



Gospel / life

Toward a Spirituality of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 1: What is A Spirituality of Freedom?

Spirituality is a word with quite a wide usage today, both within and outside church and Christian circles. It is normally considered a good thing to be called a “spiritual person”. But just what is *spirituality*? How do you understand the term?

Who Is In Charge Of Our Spirituality?

John Kleinig, in the introduction to his fine book *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* says the following:

The modern interest in spirituality is a bit like our interest in our health. Our obsession with health is not at all healthy; in fact, it emphasizes the problems that we have without providing much of a solution to them. So, too, with our concern for spirituality! Despite the multitudes of books on spirituality that can be found in any bookshop, Christians seem to find it harder than ever to practice what they believe. So many aspire to be spiritual highfliers but never seem to get off the ground for any length of time. As the failures mount, so does the fascination with what seemingly cannot be achieved. The only thing we learn is that something is lacking in this part of our lives. But we end up with no understanding of how to fill the void.¹

Perhaps this describes your experience of Christian living. Part of the problem for us, in fact the very heart of the problem, is that when we think of spirituality we think of *our* spirituality, we focus on our piety (that is, how we live out our faith.) We presuppose “that the onus rests on us to make ourselves more spiritual and devoted to Christ.”²

In fact, spirituality is not primarily about what we do at all. “*Spirituality*” is *primarily about the action of the Spirit of God in us*. It is not something that we work on in our approach to God; rather it is what God is doing in us as He comes to us in grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. So, for this reason Christian spirituality is, like the gospel, very *down to earth*. Spirituality is not primarily about what we do to be more devoted to Christ; it is about how God our Father is at work in us, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to conform us to the glorious likeness of His Son, our Saviour Jesus

¹ *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality For Today* by John W. Kleinig, Concordia Publishing House, St Louis; 2008

² Kleinig, p. 5

Christ. Spirituality is the way the Father works His gospel right through the totality of our lives and existence as people.

It is undoubtedly true that each of us is to take responsibility for growing in the gospel. But, we must face the fact that so often we don't really know just what the needs for our growth are. Trying to take the splinters out of our fingers we discover that we are afflicted with terrible eyesight! Where we may think we are strong, we may in fact be facing great weakness. God our Father takes the main responsibility for our growing. He knows us thoroughly, better than we know ourselves. He understands our weakness and sinfulness better than we ever will. **Psalm 139** speaks of this great and humbling knowledge of God very clearly:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
 you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.
You hem me in, behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.
Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
 if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say,
 “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,”
 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.
For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
 your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me were written in your book
 before one of them came to be.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.
When I awake, I am still with you.
If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.
Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD,
 and abhor those who rise up against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Note how at the end of the Psalm, David prays that God, his Saviour and Lord (=LORD/Yahweh), will be his teacher.

As a good teacher, not only does God our Father know what we need to learn, but He also knows the best way for us to learn it. His methods are not always what we ourselves would choose! Growing into the likeness of Christ means a radical reshaping of us. Images of God’s dealings with His children include “vinedresser” and “potter”. But primarily we know that He deals with us as Father. **Hebrews 12:5-11** tells us about these Fatherly dealings:

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” [from Prov. 3:11-12]

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

The purpose of God’s discipline is that there finally be the harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. In other places in the New Testament, that goal is described as attainment of the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). At the goal of God’s work in our lives is that when Christ appears we shall be just like him (1John 3:2)—and that all the approval of the Father for His Son will be fully expressed to us also.

The Freedom of Grace

Within Christian circles often people find that there seems to be a large separation in their understanding of God’s dealings with us in Christ—which are all by grace freely received by faith which is also His gift—and their understanding of the dynamics of Christian living. It seems that salvation is itself a cause of great joy and delight, but that Christian living devolves into drudgery and dour doing of duty. Or alternatively, it seems that salvation makes no difference at all to the lives we lead as Christians. It seems that people receive God’s salvation in Christ, and then think that they can just go on living as they will, doing whatever pleases them without any thought of whether this pleases God and is according to His will. On one side it seems like the freedom of grace doesn’t enter into the dynamics of Christian life; on the other side it seems like grace makes no impact at all, but becomes a bland seal of approval on us and all our behaviour.

In Germany in the time of the rise of Hitler, these problems were faced by thoughtful Christians. At that time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his very influential book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He saw the problem of what he called *cheap grace*. However, Christian joy disappears when we speak of dear or costly grace, if by that we mean dear and costly to us in the changes and demands that grace brings to us. Through these studies I am trusting that we will find what the New Testament says about these

matters and that we will be gripped afresh with the joy of the holy freedom that is ours in Christ. More of this to come later....

Is Spirituality About Escape?

And also there is the problem that life in this world seems to *get in the way* of our spirituality, our Christian living. Concern for work, marriage, raising a family, managing finances, buying a house, even responsibilities at church all seem to impinge on, compete with, or detract from the real spiritual side of life. All these other things seem so *unspiritual*.

In the Scriptures as a whole, the basic view of a human being is that of a unified entity, not a split and fractured one. It is true that the New Testament speaks of us being “spirit, soul and body”—but these elements cannot be separated out from one another. Moreover, none of them is more “godly” or “spiritual” than the other, the spirit included! Our spirit is as much part of our created reality as our bodies. Our spirit is more likely to be the throne of our fleshliness and sinfulness than our bodies!

The Scriptures do not make categories of human activities some of which are more spiritual than others. In Romans 12:1 we are urged to present our bodies to God as an act of spiritual worship. What we do with our bodies in this worship is spelled out in the next few chapters: and it includes such things as not being proud, but associating with the lowly, not just the well-to-do or popular (12:16); being constant in prayer (12:12); obeying government regulations (13:1ff); paying your taxes (13:7); using the particular gifts God has given you to serve Him and your brothers and sisters (12:3ff); not being a burden and debtor to others (13:8ff); being gracious and tolerant with those who seem to have more sensitive consciences than you (14:1ff).

For this reason we must not see spirituality as an escape from life in this world. It is in fact about full participation in this world in the createdness of our nature. More of this to come later.....

In conclusion...

A quote of Helmut Thielicke to mull over:

In the structuring of our whole life we begin by reckoning with the fact that this Creator has a demanding will and therefore demands to make upon us.... We also accept as necessary from his hands the hard – and the hard to understand – lot that may come to our personal life or country – not only the pleasant things such as the magic of an alpine sunrise or sunset....³

³ Helmut Thielicke, *Man in God's World: The Faith and Courage To Live and To Die*