



Holiness and the Spirit

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HOLINESS AND THE SPIRIT

"We misunderstand and distort reality when we take ourselves as the starting point and our present situation as the basic datum."

-- **Eugene Peterson**, in **Leadership Journal** magazine.

God calls us to be holy. After all, God is holy. (Most of us just assume that, but in the Bible they're so awestruck that they keep saying it : [1 Peter 1:15-16](#); [Romans 1:7](#); 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:4). When we speak of the 'Holy Spirit', we're saying that the Spirit is holy; if we are 'indwelt' and even '[filled](#)' with the Spirit, doesn't that mean holiness is in us? But **what is holiness?** Following the law? A saintly countenance? A quietude people can see? Churchly achievement? Excellent performance? Good deeds? Good PR? Being super nice to everyone?

The holy life is simply living as someone who belongs to God and who lives by the vision of the Kingdom of God. Were it only so simple to be that way. For we, on our own, don't have much to work with. We can't rightly envision what a life of holiness is, and even if we could, we couldn't get ourselves to be that way. So, the Spirit brings us into the holiness of **Jesus**. (When I say that, I'm not talking about a holiness 'like' Jesus' or a holiness in Jesus' style. Thanks to the Spirit working through your faith, Jesus is really there with you and within you, giving you **Jesus's** holiness.)

Some Christians emphasize [biblical](#) standards of holiness. Some call this legalism, and unfortunately sometimes it **is** legalism. Firmer roots for personal holiness grow when we recognize that we are broken creatures, through and through. Even our vision of what makes for holiness is marred and twisted. We start growing in Christ by coming to understand that we are strangers to God's ways. This leaves us no recourse but pray for the Spirit's leading. Without the Spirit's work, we not only cannot know God, but we also fail to discover our true selves. The Spirit, through the Bible, shows us what a God-pleasing life is, and leads us to want to live it and treasure it.

God doesn't get appeased by your doing good things, any more than by sacrifice of a virgin or conquest of a nation. God's not impressed. God does better things in the first minute of each morning than anything we ever did. **If you need Godliness, only God has it, so only God can give it to you.** It is 'earned' in a sense, but only by what [Christ](#) did. And through what Christ did, his life, death, and transcendence of death, God gave it to you. The light shines on you, and from there it reflects onto everything else.

BEYOND THE GOLDEN RULE

Whether we're Christian or not, we've all been taught the Golden Rule : "**do unto others as you would have others do to you**". Jesus [said it](#), in a positive restatement of something already in the Jewish oral tradition. It makes life's decisions a lot clearer by putting you in your own harm's way. Think like that, and you won't be so eager to do in your main rival at [work](#). We often pull up short when we feel in our own back the knife that we just started to twist into someone else's. This is a good place to start : there actually is something for us to measure up to. Yet there are some things missing in the Golden Rule. There is, of course, the sado-masochist twist -- someone doing unto others the torture he so craves from them. A more important problem, though, is that the Golden Rule keeps you in the center of it. No matter how many lessons you learn from trading places, they're still *your* lessons, and it's

still *your* human capacity to love. That capacity is more like a dinner plate than a deep well, shallow when compared with the task at hand of living a loving and holy life.

Jesus takes us **beyond the Golden Rule**. The first step past it is when Jesus commends Deuteronomy 6:5's [Great Commandment](#) about loving God, and the second like unto it, originally from [Leviticus](#) (you know, the book everyone loves to avoid), to "**love your neighbor as yourself**". Jesus then measures this not by one's own efforts, but through [what is meant by 'neighbor'](#). Jesus calls on us to be a neighbor, moving the focus from ourselves to others, especially another who is in need.

But one more step is needed. For while this approach builds up our capacity to love, it is still *our* human capacity to love that is being given out. In John's Gospel, Jesus makes the final step to setting this right, by giving a "[new commandment](#)" : "**that you love one another, just as I have loved you**". There is a new measure : to love as Jesus loved. Right after He said that, He went on His way to setting a [standard of love](#) beyond our wildest imaginings : to the cross and the tomb. Then, He gave out a new power to love in a manner like that : He emptied that tomb, and went back to God's Beyond, sending the Holy Spirit to us in His place. What the Spirit gives us is *Jesus'* holiness and *Jesus'* love. That's the bottomless well of boundless love. No longer do we have to dish out our own love in saucer portions, we can now drench everybody with love from beyond ourselves. We can now dare to live the life of holy love, [trusting](#) that in the end there is no loss where that kind of love is found.

