

Living as Children of God

(Talk #4 *Living in the Heavenlies* series)

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Welcome to the fourth talk in the *Living in the Heavenlies* series. In the earlier talks we described the eternal vision of heaven and hell; we considered the consequences of sin; we illuminated heavenly glory, and we learned to embrace our heavenly reality. This week we turn our attention living to as children of God. Well let's get started...

We Are Children of God

In the letter to the Galatians, St. Paul writes:

For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Through faith and the words of St. Paul, I believe that we are all children of God. But what does that really mean?

The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church is a great resource. And the Compendium's first question is *What is the plan of God for man?*

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. In the fullness of time, God the Father sent his Son as the Redeemer and Savior of mankind, fallen into sin, thus calling all into his Church and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, making them adopted children and heirs of his eternal happiness.

That, in a nutshell, is the whole story of salvation.

Some of us remember a similar question from our youth—question 6 in the Baltimore Catechism: “*Why did God make you?*” And the answer we memorized then echoes the Compendium and rings true today: “God made me to know him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him in the next.”

George Weigel neatly sums this up in the *Truth of Catholicism*: “Sainthood is everyone's destiny—sainthood is everyone's purpose... In becoming the saints we are made to be, we become the kind of people who can live with God forever.” In short, God is calling us to become saints.

I distinctly remember the Bishop's homily in the spring of 2000 when Michael and Mollie, two of my five children, were confirmed. Underscoring the words of St. Paul, the Bishop challenged the candidates to “live in a manner worthy of your calling” (Eph 4:1)—a charge that became a fundamental aspect of my faith journey, even though at times I have fallen far short.

Living a Life Worthy of Our Calling

So how do we live as children of God? How do we live a life worthy of our calling? It's as simple and as difficult as this: Through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, we must choose to follow Jesus—the same choice made by his first disciples. As we read in Matthew's Gospel, “And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. And immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Mk 1:16-18).

During his time on earth, Jesus *both* taught us how to live as children of God *and*, by his example, he showed us the Way to eternal life.

The Beatitudes, The Greatest Commandment, and “You did it to me.”

In Matthew’s Gospel we find three pillars of Jesus’ teaching on living as a child of God.

The Catechism says the Beatitudes (Mt 5: 3-12) are at the heart of Jesus’ preaching (CCC 1716) and, according to Fr. Robert Barron, “What Jesus gives us [in the Beatitudes]... is that new law that would discipline our desires, our minds, and our bodies so as to make real happiness possible.” Following Fr. Barron’s lead, let’s briefly consider the eight Beatitudes, first looking at the four “positive” beatitudes and then the more “negative” beatitudes. “Blessed are the merciful...” recognizes that mercy or tender compassion is God’s distinctive characteristic, or, in the words of St. John, “God is love.” “Blessed are the clean of heart...” shows us the joy of a person who knows that to love God is of paramount importance. “Blessed are those who hunger and search for righteousness...” acknowledges that a person’s ultimate concern is to do the will of God. And the last of the positive beatitudes, “Blessed are the peacemakers...”, reveals that God the Creator wants to draw people and things together in unity and harmony. To live in the way of these four Beatitudes is to move toward a life of joy.

Turning to the more negative beatitudes, Fr. Barron writes, “One of the most fundamental problems in the spiritual order is that we sense within ourselves the hunger for God, but we attempt to satisfy it with some created good that is less than God.” This echoes St. Augustine who said about our need for God, “...our heart is restless until it rests in you.” According to St. Thomas Aquinas, the four typical substitutes for God are wealth, pleasure, power, and honor. The inordinate pursuit of these created things in search of the happiness that only God can provide leads to sin and moves us away from our calling.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...” says that we should not be inordinately attached to wealth or material things. “Blessed are they who mourn...” tells us to avoid the inordinate attachment to pleasure or good feelings. “Blessed are the meek...” is not celebrating timidity, but rather is pointing us away from the inordinate attachment to power. Finally, “Blessed are the persecuted for the sake of righteousness...” shows us that we should avoid the inordinate attachment to honor or approval so we can follow the will of God even when we may be ignored or dishonored.

To live by these Beatitudes is one pillar for a life of as a child of God.

Teaching in the temple, Jesus was questioned by a Pharisee, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” We all know Jesus’ answer. “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Mt: 22:37-40)

To obey The Greatest Commandment, to love as Jesus loved, is a second pillar. And what is love? According to Thomas Aquinas, love is willing the good of another.

In Chapter 25 of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus teaches that when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoner we are willing the good of the other; we are acting with love. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40) To live knowing that “you did it to me” is a third pillar for life as a child of God.

