



## 297: Am I Doing This Wrong?

I'm Emily P. Freeman. Welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 297. I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in the Piedmont of North Carolina with my family and through my work I've helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue so that they can discern their next right thing in faith, work and life. You are enjoying this podcast ad free because of the generous support of subscribers to the Soul Minimalist on Substack. You can learn more in subscribe at [EmilyPFreeman.substack.com](https://emilypfreeman.substack.com) where we'll continue the conversation about discernment and decision-making for anyone who wants to move beyond the pro/con list. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing.

Today's question, am I doing this wrong? When it comes to spiritual practice and life with God, it might be your default to think you're doing it wrong. Even though I've walked with my friend Jesus for many decades now, even though I've written many faith-based books, even though I have a master's degree in Christian spiritual formation and I even teach in a master's level program on the same topic, I still carry around that childlike questions sometimes without even realizing it. Am I doing this wrong? Am I on the right track? Am I going to be okay? Let's talk about it. Listen in.

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I'm in the car with our son and we are going downtown for an appointment. The GPS leads us a way we don't often go. I've lived in Greensboro for 26 years, but I've rarely spent much time on this side of town with her sprawling green lawns and stars, hollow street lamps. My son, he's surprised that houses this big exist in our own hometown, and while I know that they're there, I know it to be true. I'm kind of surprised seeing them again, remembering. We passed by the beautiful First Presbyterian church and almost French Cathedral with her gothic spires pointing to the heavens, one giant stained-glass eye letting in the light. Or depending on how you feel about God these days, one giant stained-glass eye watching.

So we pass First Pres and a minute later, I see a spot available on the street next to the cozy covered walkway of Holy Trinity Episcopal. Once my son is settled in his appointment down the road, I have an hour to wait. Since the twins are off at college and our son's been driving himself around for over a year by now, my days of spending time in carpool, drop off pickup and car waiting lines are over. If you're in it now, just know the driving activity will rise to a feverish pitch and then one day you'll be done. Well, today is the exception I find myself delighted with the time I have here just sitting in the car. I don't have any place else to be and nothing pressing that needs to be done. It's an evening in September, and while there's still plenty of daylight, the air feels just barely giddy with a promise of cooler temperatures to come.

I'm in short sleeves and I'm comfortable, the sun behind the church building, casting longer shadows on the grass. I vaguely remember my spiritual director once mentioning that this church has a labyrinth and I'm suddenly eager to find it. Now, if you've never walked a labyrinth or you're not sure what one is, the simplest way to describe it is as a meandering path leading to a center and back out again. It's used for the purpose of walking, prayer or meditation, serving as a sort of metaphor for our spiritual life. Usually they're only two-dimensional, generally made with stones or rocks or small plants or pavers on the ground laid out in a circular pattern. At first glance, it might look like a maze, but there are no dead ends, no gotcha moments in labyrinth. There's only a continuous path toward the center and then a continuous path back out.

The invitation is to walk slowly, following the simple path that weaves toward the center where you can stop and pray, consider or maybe even lay something down, a rock of remembrance there in the middle. And then you walk slowly back out, retracing your steps, exiting the same way that you entered. Many different churches and retreat centers have labyrinth on site, some even as simple as a pattern spray-painted in a parking lot. It doesn't have to be fancy to count as prayer. I follow the covered sidewalk and cross a wide paved courtyard with a fountain, and I'm looking around for signs that may point to the labyrinth. I see a sign across the way, and when I get closer, what it says I notice is it's actually honoring those who contributed to the provision of the labyrinth fountain. Wait a minute, I just passed a fountain, but I didn't see the labyrinth.

Well, as it turns out, the courtyard I had just walked across, well, that was it. Monochrome stone pavers set in a circular pattern whispering their invitation just under my feet. Sometimes I am so focused on something presenting itself in a particular way that I miss it altogether. So I retrace my steps and I look for the start, but I can't quite get my bearings. I don't know if it's because I'm flustered from walking right over the labyrinth the first time, or if it's genuinely difficult to see. So I decipher what I kind of think is the entrance, and I just start my walk right there, weaving in and out, and as I do, I settle in. I notice the rectangular pattern, it becomes more obvious to me and I follow it walking the path with ease. I pray as I walk for hope in a situation that is playing a little too fast and loose with hopelessness.