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TURNING OVER

"If you have really handed yourself over to Him it *must* follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you."

---- C.S. Lewis, **Christian Behavior** (Macmillan, 1943), p.66

A key lesson about living in the Spirit is learned from the experience of the Twelve Step groups (like [Alcoholics Anonymous](#)). Step Three is about turning one's will and life over to God. It's one of the hardest things for an alcoholic to do. It's also something said far too glibly and easily by those raised in churches. To those who claim a Christian spiritual rebirth, the first reaction (and too often the only reaction) is to say "well, didn't I already do that when I accepted Christ, or when I was baptized, or confirmed? Aren't you really talking to the unbeliever with that?" **NO. NOT IN THE LEAST.** The unbeliever usually has a hard time grasping the idea of self-surrender. The believer has no problem with the [idea](#). The believer, however, often has two other obstacles:

1. they don't see this 'turning over to God' as a 24/7, relentless, moment-by-moment, lifelong matter; or
2. they **want** to do it, **think** they have already done it and think they are **still** doing it, but

haven't **really** done it at all because they do not know **how** to do it.

The steps after Step Three in the Twelve Steps are just that: a process of how to uncover -- and keep uncovering -- the matters of your life that you have not let go to God, and how to discover where God wants you to go from there. Whatever processes you use, the aim must be to uncover and turn over.

The history of the Christian Church is full of good examples of those who made a devotional legacy for us to learn, from Polycarp and Irenaeus to Sts. Francis, Clare, Bernard, and Catherine, to Gregory of Nazianzos and Theresa of Avila, to Henri Nouwen and Richard Foster, and people in congregations near you, perhaps next door or even in your [family](#). The legacy runs deep. It goes beyond merely [prayer](#), meditation, and fasting (as if those were in any way 'mere'). The [disciplines](#) help us to turn over as much of ourselves to God as possible, through God's own power. It also takes repentance : recognizing how wrong we are, laying it before God and another person, and then setting about doing right in place of the wrong we did.

Why is this 'turning over' so important for living in the Spirit? Because the Spirit is not going to override you. The Spirit will not rape your will. God seeks to create love rather than exercise control. The Spirit works to inspire you and set you right through surrender to God, even if the surrender's just a little. Whatever you hold back from God won't be used by the Spirit.

The spiritual disciplines are not ways to be saved or really even to become pure or holy. Nor do you become holy just by repenting. They are tools for prying the [self](#) open to the Spirit, and stripping away the barriers. They're ways to let *the Spirit* mold you into the you that you are meant to be.

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WHAT SHAPES US

"We live in a strange society where we make documentaries of serial killers, movie idols out of organized crime members, authors out of political crooks, and role models out of criminals who beat the system.... I don't know when crime went from being news to entertainment, but somehow it's made the transition."

--- Erma Bombeck

Are we 'without form and void'? Does that which is around us determine our shape? If so, the Spirit isn't shaping us. We'd be more like an amoeba than a Christian or a human being. A church that's a shapeless lump is not a church that is following the Spirit. A Christian chameleon who blends in with his/her surroundings isn't a Christian at all. Any group that tries to be everything in general and nothing particular is no kind of a group. Those who believe in Christ are called to live out the Kingdom.

How does the Kingdom stack up with today's moral climate? Think of the attitudes that are becoming more common nowadays:

- "It's only a crime if I get caught."

- "Become big enough to get away with it."
- "I've got to come out of it looking good."
- "Go do it; you can always cover up the consequences."
- "It's better to be believed than it is to be truthful."
- "Rules are made to be broken by me and used against others."