Do the will of the Father

Jesus showed us the Way to eternal life by how he lived—and he lived with one purpose—to do the will of the Father. Long before beginning his public ministry, when Mary and Joseph question Jesus after finding him in the temple, he responds, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49) telling them that their parental role is subordinate to the will of his divine Father. And at the

end of his earthly ministry, while in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays, “Father if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still not my will but yours be done.” (Lk 22:42)

Jesus linked the will of the Father and our salvation when he said in Capernaum, “For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me... For this is the will of the Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life...” (John 6:38-40). Jesus came to do his Father’s will—and God’s will is that we share in the life that Jesus obtained for us by his obedience to the Father in accepting the cross and rising from the dead.

Jesus calls on his disciples throughout history to do as he did: “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother. (Mt 6:50)

What is God’s Will for Me?

And this leads to the crucial question, “What is God’s will for me?” It is certainly a question we ask ourselves when facing the life’s major decisions. That’s where seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer, consulting trusted friends, and practicing the discipline of discernment are invaluable. But I’m not facing any major decisions right now. I am blessed with wonderful wife, a loving family, and good health. I have a steady, albeit less than challenging, job with a good salary, and a comfortable home. I’m a practicing Catholic trying to grow as an intentional disciple, and a member of a spirit-filled charismatic community. I am greatly blessed. In my current circumstances, what is God’s will for me today—and every day?

(Jesuit) Fr. Walter Cizek confronted that same question about God’s will in his daily life—and he did so under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. His response speaks to me in my current situation—and I think it may apply to you as well. But before giving his answer, let’s learn a little about Fr. Cizek.

Born in Pennsylvania to Polish immigrants, Walter Cizek entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1928 and, while still a seminarian, he felt called to serve the Church in communist Russia. Upon ordination in 1937, Fr. Cizek was sent to the Jesuit mission in Poland. With the outbreak of World War II, Fr. Cizek followed the Polish exiles across the border into Russia where they found work in a logging camp. Fr. Cizek and a priest friend quickly became disillusioned, disappointed, and depressed at their seeming inability to minister to the people in the camps with them. They were extremely frustrated at not being able to do what *they thought* the will of God was for them.

In this time of great need, the Holy Spirit blessed them with this revelation about God’s will:

[God’s] will for us was the 24 hours of each day: the people, the places, the circumstances he set before us in that time. Those were the things God knew were important to him and to us at that moment, and those were the things upon which he wanted us to act, not out of any abstract principle or out of any subjective desire to “do the will of God.” No, these things, the 24 hours of this day, were his will; we had to learn to recognize his will in the reality of the situation....

In 1941 Fr. Cizek was arrested by the Russians and for the next 23 years he was held captive, the first five in the infamous Lubianka prison in Moscow followed by a decade of hard labor in the Gulag archipelago. For many years, Fr. Cizek’s whereabouts were unknown and he was declared dead in 1947. After his release from hard labor in 1955 Cizek was able to write his sisters to let them know he was alive. And in 1963 he returned home as part of a prisoner exchange arranged by the Kennedy Administration. Upon his return, the question Fr. Cizek was constantly asked was “How did you survive?” And his answer was, simply, “Divine Providence.” He described how Divine Providence worked in his life in *He Leadeth Me*—the magnificent book about his spiritual journey.

Fr. Cizek writes that what sustained him through many years of imprisonment, solitary confinement, forced labor, hardship, suffering and pain—years that were also blessed with priestly ministry and service, often at great personal risk—was his recognition that...:

“The plain and simple truth is that [God’s] will is what he actually wills to send us each day, in the way of circumstances, places, people and problems. The trick is to learn to see that -- not just in theory, or not just occasionally in a flash of insight granted by God's grace, but every day. Each of us has no need to wonder about what God's will must be for us; his will for us is clearly revealed in every situation of every day, if only we could learn to view all things as he sees them and sends them to us.

Father Ciszek lived out and shared his understanding of God’s will until he died in 1984. In 2012 the Vatican gave formal approval to pursue Father Ciszek’s cause for canonization and he was named a Servant of God.

We can draw on Fr. Ciszek’s profound insight about God’s will in our lives too. Every day each one of us is faced with circumstances, places, people, and problems. Can we see them as God sees them and then act accordingly? For example, we are all together this afternoon at prayer meeting. What is God’s will for me, right here and now? And tomorrow morning I will return to work; will I see God’s will for me there even if I am ignored, bored or aggravated. Is there someone at the office that I should reach out to? Am I called to some act of kindness or fellowship? Is God showing me a way that I can help make a difference in the lives of others? And now the harder question... Will I choose to act and follow God’s will in the situation he places before me, or will I remain trapped by my own perceptions and frustrations? It’s my choice every day, and it can be a tough one. And how about you? What about your daily choices?

Following God’s Will by Making Good Choices

To choose to follow Jesus and to do the will of the Father means that we will build our life on the pillars we just mentioned. And we have the freedom to do just that. In his homily in Baltimore in 1995, Saint Pope John Paul II said, “Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we want but in having the right to do what we ought.”

St. Paul puts it this way in his Letter to the Galatians: “Make no mistake: God is not mocked, for a person will reap only what he sows... Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest.” (Gal 6:7-9).

