Session 8: Paying Attention and Responding to God

(The 'How' of Discipleship 3)

Head **Heart** Hands

ATTENTIONAL	*"Christians grow through being intentional over the thoughts, experiences and feelings that influence our character".*
SUBMITTED	*"Christians grow as we continue to choose to lay down our will for the sake of God's".*
ACTIVATED	*"Christians grow when we put into practice new ideas and teaching we gain, often from the invitation of others".*

Session Aims

- To reflect on the importance of developing a day by day, moment by moment practice of seeking to pay attention to God and respond, as a key discipleship practice.
- To learn and practice a simple pattern of reflecting on the 'kairos moments' when we sense God is seeking to get our attention.
- To reflect on what using this method with others requires from us as enablers of discipleship.

Key Bible Passages

- Exodus 3.1-10 (Moses and the burning bush)
- Mark 1.15 (Jesus announces the Kingdom)
- Matthew 7.24-27 (the wise and foolish builders)

Discipleship Story

For this session, we'd suggest the group leader shares a story from their own experience about paying attention to God in the midst of daily life – what happened? What did it mean? How did they reflect on what God was saying? How did they respond?

Main Session Content

How can each day be lived to the full?

To follow someone essentially means to pay attention to where they are, what they are doing, and what they are saying… …and respond to that. This is the daily attitude of a disciple.[1]

[1] This session is an abridged and adapted version of Guy Donegan-Cross, *Discipleship: Start this Way* (BRF, 2025), chapter 11.

In the taster session it was suggested that in their daily life, a disciple is someone who wants to listen and notice where God is getting their attention, and then live differently as a result. Imagine if everyone in the world gave God that kind of attention and then put into practice what He was showing them.

As we know, however, that's not the case. We are constantly paying attention and responding to different voices in life - not least in our social media age. Our attention is pulled all sorts of different directions all the time, some of them unhelpful and unhealthy. Christian writer Nathan Foster says: 'Distraction is the curse of our age. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of efficient people, or busy people, but for *present* people.[2] A growing number of secular commentators also seem to agree.[3]

Instead, being a disciple is about paying attention to God, and growing in responding to God above all else, in everything we do. This is how Jesus lived, with a deep sense that His life was shaped by God's leading: 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.' (John 5:19). He also said: 'Human beings do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' (Matthew 4:4). For Emil Brunner, 'we are what we hear from God'.[4]

Being 'Called Out' People

This is a calling for us *together*, as a Christian community too; not just as Christian individuals. The original meaning of the word 'church' (*ekklesia* in Greek) is to be people who are 'called out' for a particular purpose, such as an assembly of citizens. As God's *ekklesia*, we are people who respond to God's call.

Paying attention and responding to God isn't just for special times of the week. Our lives are full of so many everyday tasks - washing, eating, working, cooking, cleaning, watching TV, shopping, caring for others, paying the bills. The idea that God might want to communicate with us in the middle of all this ordinariness - or that we might have the headspace to listen - can seem hard to grasp.

But what if God is weaving eternal and significant moments throughout all this everyday activity? What happens if ordinary things are precisely the place in which we ask big God-shaped questions and make God-shaped choices? God is always at work, willing to lead and shape us through the events of our lives if we are willing to allow Him. So in summary,

- Being a disciple is being attentive to those opportunities for growth and responding to God.
- Helping others grow as disciples is in significant part about encouraging them to listen to what God is doing and respond.

[2] https://renovare.org/articles/the-cure-for-distraction
[3] See book and video by Johan Hari in the Resources list
[4] Emil Brunner, *God and Man: Four Essays in the Nature of Personality* (SCM Press, 1936), 55.

Jesus' first sermon

Although Jesus is no longer physically here on earth, God remains present with us through the Spirit. Before we even consider whether to give Him our attention, God is already around, with, and inside us. He doen't need to be conjured up like magic or begged to appear.

Sometimes people talk about these times when God gets our attention as 'kairos' moments. *Kairos* is a Greek word meaning 'time'. It is one of two words used for 'time' in the gospels, the other being *chronos*.

- **Chronos** time is ordinary, everyday, time: minutes, hours, days, years. Chronos is clock time: we know it's happening, but we generally don't notice it, unless we look at our phones or realise we're going to be late.