This is the stuff that's filling our minds. Many people even call it "getting real", because 'this is how the real world is'. But there's nothing 'real' about it. It is all about seeming to be what you're not, and that is no way to be real. In the eyes of God the Ultimate Reality:

- God knows even your inmost thoughts, so you **are** "caught";
- You can't get anywhere near big enough to throw your weight around with God;
- God doesn't care what it 'looks like';
- Your cover-ups have consequences too, and the more you cover up, the greater and more deadly the consequences;
- God doesn't believe; God knows, holds to the truth, and calls on us to hold to it too;
- Rules are made so that you stay aware that you are **not** God, and so we all don't have to be as good as God in order to live reasonably well with each other.

You can't be holy if you're worrying about protecting yourself or about getting success or sex or fame or power. There's just no place for that before the God who ultimately determines your safety, success, or power. God wants you to **really** 'get real'. The emperor Ego has no clothes, and the Spirit is the little boy who has the sense to say so.

"My obligation is to do the right thing. The rest is in God's hands."

-- Martin Luther King Jr.

Holiness Is Part Of a Larger Struggle

Living holy is not only pleasing to God, it is displeasing to those who work evil in the world. To live as a follower of Christ and to love your neighbors as yourself is an act of [spiritual warfare](#) against evil. The struggle can be waged by acts as simple as :

- telling the truth instead of lying,
- treating people with respect instead of cussing them out,
- listening instead of blowing someone off,
- ordering vegetable juice instead of a daiquiri.

It could be :

- some gentle words for your girlfriend,
- a helping hand to an elderly woman in a store,
- an act of kindness to a stranger, just to be kind.
- keeping your lifestyle simple and less upper-class than your neighbor's.

You could choose to do something else, and that idea would not usually be from the Devil. But that idea would still have to be chosen *against* when there is a more Christlike response to be chosen *for*. Thus it could be something like :

- choosing not to abort your child,
- choosing not to throw your punch or draw your knife,
- choosing not to walk out on your marriage,
- choosing to stop trying to be a recording star so you can have time to work with troubled teens.

Even that which you are allowed to do, which you are morally justified in doing, which would make your life easier, which would give you more success or more control over your life -- *even those things* are to be turned away, if there is a more Godly choice to make. These spiritual struggles are fought in you and in the parts of society around you, every moment of every day. When Christ says "Follow me", He is showing you the way forward.

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"As long as we think we can save ourselves by our own will power, we will only make the evil in us stronger than ever."

-- Heini Arnold, *Freedom From Sinful Thoughts* (Plough, 1973), p.82

WHAT DOES THE SPIRIT DO IN YOU?

One of the great spiritual problems with the human creature is that God keeps doing things in us, with us, and for us, but we can't for a minute let go of the idea that we are doing it on our own naked choices, by the strengths we have in us. Mind you, we have strengths, but our weaknesses are such that the moment we choose to stand on our strengths, we fall down. The weaknesses, ultimately, go right down into the core of our strivings, making even the effort to stand or to move yet one more force disbalancing us and toppling us. Yet we try again and again and again. Some have tried to get us to work at standing together as a team (social utopian ideologies do this). The result looks like a chorus line of plastered drunks swinging and swaying, going in circles, getting nothing done. We can't know or learn the darkness away. We can't power it away, wish it away, discipline it away, pray it away, sing it away, explain it away, define it away, or pretend it away. God has given everyone tools to lessen parts of the darkness, but it's still very much there. And God doesn't promise it won't be. Instead, God gives us an entirely different way of facing it.

We're lucky to have a God who can laugh over the pitiable scene. We're fortunate enough to have a God who cries over the frustrations we feel as we struggle. We're blessed enough to have a God who takes action to steady us and be strength for us. Of course, God's actions do little good for someone who likes stumbling and tries to stay in the gutter, to those too proud to rely on anyone else, or to those who prefer to just lay there. But to those who let God be their strength, those who [trust](#) God enough to want to walk the Savior's walk, it's the start of a whole new life. A whole New You !

This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.

--- **Martin Luther**, **Defense of All the Articles**, Lazareth transl., as found in Grace Brame, **Receptive Prayer** (Chalice Press, 1985) p.119

This inner change is not what restores one's relationship with God; **Christ did that**. Our opening up to Christ is something that is done solely by the Holy Spirit who brings Christ to us through the Good News. Upon doing this, the Spirit starts to re-create you : a New You, being remade to have the character of Christ. This New You, powered with new [gifts](#) from the Spirit, willingly works with the Holy Spirit on this re-making project, in a manner not unlike an inexperienced new hire doing what the foreman orders. The Old You is still in there, fighting these changes every step of the way, but the New You co-operates with the Spirit ([Col 1:29](#)). A person spends their whole life in this struggle, and the work still has a ways to go at the time of death. If we are [holy](#) at all, it is Christ's holiness alone that we wear, not our own. But that never leaves us as we were.