Here is a simple model that may help to focus our individual choices and actions.

- If we sow an ACT, we will reap a HABIT.
- If we sow a HABIT, we will reap a VIRTUE or a VICE.
- If we sow our VIRTUES or VICIES, we will reap our CHARACTER
- If we sow our CHARACTER, we will reap our DESTINY

If we want our destiny to be eternal life in heaven, we should form our character to mirror that of Jesus Christ. To really simplify things—If we want to live as a child of God, we should strive to live as Jesus lived because he is, in fact, the child of God, the Son of God. We have the freedom to choose and the choices we make every day either move us forward or hold us back on our spiritual journey.

Now let’s take a brief look at virtues and vices. St. Gregory of Nyssa said, “The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.” Four virtues play a pivotal role in our moral life and are called the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice fortitude, and temperance.

Prudence leads us to see the true good in every circumstance and situation and to choose the right means for achieving it. Prudence is “right reason in action” and it guides the exercise of the other virtues.

Justice consists in the firm and constant will to give to others their due.

Fortitude assures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good.

Temperance moderates our attraction to pleasures, assures the mastery of the will over instincts, and provides balance in our use of created goods.

Now let's turn our attention in the opposite direction. Vices are perverse habits which darken the conscience and incline one to evil. The vices can be linked to the seven capital sins which are: pride, avarice, envy, anger, lust, gluttony, and sloth or acedia. These seven sins are particularly harmful because they increase our tendency to sin and can often lead to other sins. For example, gluttony can lead to drunkenness; envy can lead to gossip or theft; and anger can lead to physical violence. Similarly, those of us of a certain age may recall Master Yoda saying to young Luke, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to the dark side."

God want us to turn from the dark side, to live a virtuous life, and we have the God-given freedom to do just that—to choose the good, to follow Jesus, and to do the will of the Father.

So what should we do with our freedom? At the Transfiguration, God said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." (Mt 17:6) At the wedding of Cana Mary said to the servers and to each of us, "Do whatever he tells you." *Listen to Him* and *Do whatever He tells you*. Pretty good advice for living as children of God. And from very reliable sources.

Conclusion

Let's tie it all together. Out of his infinite love, God created each one of us and he calls us to be with him forever. Everything we are and everything we have is pure gift, including the gift of the Holy Spirit that we first received at our Baptism. To live as a child of God we must choose to follow Jesus. By choosing to follow Jesus and allowing the Spirit to guide our thoughts and actions in the many choices we make each day, we will open ourselves up to receive our eternal inheritance and, we will experience the fruits of Spirit— charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity (cf. Gal 5:22-23) — as we help to build the kingdom of God here on earth.

On the way out you can pick up a handout of the talk with questions for reflection. It includes two prayers that help me in my quest to live as a child of God—the morning offering prayer I have assembled over time and Thomas Merton's famous prayer about trusting God as we travel the road on our spiritual journey.

May the Lord give you peace. Thank you.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you believe that you are called to sainthood? Why or why not? How does this understanding affect your life?
2. When have you lived by the three pillars in Matthew's Gospel? When have you fallen short?
3. How do you respond to Fr. Ciszek's understanding of God's will? Could it change your life?
4. What virtue do you think the Lord wants you to grow in? Is there a vice you want to overcome?
5. If you were to explain to someone else what it means to be a child of God, what would you say?

References

Catechism of the Catholic Church: Beatitudes (1716-1729); Virtues & Sin (1803-1876)

He Leadeth Me by Fr. Walter J. Ciszek, S.J. with Daniel L. Flaherty, S.J., Image Books, imageCatholicBooks.com

Catholicism by Fr. Robert Barron, Chapter 2, Happy Are We: The Teaching of Jesus, Image Books imageCatholicBooks.com

Ray Glennon's Morning Offering

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, through the intercession of your Blessed Mother, Saint Maximilian Kolbe, and Servant of God Walter Ciszek, I offer you all my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day for your greater honor and glory, in reparation for my sins, in thanksgiving for all you have given me, and for the intentions of my family and friends, the intentions of the parishioners of St. Francis of Assisi and the members of Mother of God community, and the intentions of our Holy Father.

Jesus, I love you and I know you are with me always. Like you, I am a beloved child of the Father. Help me to experience the joy of the Father's ever-present love and the peace of your friendship today as I strive to do the Father's will. Send your Holy Spirit to open my heart and mind so I may recognize and be grateful for the many times and the many ways that you touch me, guide me, and help me on my journey. Holy Spirit, give me the wisdom and understanding to know what I should do and the courage and strength to act on that knowledge today and everyday.

Almighty God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—I thank you for the gift of life and for this day. I pray that with your assistance I may use this day to serve you by doing your will and that at the end of the day I may return it as a gift to you. I ask this in your most Holy Name. Amen

Thomas Merton's Prayer

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.