- **Kairos** time, on the other hand, is a precise or particularly significant moment in time. For example, when you've been waiting for something and are told "It is time!", that is 'kairos'. Kairos is the *right* time, the season for something. It's the point at which our hour by hour, day by day life is interrupted, and new possibilities open up. Kairos moments make us pause, think, reflect, take new actions.

If someone says, 'What time is it?' and someone answers, 'Twenty past three.' That is *chronos*. If someone says, 'It's time for change!' that is *kairos*.

When Jesus began His great mission to reconcile the whole world to God, he said: 'The time [the kairos] has come! The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1.15). Jesus himself was open to those Kairos moments. Think about the way he let himself be stopped by the woman who had suffered bleeding for twelve years, or by Jairus begging Jesus to heal his daughter. Think about the way Jesus stopped to notice Zaccheus up a tree and engage him in a life-changing conversation.

Think of other New Testament examples of faithful people who stopped what they were doing to pay attention to God and to respond to God's call. Think about Mary being visited by the angel Gabriel, or Philip being led to speak to the Ethiopian official who was passing him on the road, or Ananias in prayer being led to visit the newly-converted Saul of Tarsus. These were all 'kairos moments'.

Kairos Moments in Everyday Life

For us too, every moment can be a kairos moment in which we recognise how close God is. In this important sense, the world is not an empty place which I occasionally get to invite God into. Instead, the world is a God-saturated theatre, alive with His presence. In it, I get to listen to a God who loves us and is our Lord, friend, source of life, parent, shield, beginning and end. He is always wanting to lead, guide and protect us.

In this respect, Christian discipleship is about paying attention to God, just as Jesus constantly did. In doing so, I notice in small - and sometimes big - ways that God and His kingdom are near in this moment. And then I get to respond.

We always have a choice with kairos moments. God lovingly never forces anything on us. But these Kairos moments are all around us. They can be big; for example, a major world event which offers opportunities to respond in faith and love in a new way. It could be an unexpected invitation to a new role in work, church or community. It could be as simple as a breeze on our face, reminding us of God's gentleness in a time of challenge…these can all be moments of interruption, opportunities for the everyday disciple to ask, 'What might God be saying to me?' and, 'How might I respond?'

Hearing *and* Responding

If paying attention is the first step, the responding bit is vital too. When Jesus told people that the 'kairos has come' and the 'kingdom of God is near' it wasn't just to draw their attention to a new fact. It was to call them to live differently as a result. He immediately followed this with the two inner steps of surrender: 'repent' (change the way you think) and 'believe' (act in a new way which reveals what you really trust in). Those first steps turn out to be a way of life.

It is possible to pay attention to God's presence, to get to know His teaching, to start to notice these kairos moments, but for that to make little difference in our lived experience.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us plenty of teaching on what the life of discipleship looks like. But, crucially, immediately after the sermon there comes the parable of the wise and foolish builders. One builds on rock, and when 'The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house…yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.' But the other builds on sand. When the storm comes, it 'fell with a great crash' (Matthew 7.24-29).[5]

Both builders have heard God's words and received His teaching. But the difference is that the wise person in the parable, whose house remains standing, is the one 'who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice.' Discipleship is helping one another to do this regularly.

Everyday, Ordinary Discipleship

In this, all of us are learners; none of us have got it sorted. Discipleship is about ordinary Christians helping each other to respond to God in our daily lives. In our meeting sessions, we are setting aside time to focus on this. Often discipleship is about taking a step back to have time to notice where God is.

But this can also happen through informal conversations in which we ask questions which make us wonder what God might be showing us. It is great in groups, but we can all disciple each other at the kitchen sink, in the park, in the pub… whenever we meet.

This practice of listening, paying attention to where God is at work and responding faithfully sits at the heart of what we sometimes label 'theological reflection' and also what we call 'spiritual direction'. We reflect on something that is happening or has happened, and try to understand it through a God-shaped lens so that we can respond faithfully. Whatever term we use, we are after the same thing. The heart of being a disciple is paying attention to God and responding to what He says.

[5] Matthew 7:24-29.

Navel-Gazing?

