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Guidance 4 – What does it mean to practice God’s presence? – 8.30.9

Dallas Willard is one of my favorite spiritual writers, and in his book *In Search of Guidance* he quickly sums up three common mistakes about guidance from God that we have covered in this series:

1. Message-a-minute. This view says that a personal relationship with God means that we talk to God all the time and therefore, he talks back and even gives us constant and minute guidance about every decision. “God, where should I eat?” God says: “McDonalds”. “What should I eat?” “A Big Mac”. That’s not the voice of the Lord, it’s years of watching commercials!

Most of us don’t expect that from God, and it certainly isn’t Biblical, but there are people who take it to that extreme, and logically, if God wants to make your BIG decisions for you (as many people say), what difference is there really between big and small? How can you draw the line? But in this series, I hope I have shown you that God has something else in mind than giving you a message a minute.

2. It’s all in the Bible. Read the directions and don’t bother God! That’s the exact opposite of the message-a-minute mistake, but it is just as wrong-headed. There is such a thing as Bibliolatry, making the Bible your idol, and this is it. If the Bible takes the place of knowing God, then in a sense it becomes our idol.

3. Whatever Comes. Whatever happens is the will of God. A tornado destroys a town? God had a reason for it. Someone dies? It was God’s plan. My checkbook is empty? I guess God doesn’t want me to have any spare money. Well, the Bible teaches that God’s ultimate will shall go forward and history will reach its intended conclusion, but there are a lot of things that happen in this sinful world that aren’t God’s will. You and I DO a lot of things that aren’t God’s will. A lot of things that happen to us aren’t God’s will. Now what God has promised is that **in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28)**. God can work in anything, but that doesn’t justify us allowing just anything to happen.

If you’ll permit me to diagnose OUR most common mistake with regard to God’s will, this is it. What ever happens must be God’s will. That viewpoint shows respect for God but not understanding of who he is.

Dallas Willard also talks about what he calls three lights that many of us have been taught to look to for guidance. The three lights are circumstances, impressions from the Holy Spirit and passages from the Bible. The way I’ve heard it taught is that if I have a major decision to make, and when I consider one option, these three things agree, then it’s probably God’s will.

Let’s say I’m thinking about buying a Ford Focus, a small fuel-efficient car.

- Circumstances: Got a cousin who sells Fords. He can get me a sweet deal and good cash for my trade-in.
- Bible: Jesus said not to store up treasures on earth. That’s why I should buy this little Ford rather than a car I might really like! Driving around in this small thing will

keep me humble and let me develop a rich and perhaps evangelistic relationship with my mechanic. Besides with the money I save, I can give more to missions.

- Impressions from the Holy Spirit. I've got a peaceful, easy feeling about this car and about spending this money.

The three line up, so there's a good chance that this is God's will, right?

The problem is that all three of these can be read a variety of ways, and more than that, I'm capable of making any of them say what I want. That sweet deal from my cousin might seem sweet just because I want a new car, and in reality a much sweeter deal would be to keep driving the car I've got. The Bible is easy to misuse too. After all, as far as cars go, **Acts 2** says the people were all in one Accord! And then impressions from the Holy Spirit are the most subjective. Even though I know the Spirit can show me where I need to change or quicken my conscience when I have sinned, it's easy to put my own self-centeredness between Him and my heart. So Dallas Willard says that the three lights are by no means a formula for finding God's will. Rather: "*The three lights are simply the factors we must consider in making a responsible judgment and decision about what we are to do*".

In fact, if you're looking for a formula or a checklist for finding God's will, you won't find it. Formulas and checklists aren't the way we relate to those who love us, whom we love. Last week, I gave you three words to describe the nature of God's guidance: Freedom. Scripture. Wisdom. God guides us in the context of freedom: **2 Corinthians 3:17** says: ***17Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*** He guides us in the paths of Scripture: **Psalms 119:32** says: ***I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.*** And God guides us to a life of wisdom, where we mature and reflect His image more and more, able to make wise decisions, as his character and values becoming our own.

Today I want to finish out the series with a few thoughts on Practicing the Presence of God. Practicing the presence of God is a term that comes from the experiences of a Catholic monk in the 1600s in France named Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a very simple man whose life was difficult – he was injured in war as a young man and was disabled all his life. His work in the monastery included maintaining and repairing sandals and working in the kitchen. He wasn't a scholar or writer, and indeed we wouldn't have any memory of him except that the quality of his life and his relationship with God caught the attention of those who worked with him, to such an extent that one of the higher-ups in the church came down from Paris to interview him and then after Lawrence's death, published the interviews and some letters from Lawrence in a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

Brother Lawrence was just an ordinary guy who lived a much simpler life than most of us can, and yet the way he was able to relate to God speaks to us all because it so closely matches the example of Jesus and it so wonderfully lays out what it means to have a personal relationship with God, and to therefore find guidance from God. Today I want to lay out a few quotes from the book on Brother Lawrence about practicing God's presence and show you what Scripture says about them.

First, this reminder: A few months back, I quoted from Mark Galli's book, *Jesus Mean and Wild*, where he says that when we talk about God's absence, there's really two kinds: First, there is the excruciating absence of God, where we need to feel his presence and we don't. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But then there's the ordinary, everyday absence, the comfortable absence, the one where God stays out of our business and we don't think much about him at all. We kind of prefer that absence, and it's that kind of absence of God that we must address if we are to develop this relationship with God we've been talking about, and it's that kind of absence that is dealt with by practicing the presence of God.

My title today is "What does it mean to practice the presence of God?"
Practicing God's Presence – What is it?

