

The Way

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 and John 14:6

INTRODUCTION

If you and I were to take a ride up State Route 29 toward my hometown of St. Mary's, we would drive through a quaint little Ohio village called "New Knoxville." And if you would look to your left just before arriving at New Knoxville, you would see a big red barn with a dove painted on the side of it and various signs for a (quote) "Christian Ministry" known as "The Way International."

The Way, as it is known, was founded in the early 1940s by Victor Paul Wierwille, a pastor in what is now the United Church of Christ. He served churches in and around Van Wert, OH and preached on radio stations in Lima and Cincinnati. Eventually he moved the ministry to his family farm in New Knoxville in 1959. He was committed to accurately interpreting and teaching the Bible. But his research led him in some unfortunate directions.

The Way International believes, for example:

- Jesus is the Son of God, but not God the Son – that is, Jesus is not God. In fact, that is the title of one of Wierwille's many books: "Jesus is not God"
- He did not exist before He was born, and He does not exist now.
- The Holy Spirit is merely a reference to God's presence. It is most definitely NOT an additional member of the Trinity.
- In fact there is no Trinity. Just God.
- There is no need for water baptism because every believer is baptized by the Holy Spirit.

This ministry – and hundreds of others like it – falsely but proudly proclaim that following them will get you to heaven. This one in New Knoxville has even woven that claim into its name. They are "the way" international.

I am reminded of three verses of Scripture:

There is a way *that seems* right to a man, But its end *is* the way of death.
(Proverbs 14:12)

(Jesus speaking) Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. (Matthew 7:13)

The third verse will serve as our theme verse for this Lenten season. It is one of those verses that every Christian needs to know by heart, so if you don't already have it committed to memory, please work on that this Lenten season:

(Jesus speaking) I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

The Way. Jesus alone is the Way. Forgiveness of our sins and our future home in heaven depends entirely on Him. He is the Way.

It is not a new message. This is the same message proclaimed by the Apostle Peter to the Jewish religious leaders that arrested him:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

Over these next seven weeks we are going to walk with Jesus along His way as He leads us to the cross and on to the tomb. And we are going to discover what it really means to follow Him.

For those who chose to follow the WAY OF JESUS, this was more than a physical journey. That is, it involved much more than simply walking the geographic distance marked out by two points on a map. For His followers, this would be a spiritual journey too. For them, this journey would lead them to circumstances and situations where their faith would be stretched and shaped and strengthened.

They would emerge from this journey changed. They would be transformed from mere followers to leaders, from fishermen to fishers of men. Even their job titles would change. Following this journey these men, who were once known as “disciples,” would now become “apostles.”

From disciple (learner) to apostle (messenger).

Over these next 46 days you and I will walk the way of Jesus.

And it all begins today. On a hillside in Galilee. There Jesus gathers around Himself a crowd of people, and as was the custom for the rabbis of His day, Jesus sat down so that He might teach them:

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. (Matthew 5:1-2)

The crowd would have been composed of mainly Jews at that point.

- Those who gathered there had already witnessed His power to heal the sick.
- Many would have seen – and all would likely have heard – about the dramatic ending to His baptism in the River Jordan.
- They knew who John the Baptist believed Him to be.
- They were looking for the Messiah, and wondered if He might be the One.

And so, on that hillside, Jesus began to teach:

³ Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,

for they will be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth...

He confused them a bit because some of what He said contradicted what they had always been taught. He phrased it like this:

You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you ...

He taught them to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecuted them and called them to live beyond the standards established by society. We call it "going the extra mile."

Then, there on that hillside, Jesus talked to those gathered around Him about the proper way to "practice their righteousness." That's the phrase in Matthew 6:1, and He worded it in the form of a warning:

Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. (Matthew 6:1)

Other translations refer to "doing good deeds."

Every Jew understood that their faith was to be expressed in three specific ways:

- Almsgiving
- Prayer
- Fasting

These three good deeds were the evidence of the quality of faith in the life of the believer. And they still are! Jesus does not change the expectation! Quite the contrary! Look at what He says:

- **When** you give to the needy (Matthew 6:2-3)
- **When** you pray (Matthew 6:5-6)
- **When** you fast (Matthew 6:16-17)

Not if, but when. The promise is not one of expectation, but one of expression. Not "should I do it?" but "how should I do it?"

Let me describe what I mean:

DECISION #1: WHAT'S MY GOAL?

Once I've determined to do my good deeds (to give, to pray, to fast), my next decision will always be: "What is my goal?" As a result of the giving, praying, or fasting I am about to do, what is the outcome I want to achieve?

I have two choices:

- I can receive the praise of men – their accolades and all the fanfare that accompanies that OR

- I can receive the praise of God.

Here's the tough part:

The two are mutually exclusive. You are only entitled to one reward.

The first step along the WAY OF JESUS is summed up in this question:

Whose praise matters most to you?

We all have struggled with this, haven't we? It's why Jesus begins here. One of the essential issues of faith that we have to wrestle with as we become mature believers is this very question: Who are we trying to please?

If I want people to be pleased with me

- I probably won't talk to them about their need for a Savior.
- I probably won't object to their objectionable behavior.

See it? That's why Jesus begins here. That's why just a few verses before this text in Matthew 6 we read these words in Matthew 5:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

DECISION #2: WHAT'S OUR PRACTICE?

If my goal is the praise of people than I will practice my righteousness in one way; if it is the praise of God my practice will look much different.

For example, if I want the praise of people:

- I will give...
 - In front of others so they see me
 - With trumpets blaring to call attention to myself
- I will pray...
 - On the in public places
 - With big words (in another text)
- I will fast ...
 - With a sad face
 - With mournful clothing and a dirty face

But when I choose to please God, my practice takes on a much less dramatic form.

Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18)

APPLICATION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded his readers that it was impossible to keep your eyes on others if you had them firmly focused on Christ.

Disciples should “keep on following Jesus, and should keep looking forward to him who is going before them, but not at themselves and what they are doing.”
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

We begin here. And we journey on.

Amen.