There can be a worry that this might lead to over-analysing life in endless self-preoccupation. And perhaps there is a danger that we can become paralysed by spending more time thinking about life than living it.

But the aim is that the more we seek to notice God within day-by-day moments, the more precious they can become. And as we notice these things we express our thankfulness by responding to God by joining in with God's invitation.

In an intentional discipleship group, the main focus is to spend time listening to the Spirit about where God might be getting our attention, and how we might respond. We can use a variety of simple questions to help us. Because we want to grow, we help each other with steps forward. That's why it's important to these spaces are safe environments in which we can mutually support and gently hold each other accountable.

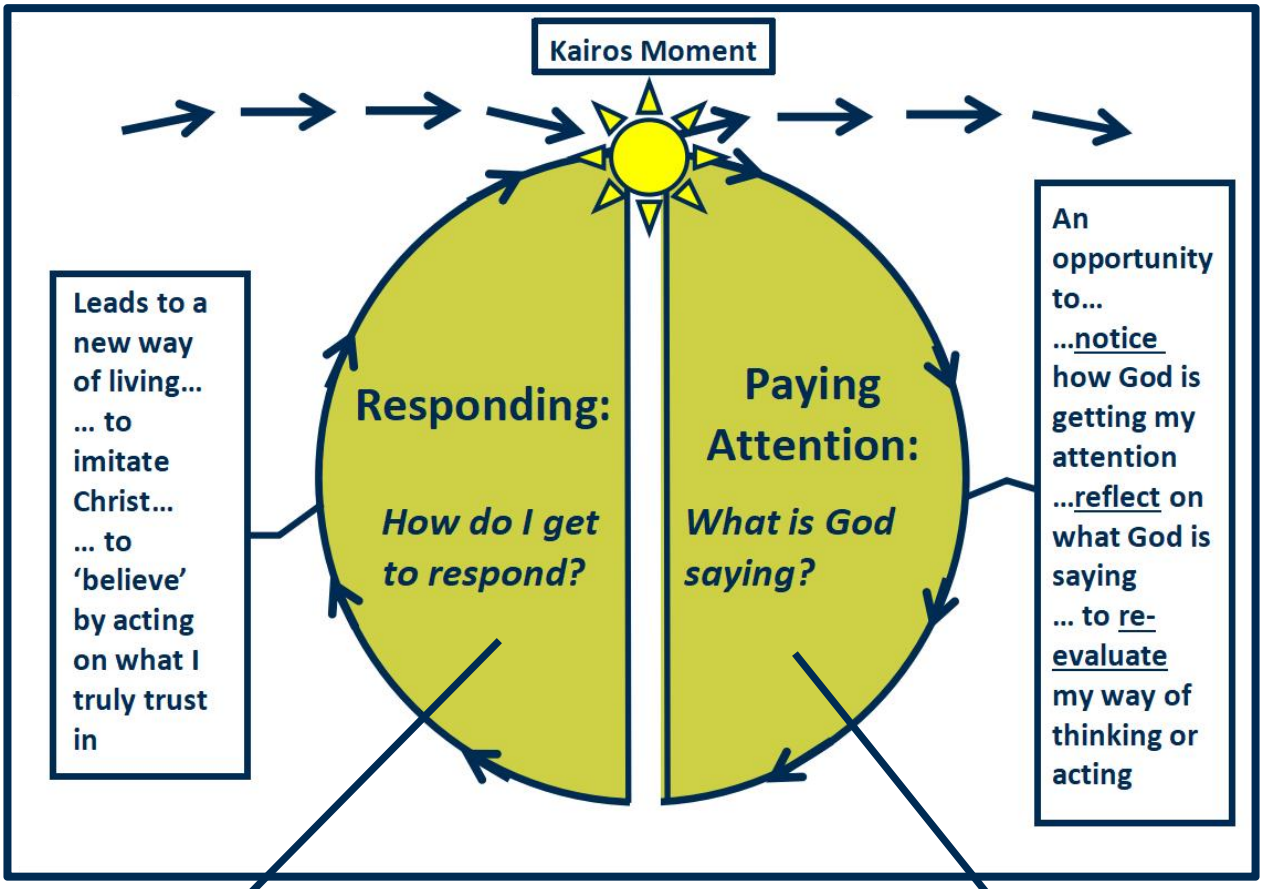
How do we hear God?