What we have now from God is just a hint of what is to come. And what we are now is just a hint of what the Spirit is making us into. It is a constant [struggle](#) that is being waged [within](#) the human being.

Some Protestants have a bad habit of describing the New You in such a way that it seems like a wimp and a weakling next to the athletic Old You which Luther noted to be 'a good swimmer'. But that's not the case. The Spirit knows how to rebuild a person. If it doesn't seem like it, perhaps it's because the Old You (also called 'Old Adam' or 'Old Man') puts all its strength on the line in the desperate struggle to be in charge. It may also be because of the Western cultural confusion between service and servitude. In [service](#), the server deliberately works on behalf of or for the benefit of someone else or some other purpose than one's self. In servitude, the server works as an act of forced submission, which renders the server as a tool to command. The New You is in service, not servitude.

The Spirit works to make progress in us. On occasion, the change in us is dramatic and breathtaking in speed and depth; usually, it is slow, building one brick onto another, aiming to alter our entire life and being. Sometimes, the steps are quite conscious and deliberate

on our part : we turn things over to God piece by piece as we become aware of the need to do so. Sometimes, the Spirit works overtime, in striving to reveal to us where we are still trying to run the show. It is in this process of letting go of what you were, letting go of the Old You, that the New You works with the Spirit. Here, the [spiritual disciplines and practices](#) are a help.
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"The old Adam does not die from the infirmities of old age."
 --- **Jakob Traalsdahl**

You Are A Person, Not a Sloth

Some people turn this truth about the Spirit doing the work of inner change into an excuse for spiritual laziness. "Oh, God will do it!", they say. But :

- God wants you to do what you're responsible for;
- God wants you to deal with life as far as you can. Unless you do, you'll spiritually shrink, and the New You wouldn't really be you.
- God wants you to learn how to work with the Spirit.
- God's work happens not only to you, but through you -- and God wants you to take part in that work.
- When the Spirit shows you something from your devotions and disciplines and such, a call comes with it to do something because of what you're shown.

Thus, God-pleasing spirituality is not an [escape](#). God won't allow it. If spirituality is used to escape action or real thinking, then it misses the whole point. Christian spirituality is about changing us into citizens of the Kingdom who live in this life as Christ's followers.

"For when the Holy Spirit has effected and accomplished new birth and conversion and has altered and renewed the human will solely through his divine power and activity, then the new human will is an instrument and tool of God the Holy Spirit, in that the will not only accepts grace but also cooperates with the Holy Spirit in the works that

THE REFORMERS SPOKE ON THIS

The Reformation era had some rather extreme spiritualists. Some were [dualists](#) and [synergists](#). For instance, Karlstadt claimed that Scripture wasn't really needed, just the Spirit's inner testimony. Muntzer said that those who didn't have such inner discernment were of the devil. Such a stark divider between good and evil is the mark of a dualist. They saw salvation as a process of actions which make us become ever more like God. [Synergists](#) believe that human beings have a limited but nonetheless natural -- not Spirit-given -- capacity to work with God to make themselves holy. For them, the Spirit helps us to make ourselves like

Christ in this life. This makes salvation at least partly into a work of the human will rather than solely a free gift of grace from God. Synergism may convey what a person **senses** is happening to them, but it does not convey what is **actually** happening. It's what inner change looks like from where we're sitting. But we're too close to what's going on to be able to see the real picture. To get beyond this, we must get outside of ourselves, and into the full Scriptural vision of what God is working toward.

proceed from it."

--- **Formula Of Concord, Epitome**, Art II Free Will, Kolb/Wengert ed., 494.18

Luther went a very different way from Karlstadt or Muntzer. He went back to the basics of the faith and worked back from there. What the Holy Spirit gives us is not an unspecified magical power or method or tool which gives each of us an ability to be like Christ. Instead, the Spirit gives us **Jesus Christ** Himself, which means that we have **Christ's** righteousness in us, so we can say with Paul that "it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). This divine nearness or presence is what transforms us. And that presence itself is **gift**, not work.

