



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

"Attitudes Toward God" Excerpted from *The Spiritual Journey Part 1*

Thomas Keating

There are a variety of attitudes towards God. What is your attitude? This is a question that deserves a little bit of attention as we begin this course in Christian spirituality. In childhood we have a variety of attitudes towards God, too; but many of them, depending on our religious education, tend to be tinged with certain childhood fears. If our parents were a little severe or exacting, we may have picked up ideas about God that reflected their uneasiness or their guilt feelings about this or that. And somehow the feeling can be communicated to a child that God is a rather dangerous character.

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE TOWARD GOD IS ESSENTIAL TO ONE'S PROGRESS ON THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY.

I would like to emphasize the fact that the spiritual journey has great difficulty in getting off to a good start if we are carrying with us a negative attitude towards God which will be like a ball and chain around our emotions, if not our feet. It's important to have a good idea of God.

FEAR OF GOD = TRUST

A good idea of God consists, of course, in trusting him. And so how you communicate to a child this trust is a very important consideration for parents and teachers of these little people for whom the attitude that we communicate about God is probably going to stick with them, for weal or for woe, all through their lives. And sometimes, in my experience, I have seen God have to go to incredible lengths to try to dissipate some unrealistic and unwholesome idea of him or her that could have been avoided had we received in early childhood this disposition of trust which parents, by their goodness and care of the child, are intended to manifest – that's part of their vocation as a parent – to show the kind of love that God has for the child by the way they treat us, love us, care for us, nurture us and all the rest of the parental virtues.

The Western Model

Let's move to a point in our early childhood education when we began to receive religious instruction. The general sense or environment in which religious education was communicated seems to have been more of a philosophical model stemming from Descartes, with his dualistic view of reality and reinforced by Newtonian physics with its idea of God out here managing the world from a distance, and its corollary, that those who wanted to be united to God would have to climb an infinite number of stairs in order to get to wherever heaven was. In other words, heaven was identified as a kind of geographical location, somewhere off there someplace, where nobody knew where it was. And so, its access was difficult.

We might call this model of Christian education, the Western Model which is characterized by the self-outside-of-God and God-outside-of-the-self. This model, as you can see with a little bit of analysis and reflection, would suggest to someone engaged in trying to be united to God, or make oneself pleasing to him, would require efforts on our part in order to please God. And these efforts, since God is out there someplace, would obviously be the result of our natural capacities, efforts, and talents.

With this model in mind goes certain other attitudes. The first attitude that goes with this syndrome is: external acts are more important than internal acts or motivations. This is clearly contrary to the whole of the Gospel. You only have to think of the battle that Jesus had with the Pharisees precisely for this reason.

IN CHRISTIANITY, MOTIVATION IS EVERYTHING.

Their motive for their religious observance was the external completion of the ritual, whatever it was, or the good acts, and their motive was rooted in the worldly motives of human respect, satisfaction and of adulation from the people. Their motivation was shot through with their own desires for self-aggrandizement and the glorification of their own ego.

THE IDEA THAT WE MUST EARN GOD'S LOVE IS CONTRARY TO SCRIPTURE.

Let's move on to the second attitude that went with this disposition and that was: the self initiates all good intentions and good works, and God rewards. This gives us an image somehow of our poor little self in this arena working like mad to please God, and God is in the bleachers someplace watching this adventure or this contest. If we do well, it's "thumbs up," to use the old Roman arena symbol. If it's not so hot, it's "thumbs down."

The next syndrome is that the emphasis is on reward in this life and in heaven, rather than on the love and union with God and love of neighbor here and now. Now this was the concern, of course, that manifests itself in the idea of external works, and piling up certain merits in order to require God, it would seem, to give us his reward in heaven.

Finally, the emphasis of the Western Model was on getting guarantees of future reward and happiness rather than on being concerned for loving and being united to God in this life and in serving others in need.

The Scriptural Model

Now let's look at the Scriptural Model. The Scriptural Model was recovered through the efforts of many Christian scholars prior to Vatican II. It received an emphatic endorsement in the great documents of Vatican II. This return has enabled us, as a Church, to recapture once again the basic Gospel teaching and its values from the pure source. In other words, we don't have to depend on somebody's homilies or on translations of the Gospel. The best translations of the Gospel probably now put us in closer contact with the word of God than any generation since the Apostles.

OUR ERA HAS THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE TEXTS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF SCRIPTURE SINCE THE APOSTOLIC ERA

Because we now have, through the scholarly process of examining the cultural background, the meaning of words, the evolution of cultures ... we now have a better understanding of what the mind of the scriptural author was when they wrote these various passages.

