growing humility.

When I bring one or another of you to mind, one thing is very clear: There has been enormous change and growth in your lives in the short time I have known you. Some of you don't even notice it yourselves, as you are rightly focused on where the Path leads next. None of us are as bold and brave for our Lord as we hope one day to be, but it is a privilege to be among you. Not many churches have as much "unseen church" alive and thriving in their midst. I am incredibly grateful to be here.

Nevertheless, we may still pay attention to Isaiah. God always answers prayer, but only if he decides to listen. And according to Isaiah,

God does not always decide to listen. Only if our hearts are eager – and our souls are willing to obey – will God decide to listen to us. If God listened and answered when our hearts and minds were off their marks, it could only do more damage than good. “*Seek ye the Lord while he may be found,*” says Isaiah (55:6). God cannot always be found at our whim. And if we lose our humility – our teachableness – who knows how long before we get it back?

We are reminded of what an incredible privilege it is to talk with Jesus. It is not our right. It is not a prayer-on-demand system. There is no switch I get to flick on or off at my own whim. It may be true that Jesus only waits for my heart to be right; nevertheless, when my heart is wrong, it feels like He is unavailable or uncaring or too busy. And if He listens and inspires, it is sheer mercy, grace, and love. Always His choice – never mine.

Over and over I find that when we do connect, I want to talk about big and important things: the affairs of His Kingdom, and how I can be a good servant and really help Him a lot. But He wants to talk about little things: my schedule for today; how I am using my time; what I am angry about; who I need to see; what I need to take out of my life, and sometimes what I need to put in its place. How very annoying! I am willing to be noble and grand, and He wants to talk about petty little details? Yet life is made up of the details. If I will not give Him the right to change the details, He can make no difference in my life.

If we ever see through the veil, we see that the real reason for Bible study, theological reflection, contemplation, and time in prayer – the real reason and purpose for it all – is so we can have this relationship – this chance to walk and talk with Jesus. And it is not somebody else’s notion of Him, or who He is, or what He wants. What truly matters is our own connection with the Holy Spirit of our Resurrected Lord – our own individual encounter in the quiet of willing minds and hearts and souls. It is personal. And only a personal response will move us into His presence, and into His WAY.

Thousands of people are cut off from the real glory and joy and change of the Christian Life because they make it too big, too theoretical, too institutional, too creedal. They will not let Jesus in, to where He really belongs – into the nitty gritty of the details of their everyday lives. It is personal. And that is where and how He cares. Never ever try to make a difference. Let Jesus show *you* how to BE different.