
The Temptations of Spirituality

Matthew 6:1 -2; 5; 16

New Beginnings – 201 – *My Spirituality*
Sunday, September 18, 2005
Northway Christian Church – Dallas, Texas

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When I began seminary in the mid-1970's they were still talking about "*religionless Christianity*" - a Christianity without the trappings of piety. Bishop John A.T. Robinson said that Christianity had been perverted by the impulse to withdraw from the world in order to be with God (86). And so I was told in seminary that before I was finished with my ministry that nobody would be searching for God anymore in the depths of their souls or from the pews of the church. Instead they told me that everyone would be looking for God in the struggle for peace with justice and in works of compassion in the world. Prophets not priests were what the church really needed, change agents not pastors, and so when I started seminary there were no classes on prayer but lots of them on social transformation.

Well, I've been an ordained minister in the church now for 29 years, and I think that I can safely say that they got it wrong. Instead of rounding the bend and heading into the stretch of my ministerial vocation in an era of "*religionless Christianity*," I find myself in a world of the exact opposite. "S" words are in. I'm talking about words like "*soul*," "*sacred*," "*saint*," "*salvation*," and "*spiritual*." As the cover story for Newsweek magazine put it two weeks ago (9/5/05), there is an explosion of interest in the spiritual in our culture today. 79% of those polled described themselves as being "*spiritual*," and 58% of them said that spiritual growth was one of their life's highest priorities (48). And maybe the best place to see this is just down the street at the Barnes and Noble.

Recently Books in Print listed more than 2,000 new titles on prayer, meditation and spirituality, and many of them are right there on the shelves of the ever-expanding religion section of our local secular bookstore. But maybe even more striking than that is what you'll find on the bestseller tables at the front of the store. On the nonfiction display you'll find Joel Osteen's Your Best Life Now and Rich Warren's The Purpose Driven Life prominently featured, and on the fiction display there'll be a good supply of Dan Brown's The DaVinci Code and Mitch Albom's The Five People You Meet in Heaven. You see, it's not just that there are more books on spirituality being published than ever before; it's that more people are reading them than ever before! And frankly, this is a development that I welcome.

Frankly, the thought of religionless Christianity never appealed to me very much. In fact, I've always thought that the only thing that the church really has to offer people is an encounter with the living God, and religionless Christianity would have tried to take all that away. It would have flattened out the church's claims of transcendence and stripped bare her life of devotion, leaving us with nothing in our hearts to hold and nothing in our hands to share.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung said that he never saw a patient over the age of 35 whose problem was not fundamentally spiritual. And so I believe that only those communities of faith that are serious about spirituality will have a future. As I said in my message last week, put me firmly down in that column labeled "*spiritual and religious.*" But once my name is there in permanent ink, then let me say just as quickly and clearly as I can that not everything that marches under the banner of spirituality in the church today is helpful, good or true.

Jesus Christ in our Scripture lesson this morning criticized the spirituality of His day. The giving of alms, prayer and fasting were the three pillars of Jewish spirituality in the first century. Their experience of life with God found its most important expressions in the practice of these three spiritual disciplines. And Jesus had some problems with it.

Jesus said that the spiritual discipline of almsgiving was being undermined by the giver's need for applause. The spiritual discipline of prayer was being undermined by its practice in public and by the serious disconnect between the prayer's heart and prayer's mouth. And the spiritual discipline of fasting was being undermined by the showy way that it was being observed. Clearly Jesus Christ came to bring us spiritual life, abundant and eternal. But He was not uncritical of spirituality. He had a spiritual mission, but that didn't mean that He embraced every spiritual practice or endorsed every spiritual ideal. And by criticizing some of the expressions of spirituality of His day even while He was inviting people into a deeper spiritual life, Jesus Christ modeled a balanced approach to spirituality that I believe the church today must continue.

I'm all for spirituality, but I'm also spiritually cautious. I strongly believe in the spiritual mission of the church, but I'm also critical of some of what I see passing for spirituality in the lives of Christians. For instance, I'm troubled by the spiritual greed that I see among so many spiritually-oriented Christians today. In the novel Franny and Zooey, J.D. Salinger had one of his main characters observe –

As a matter of simple logic, there's no difference at all, that I can see, between the man who's greedy for material treasure – or even intellectual treasure – and the man who's greedy for spiritual treasure.... treasure's treasure... and it seems to me that ninety per cent of all the world-hating saints in history were just as acquisitive and unattractive, basically, as the rest of us are.

Spiritual greed is the constant drive of some Christians for more frequent and intense spiritual experiences. They're God junkies trying to stay high on Jesus. Only when they're spiritually buzzed do they appear to be spiritually

satisfied. And so their spiritual life gets reduced to a frantic search for the fix so that they can get back to the mountaintop.