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CHOOSING

Our era is the era of choice. Choice is a good thing. It gives dignity, adaptability, fit, and the chance to show forth character. But we live in an era when choice has become a new commandment: everything is subject to the new iron law. We can choose to ignore law, and ignore common sense. There are ideologies around which claim one can choose not to be ill or choose to have one's mind escape the limits of time and space. We can supposedly choose to pretend away the very existence of others' lives, especially if we can't see them or if they can be wrapped in an enemy flag or lost in a statistic. Modern choice is not really a god; it is a tool we choose (sic) to use in order to carry out the pretense that we can fashion our own version of reality itself. This is the lot of the fallen human being of today. It's obviously nonsense when pushed as far as it has been pushed, but all of us believe it to a rather large extent. Yet because our powerlessness is obvious to anyone who thinks about it a while, or anyone who is among the poor or oppressed, there is this nagging doubt which surfaces as our era's tendency toward cynicism.

This creates a spiritual problem: we're so busy fashioning something we pretend is reality that we don't have the time or patience or desire to pay heed to the One who created us, the One who is what is ultimately real in a way we can never reach in so-called 'real' life.

Most of us confront this spiritual reality only when we finally have to face it. When the only choices are few, limited, or even Hobson's, we come face to face with our limited-ness. It is when we hit the wall, or hit bottom, that we are brought to even try the one thing that will

most benefit us: to let go of the controls and the obsession with choices and fashioning our own version of reality. To let go -- and let God.

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RELIANCE ON THE SPIRIT

Those with a high view of the Spirit believe that there is no option about what is key to making churches come alive : **RELIANCE ON THE HOLY SPIRIT**. Renewed Christians are not to worry whether what they do causes them to be resisted, rejected, even acted against. The outcome of renewed living is in the hands of the Spirit. Our task is to live in the Spirit, and what comes out of it is left in the Spirit's hands.

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THOUGHT AND DEED

"If a tenet of faith has no behavioral implications, it is not worth the trouble to write it down."

Henry Mitchell & Nicholas Lewter, *Soul Theology** (Harper & Row, 1986), p.162

In the Epistles, there is a clear link between one's thoughts (or more precisely, the overall framework of mind) and one's deeds. It's expressed in both the positive and the negative: a godly mind leads to godly deeds, while a foolish and 'fleshly' mind leads to evil deeds.

Romans 8:5) "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit the things of the Spirit. ... Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be."

Romans 12:2) "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may be evidence of the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

Ephesians 5:10-20) "Walk as children of light, for the [fruit](#) of the Light is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth, finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness. ... See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as the wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of God is."

It's called 'walking the walk'. In both Testaments, in a patently Hebrew turn of thought, 'walk' is a word that describes the act of doing as God wills. Obedience to God is not a destination, but a journey. Holiness is the journey's character. We 'walk' one step at a time, we (to use more 'walk' terms) 'follow' the 'path/way/road' that Jesus has made ready for us.



WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

One of the things that spiritually-alive people most talk about is a sense of expectation. They have a sense that God **will** act, and **will** let people be aware of the continuing divine involvement in their lives.

Henri Nouwen (in Out of Solitude, p.59) likened it to getting a letter from someone you love: it brightens up even the most boring day. God's 'love letters' are being delivered daily, hourly, often moment by moment. Part of living in the Spirit is to trust that God will deliver these 'letters'. No wonder people who live in the Spirit feel so refreshed; is there anything as refreshing as that?

Part of this sense of expectation is expecting to be **empowered and used by God**. God will not waste you. God will put you to use. Maybe not as you want to, maybe not when you want to. But just as God's Word does not come back empty, neither will God's work in you. This idea draws from, among other places, Acts 1:8, where the risen Jesus addresses the gathering of His followers (beyond just the circle of his disciples!). Jesus told them not to try to figure out the time of the coming of the Kingdom, for that was not their task. "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you," Jesus said, "and you shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." No maybes about this commissioning -- the power **shall** be given to be Jesus' witnesses. Acts 2 reports that on Pentecost, just after Jesus left, the Holy Spirit arrived in full force. The Spirit is still here, in each baptized believer.