"There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it." Well, at a web site devoted to practicing God's presence, there is this definition: "To practice the presence of God in the Brother Lawrence tradition we walk before God simply, in faith, with humility, and with love. We engage in a continual, silent, and affectionate conversation with Our Father. Out of love for Him, we strive to do nothing and think nothing which may displease God." From: <http://www.practicegodspresence.com/> That is very different from thinking of God as far off, watching us from a distance. It's also very Biblical, very consistent with God living in us, which is what Jesus promised in John's gospel.

Point 1. The continuous conversation.

After one of his interviews with Brother Lawrence, his superior wrote: "Brother Lawrence related that we should establish ourselves in a sense of God's presence by continually conversing with Him. It was a shameful thing to quit His conversation to think of trifles and fooleries." Later in the book, he added: "Brother Lawrence said that in order to form a habit of conversing with God continually and referring all we do to Him, we must, at first, apply to Him with diligence. Then, after a little care, we would find His love inwardly draw us to Him without any difficulty." In other words, to think of God as always at hand and always listening, we have to work at it...at first. But as with any worthwhile thing we learn to do, it starts to become part of us as we practice it.

Now if your idea of God is that you're simply supposed to read the Book and do what he says, and he'll check in on you later, listen to what Jesus says in **John 15:5-8 (NKJV)** - ⁵ **"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned. ⁷ If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. ⁸ By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.** Jesus said that he plans to do his good works in the world through us, so that in a sense it isn't us doing things for him but him doing them through us, as long as we remain connected to the vine. What better way to remain connected to him than to practice his presence, to remember him and speak to him and praise him throughout the day.

On our missions trips to Haiti, it was delightful to eat mangoes or bananas that had been picked ripe that same day. The reason we can buy bananas any time of the year is that they're picked in central America and shipped here green and we end up eating them a week or two later, and it just isn't the same. Fruit needs to stay connected to the tree or to the vine to ripen the way God intended. It's just as true for me and you as it is for our bananas.

And listen to **Thessalonians 5:16-18** - ¹⁶**Be joyful always;** ¹⁷**pray continually;** ¹⁸**give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** I always thought "pray without ceasing" didn't make much sense, and it doesn't, if you think of prayer as something you stop everything else to do. So I admire those of you who, like Brother Lawrence, made prayer part of your moment by moment existence, and I want to do that more.

Point 2. Where you let your mind dwell.

Here's another quote from an interview with Brother Lawrence: "He said that as far as the miseries and sins he heard of daily in the world, he was so far from wondering at them, that, on the

contrary, he was surprised there were not more, considering the malice sinners were capable of. For his part, he prayed for them; but knowing that God could remedy the mischief they did when He pleased, he gave himself no further trouble.”

This week I couldn't escape the news about the trial in Nashville of one of the people involved in the terrible carjacking case. It was so awful that I found that I couldn't let myself dwell on it. Now I know that we need to be aware of things happening around us so we can engage in our world to change it for Christ. But that case illustrated for me that sometimes, you have to let things go. Sometimes what I need to let go of is a high-profile news item. More often, it's some church issue or personal difficulty that I can't help right now, so rather than worry or stew, I have to lay it at the Lord's feet, at least for awhile, and let Him take care of it.

In **Colossians 3:1-2**, it says: **1Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.** And here's a word from Philippians 4:8 that we talked about in our small group this week: **“8Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.** This of course includes not only what I'm tempted to worry about, but what kind of entertainment I pour into my spirit. And Brother Lawrence addressed that too: “Brother Lawrence spoke with great openness of heart concerning his manner of going to God. He told me that all consists in one hearty renunciation of everything which we know does not lead to God.”

Point 3. Even the ability to serve God comes from God.

From the book: “When an occasion of practicing some virtue was offered, he addressed himself to God saying, “Lord, I cannot do this unless Thou enable me”. Then he received strength more than sufficient. When he had failed in his duty, he only confessed his fault saying to God, “I shall never do otherwise, if You leave me to myself. It is You who must hinder my failing and mend what is amiss.” Then, after this, he gave himself no further uneasiness about it.”

This reminds me of the father in **Mark 9:24** who cried out to Jesus: **“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”** The good things we want to do for God – he's right here with us, available to help us do them. And the temptations we want to resist – he has said: **No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. 1 Corinthians 10:13**

Point 4. Whatever.

One of the stories about John Wesley is that, like a lot of people, he thought he could get rid of his sinfulness and become a better person by becoming a minister. It didn't work (not for me either). Then he thought he could do it by becoming a missionary! That wasn't it either. But Brother Lawrence knew that. It says in the book: “Our sanctification did not depend upon changing our works. Instead, it depended on doing those things for God's sake which we commonly do for our own. He thought it was lamentable to see how many people mistook the means for the end, addicting themselves to certain works which they performed very imperfectly because of their human or selfish regard. The most excellent method he had found for going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men but purely for the love of God.”

Also - "With him the set times of prayer were no different from other times. He retired to pray according to the directions of his superior, but he did not need such retirement nor ask for it because his greatest labor did not divert him from God."

That's why Scripture says: **"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Colossians 3:17**

And: **"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Philippians 1:27a**

That's a good way to finish up a series on God's will. Where is it? What is it? Well, for the moment, at least there is no doubt. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, live in such a way that you express your love for Christ.

If you're like me, you're thinking: "I could never be like Brother Lawrence! I admire his moment-by-moment practice of God's presence, but that's too much for me to do. Maybe it is. So start small. Set your calendar to send you a text every four hours reminding you that God is here. Set your alarm on your phone to ring five times a day to remind you to talk to him.

God has promised: "Never will I leave you..." Let's live like it.