

Spirituality

Attempting to write on spirituality is almost foolish. It's probably absurd to think that such a deep topic could be addressed in one Sunday School lesson, as others have written entire books on the subject, and even those are inadequate. Worse, I'm not sure that anyone in today's evangelical churches knows what it is or even cares about it. Nevertheless the topic is on my mind, and I think we should discuss it. There's a lot to think about.

First, let's understand that we're dealing with something biblical. The Greek word, *pneumatikos*, used over two dozen times by Paul, means "spiritual." So spirituality means belonging to the realm of the Holy Spirit. People and things can be spiritual. So, for example, Paul wanted to impart to the believers at Rome some spiritual understanding that would make them stronger in the faith (Romans 1:11). And in 1 Corinthians, Paul refers again to the understanding of spiritual truths, the thoughts of God expressed in "spiritual words" that are spiritually discerned (2:13,15) by the spiritual person. Paul says further that the spiritual person acknowledges that the N.T. writings are commands from the Lord. The opposite of being spiritual is being worldly or immature (1 Corinthians 3:1). And at the end of Romans, Paul distinguishes between spiritual and material blessings (15:27).

Theologians speak of God as being "spiritual." That means He exists not in any material sense but He has a more superior or excellent kind of existence. So the term "spiritual" refers to a state or condition that transcends the normal material world that we experience. We're to be godly people, which means, therefore, that we're to be spiritual. Let's say it slightly differently: to be spiritual is to be Christ-like, because Christ is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Spirituality comes with maturity in the faith, that is, by the life-long process of sanctification, which is the enabling work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we obey Scripture. If we are yielded to the Spirit, and if we're obedient to the Word, we should progress in spirituality. If, however, we offend the Spirit, if we "quench" or "grieve" the Spirit, or if we ignore the Scriptures or fail or refuse to obey them, there's no growth in spirituality; we remain immature, pursuing a worldly life.

Spirituality can be faked. It can also be fantasized. Many in the charismatic movement were (and some still are) guilty of this. Even among evangelicals, it's too easy to suppose that because we have knowledge of the Bible's contents and knowledge of theology, that we're spiritual. Or that the Spirit so highly regards us that He speaks to us and acts through us. Or that our personal opinions are wisdom that the Spirit imparts to us. Pride – no, *hubris* – leads us into such error. In some circles, to be regarded as "spiritual" leads to celebrity status. Pretended spirituality is in the same category as self-righteousness. To such individuals, the Lord says, "Paid in full!" which means they've had their reward in this life, such "reward" as it is; but they've forfeited it in the next existence, the one that matters.

But vastly worse than feigning spirituality is ignoring it. Many evangelicals assume that because they're believers, they're automatically spiritual. Not true! It takes effort to be spiritual, because we have to work at it together with the indwelling Holy Spirit who uses the Word of God. In theology, this is called synergy. The Spirit works unobtrusively, in our inner person, but we need to commit to absorbing the Scriptures into our minds so the Spirit has content to work with. It means continually reflecting deeply on the Word, thinking how it applies to our own life and circumstances, and actively obeying it. All this takes time, personal commitment and effort.

Something else: "Believing" is not merely holding biblical propositional truths with the intellect. Even the neo-Orthodox theologians of the last century knew that. That's too easy, too arid, too inadequate. "Believing"

involves our passions! If it doesn't, it's not biblical belief. Believing involves a deep commitment to Jesus within a personal relationship based on love and trust and obedience. As we get to know Christ more and more, we take ever greater delight in Him personally. And so, God creates in us a desire, a desire that Paul expressed to the believers at Philippi: "That Christ be exalted in my body" by bearing fruit (1:20), and "to know Christ and gain Christ and be found in Him" (3:8-9). Our heart's great desire comes by delighting ourselves in God. And He then will give us the great pleasure of knowing Christ and His will. Our desires in life should be from God. But where do we encounter God? In His Word. And it's God who, thru the Spirit, will make us happy. And it's God who then makes us spiritual.

Let me suggest two keys to spirituality. One is found in one verse in the Psalms. David wrote, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). This verse is often misunderstood. It's not that God grants what we desire, but that God gives us what our desire should be, according to His goodness, wisdom and love. And the prerequisite for this is the first part of the verse, delighting ourselves in the Lord. If we take delight in God, in Jesus, that will result in a desire to be like Him and to obey and serve and exalt Him. It will also result in putting sin to death and in doing righteous works. And the Spirit in fullness will enable us to make good judgments and be discerning in the circumstances of life. In other words, to be spiritual.

The other key is serving Christ as He commanded. Sacrificially doing His will exalts Him and in return He evidently grants us an increasing measure of His Spirit. So spirituality is faithfully fulfilling God's will as a characteristic of one's life. Thus, Stephen gave his life for Christ (Acts 7), and Jesus personally welcomed him into heaven. Believers in communist or Muslim countries share Christ with others at enormous personal risk, some knowing little more than their own personal testimony, but they are thrilled with Jesus and want to be loyal to Him; we ought to regard such as being spiritual. The most spiritual man I ever met, who deeply influenced me, was an American missionary in Honduras who was content to expend his life sharing Christ, planting churches, and in various ways personally helping the desperately needy people of that region.

The fruit of the Spirit includes "joy." That's spiritual happiness. Another of the fruit is peace. We can be content with little, as long as we are delighting in Christ and His will. Seeking pleasure or happiness in any way apart from what comes from God is idolatry. The person who passes life seeking pleasures, security, comforts, happiness, etc, from whatever man is capable of supplying is worldly and immature, not spiritual. The person who passes life pursuing what interests him (or her) rather than knowing and pursuing God's revealed will likewise is worldly and immature.

I (and a few others) see a crisis in today's Christianity. It's not merely a dearth of spirituality but a total absence even of the desire for it. This is tragic, because we've been called to be godly people, to be Christ-like and responsible servants. And so the Kingdom is delayed. And we're oblivious to all that we miss out on.

Dear reader, we need to get this. It's exceedingly important. There is nothing greater in all creation, in all existence, than knowing God. For to know Him is to love Him and with that comes the greatest privilege of all, that of serving Him. That way we honor God, we glorify Him, and we enjoy Him. A treasured goal in life should be spirituality, for that pleases God.

I close with a caveat: We must be exceedingly careful not to be complacent about our religious state. Too many say, "I'm saved and on my way to heaven. That's good enough for me and all I care about." Or to be smug about living as we please according to our own lights, enjoying a (supposed) freedom to seek happiness and whatever interests us in the world. That is crass sin. Let us, instead, with humility press on to be spiritual, in the biblical sense. If we love God, we'll do it.