There is a wider question here, which is about how we actually discern God's voice amongst all the others clamouring for our attention. The point of this session is not to go deep into the question of discernment, but to learn and practice a simple method of theological reflection - paying attention and responding to God - which we can use in daily life. That said, let's remember a few pieces of historic Christian wisdom about hearing God:

- First, let's remember that God's prompting will always be consonant with Scripture. God won't ever lead us in a way which contradicts the biblical picture of God's character. So we can apply a Scripture test to our listening. That's why in the method we are going to explore we will always ask: 'what is true of God?, and 'what is true of how God sees me?'
- Second, we can test out our thoughts with other Christians. That's why the method we're going to use is best done in small groups (although you can use it individually). The perspectives of others walking the same journey with Jesus can be hugely valuable in paying attention to God and responding. Here we can also draw on the witness of faithful Christians through the ages - what we often call tradition for shorthand - to help us listen.
- Third, we do need to apply our God-given powers of reason to what we think we hear. My brain comes up with some pretty weird stuff at times and it's important to sift that stuff, It's true that from time to time God might prompt us with something unusual. But even the unusual stuff will stand up to our other tests.
- Fourth, we know that God is gentle and patient with us, and is unlikely to ask us to run before we can walk. If you feel God is prompting you to go to the United Nations and make a plea for world peace, that may well be from God… but unless you're already a very highly experienced diplomat, there are probably several stages and experiences to go through first, in order to get there. We don't generally need to know the full picture in advance, and for most of us it would be terrifying if we did. So focus on paying attention to the *next* step God is asking you to make.
- Fifth, anything God prompts us to do will produce good fruit. We may get a sense of peace about something, even if it also requires hard struggle or a big step of faith. And it will also be something which leads to an increase in blessing: are the results of our obedience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control? Does it lead to the building up of the Body of Christ in mutual love? Does it make space for the Kingdom of God to break in? If so, that's a sure sign we have heard and obeyed rightly.

Discipleship Tool/Practice

The following diagram[6] offers a simple method of paying attention and responding to God. It is based on both ancient Christian practices and more recent thinking on reflective practice. Work through the questions one by one, in the direction of the arrows.



Some Useful 'Response' Questions:

How do I get to respond?

- How might I live differently?
- When and how might I start?
- Who will support me in this, and how?
- What is my prayer?

What would be helpful to be asked next time we meet?

Some Useful 'Paying Attention' Questions:

What is God saying?

- What have I noticed?
- Why might it matter?
- How might it call me to change?
- What do I need to remember about God in this situation?
- Are there any ways I am not trusting God in this situation?
- What do I need to remember about how God sees me?

[6] The diagram is based on various action-reflection cycles and created by Guy Donegan-Cross. The addition of the 'kairos' moment comes from the reflective cycle used in Breen and Kallestad, *Life Shapes*, 40.

Reflection questions on the Tool/Practice

After you have practised working through the reflective spiral, you can use these questions to help you reflect on your experience of using the 'paying and attention and responding' method:

- What was easier and harder about using the method?
- Do I find it easier to notice where God is getting my attention through reflecting on my own, or by conversation with others?
- What might help me to notice God in my everyday moments?
- Are there any of the questions on the diagram I would find it hard to ask? Why?
- How can I help others to grow in this attitude?
- What does that require of me, in that conversation?

Enabling Tips

- Paying attention and responding to God requires us to develop a few habits of heart and mind. Amongst other things, first, we need openness to the fact that God might be wanting to communicate with us through everyday things. Second, we need what one colleague of mine calls 'wide margins' in our lives – that's to say, we need enough slack in our daily schedules to have time to pay attention to what's going on around us. Third, this also means we practice pausing to be still, to keep turning our attention towards God in the middle of the busyness, not just when we aren't busy. Remember that modern life is designed to keep distracting us, so don't worry if this doesn't come easily – just keep going. As a result, fourth, we need to be patient, and to start small before we try to pay attention and respond in big ways. To start with, it may be enough just to practice paying attention to our surroundings; to really notice and listen, before trying to discern God's prompting in the middle of it.