THANKS TO MODERN SCRIPTURE SCHOLARS, WE HAVE MORE INSIGHT INTO THE ORIGINAL MEANING OF THE SACRED AUTHORS

What does this model turn out to be? It almost is 180-degrees in the opposite direction from the Western Model with which most of us were afflicted – that's the only word I can think of. And what does Scripture say? It says that interior motivation is more important than the external acts that we perform.

The second point was the question of who initiates the good works? In the Western Model it was the self-outside-of-God. In the Scriptural Model, it's the self-in-God and the Spirit of God in us. As Paul says: "You are the temple of the Spirit who dwells in you" as the living and dynamic source of inspiration, who is communicating the gifts by which we can translate the divine will and love into daily activities on a whole range of different activities from prayer to action to service. And now the emphasis is on listening and responding to the Spirit rather than our own bright ideas and initiating all kinds of projects that we then expect God to back up.

That brings us, then, to the third comparison. And here, in the Scriptural Model, the emphasis is not on the reward of the self, in this life or the next, but on the effort and journey to unite ourselves with and to love God here and now. Right now! And to serve others in need, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, *now*.

Let us turn now finally to the fourth disposition that the Model of Scripture presents to us: that is, the model of the self-in-God and God-in-the-self through his Spirit and through the risen life of Christ within us through faith and trust and love. This final comparison deals again with an emphasis. The emphasis in the Scriptural Model is on cultivating union and love of God here and now and not worrying about the future. In other words, it's not interested in guarantees for the future. The whole syndrome of reward and punishment, in actual fact, belongs to an attitude towards God which springs from a fairly immature attitude that is normal for children but should have developed into a more mature vision in an adult if their religious education had been truly adequate. And the only way to make a religious education adequate is practice. That is to say, a discipline of prayer and action that awakens our whole being to the contemplative dimension of the Gospel, which is to be under the inspiration of the Spirit both in prayer and action.

What happens to someone who is not worried about guarantees for the future? Obviously, they are somebody who trusts in God and who knows that if they do what they can to love and serve God and serve their neighbor right now that God is going to take care of their future. And they don't want a future that isn't what God wants for them. So why bother about it? And they look to find God more and more in the present moment which is the only place he can be found. Since God is eternal, he's not a future being – he's present now. And our discipline should concentrate on the work that is to be done now to develop a mature Christian attitude and relationship to the Ultimate Reality whom Jesus revealed as Abba; that is, the God of infinite compassion, who is passionately (if I may use that word) concerned and present to the human family which manifests his inner life more than any other aspect of creation.

Here then are these two attitudes or syndromes of attitudes that go with a Scriptural Model of the self-in-God and the Western Model of the self-outside-of-God. These attitudes and dispositions towards God are still active at times, or they're an unconscious attitude that arises spontaneously in a crisis or in other situations because it has never been fully looked at, evaluated, and updated by a good and mature evaluative judgment. Now is the time to do so.

A third attitude towards God that is very easily communicated to the child who can't make a lot of distinctions is that God is a judge, with his gavel raised, always about to come down with a final judgment of "guilty." And so, once again, God is presented with overtones of fear, to which the primitive psychology of the child who already fears the unknown, the darkness, the bogeyman, and the images of television of these space creatures which are hazardous – these are the things that are awakened and easily attached to the idea of God. And then you get the idea of God with an emotional charge to it. In actual fact, "the fear of God" is a technical term in the Old Testament which means: have a right relationship with God. And the right relationship with God is trust and service.

We need to develop trust and responsibility. And this grows in the service of God and in our efforts to be united with him and to serve others in love. In other words, to love our neighbor as ourselves. This can't be done if one is constantly afraid of God. We should not translate that technical term in the Psalms and in Scripture of "the fear of God" as the emotion of fear because that emotion tends to frighten us to the point of staying away from God as much as possible. And this will hardly facilitate the spiritual journey which requires a maximum of trust, and, indeed, unbounded confidence as it unfolds.

With this in mind, let me turn your attention to the value of contemplative prayer and practice as an indispensable means for developing the contemplative dimension of the Gospel and those dispositions that we just recorded as the self-in-God and God-in-us, which is the essential starting point in regard to a mature attitude and a spontaneous and energetic attitude as we commence the spiritual journey.

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY PROGRESSES THROUGH ACTIONS BASED ON A CONTEMPLATIVE RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer is really a term to describe the traditional meaning of contemplation. The word "contemplation" has received many meanings in recent times and so Centering Prayer is intended to be an effort to identify one meaning of that traditional and classical term. And that meaning is its original meaning as "resting in God," as that gradual evolution of acquaintanceship and friendship with God that moves to the maturity of communion, which is a deeper level of relating to God than conversation or thinking about him. It is being with God and resting in him beyond concepts, however good, and beyond particular acts except to wait upon God in loving attention during the parameters in which one devotes oneself to this interview or encounter.