\The pattern is clear, but at the start it was hard for me to see, and I'm irritated that my lack of attention to detail kept me from the experience I was hoping for. At first, I was disappointed, like I had somehow missed God on my walk. This whole time I thought I was moving toward the center, but really I was moving away. To bring you along a little bit more on this personal moment with God and to be as honest as I'm able to be. I'll tell you that I felt the slightest bit of abandonment. I was being led the whole time in the wrong direction, and then I felt a fair amount of shame for getting it wrong in the first place. But then a thought, be gentle with yourself when it comes to life with God. There's no wrong way to be together.

God, as it turns out, is not limited by stones on a path. After taking an honest moment of reflection, after naming my disappointment, no matter how silly it kind of seemed, I was actually able to sort of laugh at myself. That's what a life of reflection can do. Rather than avoiding the emotion, I let it rise. And in the rising there was release, and in the release there was freedom. I cross the path and go straight to the center this time. I sit here for a moment and smile. I have a thought that is my thought, but it's also one that I trust didn't come only from me. God isn't just at the center, but is on the path too. You weren't moving away from God. You were always only moving with God. I still have time and I decide to start again this time at the proper beginning, moving toward the center, praying and breathing.

This time I end up where I expect, I say a prayer at the center peer into the fountain that is currently dry, and notice a woman walking slowly up to the courtyard where I now stand. Her presence, my cue, I walk in a straight line back to my car, the shadow's now much longer than when I first left. I sit in the front seat with the windows down, watch dappled light dance on the sidewalk, whisper a prayer of gratitude for there or here, for the God who never left.

And so we circle back to our question, am I doing this wrong? Am I on the right track? Am I going to be okay? The practice is rarely the point. The point is union with God, whether you are walking forward or back, there or here, in a circle, or a straight line. If you pray, with your eyes closed or with your hands raised, if your prayer is a song, a walk, a pot of soup, a hot shower, if your prayer is a please or a cry or a cup of sugar to your neighbor, if your prayer is a laugh, a request, a longing or a relief, you are here and God is here. If done in the presence of the divine community of God, our parent, God, our friend, and God our holy witness, then anything can be a spiritual practice as we do our next right thing in love.

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\Thanks for listening to episode 297 of the Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of walking with God can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth is our daily decisions are making our lives. As always, you can find me on Instagram @EmilyPFreeman and online at emilypfreeman.com where you can find a transcript of this and every other episode. A special thanks to the team at Unmutable who

faithfully edits and mixes our sound, and to Ashley who does our show notes, and thanks to you for listening, for leaving reviews on Apple Podcasts so others can find us here, and for your kind support through email and DMs. It's always good to hear from you. I also want to make a note that as promised, finally, we have the Quiet Collection app available not only for iPhone but also for Android.

So if you have not yet been able to download the Quiet Collection, it's now available for free in both the App Store and Google Play, so you can download that on this very day. I'll also say for both Apple and Android, the Psalms from the summer, remember Psalm Summer? Remember how we have all those Psalms here on the podcast? Well, now you can also listen to them all in one place for free on the Quiet Collection app, both for Apple and for Android. So download the app. If you already have it, you might have to update it, and once you do, you'll see those Psalms available. There are now 11 Psalms in there. I have not recorded every single Psalm there is in the Bible, but I do have 11 of them, the ones we've done for Psalm Summer, both this year and last year, so you can find them there. I hope you enjoy them. Wanted to let you know they existed.

So go find the Quiet Collection app. Just search it in whichever store makes sense for your particular device, and let us know if you have any trouble. Well, our soul minimalist highlight of the week is Missy Berry who said these words, "You've been a light and a guide to me for a long time, and I'm all for supporting more of your meaningful work. Plus you're somehow always in my head. Thanks for putting so many things into words for us."

Well, thanks for trusting me, Missy. I'm so glad you're here. Well, in closing, a few words from Barbara Brown Taylor from her book, *An Altar in the World*, all about taking a walk. "Not everyone is able to walk, but most people can, which makes walking one of the most easily available spiritual practices of all. All it takes is the decision to walk with some awareness, both of who you are and what you're doing. Where you are going is not important." Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.