- Start by following the reflective spiral step by step, asking the questions in order. This might well feel a bit clunky or artificial at first, but this is no different to learning any other skill (for example, learning to drive). It will gradually come to feel more natural.

- Note that theological reflection (paying attention and responding) doesn't have to start with our own personal experience - it can start with reading the Bible and working outwards to our experience (see Helen Collins' book on the resources list). Some of the other tools/practices we have already covered in DE so far are also good starting points for paying attention to God and responding - e.g., the spiritual journey map, four fields activity, lectio divina, up/in/out triangle, etc.

- As you become familiar with the stages of the cycle and the reflection questions, it's important not to miss out a stage. There are some good reasons for this:
  - Some people are tempted to jump straight to the 'paying attention' stage because they are desperate to problem-solve. It's important to take the time to discern what God might be saying, before we act.
  - Some people tend towards the opposite temptation, to spend all their time talking and never really move to the action stage. Sometimes a particular experience or challenge

can need a lot of 'talking out'. But sooner or later it's important to decide how to respond.

- One of the most challenging parts of this method is exploring where we think we discern God's prompting in a situation, or where we see the signs of the Kingdom breaking through. This is because, as a society, and even in many church contexts, we have become so conditioned *not* to talk about God with any expectation that God is alive and active in the world. And as a result, we really struggle to do share our thoughts about God's prompting and activity in our lives. But it's important to try. Our first efforts may feel clumsy and halting, but we can be patient and gentle with each other, and hear each others' thoughts about God into speech.

- To do all this fruitfully, we need to use the 'paying attention and responding' cycle and questions with gentleness. It's very possible to follow a good method and use it like a sledghammer, doing damage to ourselves and other people in the process. Sue Pickering writes: 'as pastoral listeners we do not try to shape the experience of those we listen to according to our understanding or tradition. Instead we listen with them for signs of grace, for what God – recognized or unrecognized – might be doing in their life'.[7] So in all of this, we need humility, gentleness and patience (with ourselves, with each other and with God). We'll talk more about the manner and character of our discipleship in the next session.

Further Resources

Spiritual classics on paying attention and responding to God:

- Celtic Christianity placed great emphasis on attentiveness and responsiveness to God in the everyday - you can find many collections of ancient Celtic Christian prayers, blessings and invocations online as well as many modern ones written in the Celtic Christian tradition (e.g., by David Adam and the Iona Community). Note that not all of the ancient Celtic material is explicitly Christian.

- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*

- Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* - https://ccel.org/ccel/l/lawrence/practice/cache/practice.pdf

- St Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius (*best undertaken with a prayer guide or acompanier, but some useful materials for individuals to try for themselves too). A useful introduction is found on: https://www.jesuit.org.uk/the-spiritual-exercises

- Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (sometimes published as: *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*)

[7] Sue Pickering*, Listening and Spiritual Conversation* (2017), 16.

A helpful introduction to hearing God, introducing some well-used prayer and reflection practices:

- Pete Greig, *How to Hear God* (2022)

A very well-loved book on the practices of paying attention and responding to God in the whole of life:

- Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: Finding the Sacred Beneath our Feet* (2009) – see especially chapter 1 ('The Practice of Waking Up to God') and chapter 2 ('The Practice of Paying Attention'

A fairly easy to read introduction to theological reflection:

- Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology* (2009) - also 5 minute video in which Bishop Laurie explains how and why he came to develop his 'doing theology cycle': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr9k-aNYe0I&t=5s

An alternative approach, starting with the Bible:

- *Helen Collins, Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting with Scripture* (2020) - more of an academic book but still useful for anyone who likes reading at this level

Two very helpful practical resource books on different methods of theological reflection. Aimed at introductory academic study level, but activities are very practical:

- Stephen Pattison and Judith Thompson, *Theological Reflection* (2009)

- Paul Nash and Sally Nash, *Tools for Reflective Ministry* (2012)

A secular writer on the distraction crisis in contemporary society:

- Johan Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why you Can't Pay Attention* (2022). You can listen to a 15 minute interview in which he discusses the book on the ABC network: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCkd7daaij4 . There's a summary of his list of 12 things that steal our focus here: https://summarypedia.org/stolen-focus-by-johann-hari/