



Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.
(Ecclesiastes 5:1-3)

Listening *authenticity*

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HE VERY NATURE OF GOD, and the means by which we are to listen to Him, run counter to the ways of a society based on quick and easy gratification. If, as believers, our citizenship lies elsewhere, then so should our methods. Listening to God does not come naturally to children of dust, for what *is* natural is not to listen to Him at all.

If Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier. But it is not. We cannot compete, in simplicity, with people who are inventing religions. How could we? We are dealing with Fact. Of course anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about.
(C.S. Lewis)

The emphasis of this age is on appearances. It doesn't really matter what is in a person's heart, so long as he *appears* to be compassionate and caring; a person's Spiritual veracity doesn't really matter, so long as his prayer *sounds* sincere. Solid faith and tenacious compliance to it have become suspect, so the idea of practicing dialogue with God for the purpose of life-altering obedience can be something odd even for today's Christian.

The easy road is to display our public righteousness without bothering with the private. But Jesus had a name for people like that: hypocrites.

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

(Matthew 6:1-4)

And Jesus applied the same principle to our conversations with God—even giving us a template prayer which would be well-received by the Father.

“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

“And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

“Pray, then, in this way:
‘Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we also
have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is
the kingdom and the power and the
glory forever. Amen.]”

(Matthew 6:5-13)

The contemporary version of this easy hypocrisy has always been illustrated for me by an episode I observed years ago. We were visiting a charismatic church on a Sunday evening to attend a dramatic presentation being staged there: a one-man show on the apostle Paul.

As with protestant congregations the world over, before the program officially began, the large auditorium was filled with a swarm of loud, boisterous people conducting the mundane business of friends and acquaintances. The two women seated next to me busily swapped tales of soccer practice, new recipes, and diaper rash.

Before the visiting actor began his monologue, the crowd was warmed up by the singing of a few songs. A worship leader mounted the stage and called everyone to join him in singing a praise chorus. The

keyboards began the intro and literally within mere seconds the two women next to me switched from a discussion of diapers to waving their arms, eyes closed—in apparent swoons of heavenly discourse and praise. I was stunned by the instantaneous transformation, and wondered just how authentic could have been their praise.

That’s the easy path; it takes little effort to go through the public motions that will convince everyone around us of our holiness. What is a much greater challenge is to go through the *private* process that will actually produce in us the public validation of our close relationship to God.

First, however, we must convince ourselves that the learning of this unnatural habit will be worthwhile.

time alone

Before Moses began his service to God, it was required of him to get alone with God, to hear His voice and intentions.

Before the apostle Paul could begin His ministry for Jesus Christ, he had to get away for a period of instruction and preparation.

Even Jesus prepared for His own ministry in the solitude and privation of the desert, listening to the Holy Spirit—

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

(Matthew 4:1-2)

—and periodically during His earthly ministry it was necessary for Jesus to get alone with God the Father.

But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.

(Luke 5:15-16)

None of us can hope to sustain an authentic Christian walk without listening, on a regular basis, to the word of God.

The temporal view of accomplishing anything is with an agenda, an “action plan,” date book and cellular phone. The quarry is success and the pursuit is executed with a ruthless passion. But the pursuit of God’s voice is not such a sweaty exercise.

Years ago, while we were living in California, there was a favorite place of mine. It was a high outlook of huge, boulder-shaped rocks that offered a panoramic view of the desert floor far below. It was a high and windy place, scorched by the sun and blessed with an exquisite quietude. There one could sit quietly for hours, gazing out over the expanse, contemplating things more ultimately important than calendars and phone calls and freeways filled with cars. There one could listen to God.

Where is your rock? Where is the place you go to listen to God and pursue eternal things? You say such benign activities are a waste of time? You say you haven’t time in your busy schedule to come away and be quiet?

Jesus Christ had all of three years to change the world. In less time than it takes people to attend college, Jesus had to begin His ministry, find and teach His disciples, and change the world forever. Yet, under time constraints that would make an executive crazy with anxiety, He took time to go “sit on His rock.”

And He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.” (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.

(Mark 6:31-32)

The goal, in communing with God, is to become like Christ; the *method* of listening to God is to behave like Christ.

Jesus understood the importance of quiet times with the Father. Where have we picked up the arrogance that says our activities take precedence over something that was so important to the Lord?

Go, find your rock. Spend time with the Lord on *His* terms. 