St. Augustine had a variety of these powerful spiritual experiences in the course of his life, unusual visitations of the Holy Spirit that filled him with assurance, peace and joy. But St. Augustine also had long stretches in his spiritual life when things were quite routine and completely unspectacular. And so he learned a kind of spiritual contentment regardless of the spiritual temperature of his soul. He wrote, *“I do not seek (special spiritual experiences), when they are present, I do not reject them, but I am prepared to do entirely without them”* (Bloesch 62). And that seems to me to be a more balanced approach to spirituality than constantly craving the next unusual spiritual experience.

Another danger with spirituality that I see today is what Mark Roberts has called *“vicarious spirituality”* (17). Mark was leading a student group at his church in a study of Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline. And when they got to the chapter on fasting Mark says that he was startled to hear his students say that they actually wanted to try fasting for a week, and that they wanted him to join them! Well, Mark says that he was real interested in a study about fasting, but not so hot on the idea of an actual fast. And isn’t that one of spirituality’s great temptations?

You can read all about spirituality, *“but you’ve got to fast, pray and meditate for yourself”* (Roberts). This is why Eugene Peterson counsels spiritually-oriented Christians to *“shun any spirituality that does not require commitment”* (30). There’s a wise old saying: *“You don’t learn how to swim in a library.”* To learn how to swim means that at some point you’ve got to jump into a pool and start to paddle. We don’t become spiritual by reading books. We only become spiritual by being spiritual, and that takes commitment, discipline and grace.

A third quarrel that I have with spirituality today is the way that we seem to be more fascinated with the spiritually unfamiliar than we are with the spiritual treasures that lie closer to home. Thomas Merton’s first spiritual guide was a Hindu teacher in New York City named Bramachari. And in the course of their conversations together, Bramachari eventually told Thomas Merton to *“go home.”*

Rather than looking for the answers to his urgent spiritual questions in a tradition so foreign to his own, Bramachari told Merton to start his spiritual quest by reading some of the spiritual classics of Western Christianity – Augustine’s Confessions, Thomas A’ Kempis’ The Imitation of Christ, and Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises (Rice 33). And when Thomas Merton did, he found exactly what he was looking for. It had been there all along, but as they say, familiarity breeds contempt.

Later in his life, Thomas Merton explained that his *“openness to humanity’s spiritual horizons came from a rootedness of faith,”* an inner security that allowed him *“to explore, experience and interpret”* the variety of religious experience in the light of his own settled religious convictions (vii). Because so many spiritually-oriented Christians I know are not firmly grounded and deeply rooted in their own spiritual tradition before they go tramping through somebody

else's sampling their wares, I fear that they are opening themselves up to confusion and are at real risk of settling for sentimentality and superficiality.

I'm a big advocate of spirituality; it's what I think the church has to offer. But I'm not a big fan of everything spiritual. This morning I've just barely touched on some of the dangers and temptations of spirituality that I see in the church today. I could easily preach on this subject for weeks, and Jesus, in the way that he talked about spirituality in the Sermon on the Mount, gives me the permission and provides me with the pattern for doing so. But rather than continuing with my list of what can go wrong with spirituality, I want to conclude my message this morning with a way for you to know when spirituality is right.

Nobody in the history of the church has written more helpfully on the nature and variety of spiritual experiences than has Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century American Congregational preacher who has been called America's most important theologian. It was out of his experiences of spiritual revival and congregational renewal that Jonathan Edwards began a serious study of the conditions that make for spiritual growth and the criteria by which spiritual experiences must be evaluated. And when you boil down to their essence what Jonathan Edwards thought about a spirituality that is good, helpful and true, you come up with three basic tests –

? **The Truth Test**

Does this spiritual practice or experience raise your esteem for Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the savior of the world? Does it increase your appetite for Scripture? Is it consistent with the historic teachings of the Christian faith?

? **The Moral Test**

Does this spiritual practice or experience turn you away from sin and towards holiness? Are the spiritual manifestations in your life just commotion, or are they being used to transform your character and engage your world?

? **The Social Test**

Does this spiritual practice or experience evoke in you a greater love for and service to God and other people?

Northway Christian Church has made a commitment to be a spiritually vital mainline congregation. Simply put, that means that the kind of Christian that we will help you to become around here is the kind who is constantly growing in their love of God with all their soul. And for that to happen, we know that we've got to provide you with more than just "*devotional goodies in the spirituality fast food lane*" (Swank). And so here's our commitment to you. Trust us with the care and feeding of your soul, and we will help you grow into a spirituality that is Christ-centered, Bible-based, Spirit-led, Church-rooted, world-focused and love-committed.

We're all on a journey to spiritual maturity, and Northway is trying to be the kind of church that helps people grow up in every way into Jesus Christ who is the Lord. I invite you to come and go with us.

Sources

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