The power is still here, too, arising within us in order to enable us to carry out our tasks of service, witness, and benefit of the Body. Because the Spirit gives such possibilities, the follower of Christ can be **bold** about doing the good things that make for holiness. The follower expects to be used at any moment. This is what the holy life is made of.

When charismatics talk of doing things in "resurrection power", they are saying that they are not afraid to take action for God's purposes, because anything that causes [fear](#) is already defeated through Jesus' resurrection. They're not afraid to be wrong, even dreadfully wrong. They trust that when they [trust](#) the Spirit, the Spirit will lead them in the right direction, out of whatever hole they may have dug for themselves. They can be free to take chances to follow God. While I would remind them that the Spirit, through Scripture, tells us to be discerning about all things, that is a matter of *wisdom* not fear. In doing God's work, whatever that may be, there's no room for fear.

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"To know the mechanics does not mean that we are practicing the Disciplines. The Spiritual Disciplines are an inward and spiritual reality, and the inner attitude of the heart is far

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AND PRACTICES

Christians over the years have learned that certain disciplines and practices help them keep the spiritual

more crucial than the mechanics for coming into the reality of the spiritual life."

----- **Richard Foster**,
Celebration Of Discipline
2nd ed. (Harper, 1988), p.3

channels open and help keep the heart turned toward God. These disciplines can't save; they can't even by themselves make you a holy person. But they can heighten your [desire](#) and awareness and love of God by stripping down the barriers you yourself put up and some that others put up for you. What makes something a 'spiritual discipline' is that it takes a specific part of your way of life and turns it toward God. A spiritual discipline is, when practiced faithfully and regularly, **a habit or regular pattern in your life that repeatedly brings you back to God and opens you up to what God is showing you.**

Spiritual disciplines help to keep our relationship with God in good working order, and even help develop intimacy. But no discipline is able to create or start one's relationship with God. Nothing we do can do that; *Christ did it already*. No discipline can earn us heavenly brownie points, because *there are no such brownie points to earn*. No discipline gives us even the briefest moment of escape from our broken nature. No discipline can rescue us, make us more valuable as persons, or make us inherently more of a leader. Your life may go smoother because of it, but it may get much rougher, and neither is really the point of it.

Disciplines and practices are tools used for cooperating with the Spirit on the task of remaking us into what God wants us to be. Tools, not magic, not willpower. Tools of surrender and remanufacture. Tools that are used with Scripture, not in its stead. Powerful tools, but only because of the powerful One we're working with. And you are not the foreman.

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SPIRITUAL EYES

The Spirit uses Scripture, fellowship and devotional practices to develop in us the spiritual eyes to see what God is doing. (This is what [Ephesians](#) means by the 'eyes of understanding'.) We then become freer to break out of the neat boxes in which we package our behavior. We don't have to act super-pious, or stay stolid and formal, or strictly orderly and in place, or do all the right things. We can be freer to stop trying to package God or ourselves as some sort of Captain Nice or Joe Cool or Heather Hip. Or perhaps we'll stop boxing God in with limits to divine authority (as if we have any power to do so). Without the vision that the Spirit supplies, such freedom leads to anarchy and self-obsession. Without 'spiritual eyes', we force God to confront us and our way of life rather than let God share with us the pleasure of divine company. With those 'spiritual eyes', we can see some part of where God is headed and where we belong in it. We can then act accordingly, and not

think about the boxes.

A DEVOTIONAL OUTLOOK ON LIFE

One way to envision this is to look at Jesus as the Light from different angles. The first vision is that we see the Light: we experience the 'something' that pierces darkness and drives it away. The second is that we see by way of the Light: we see the blessed wretchedness and fallen splendor of the world that He so loved. We see the poverty and the delusions of grandeur, the cowardice and the courage, the insight and the stupidity. We can see it for what it is when the Light shines on it. We even see ourselves, out from the shadows, our bodies, our tastes, our visual effects. The third kind of vision is to see along the Light, past the peepholes and the crevices the Light sneaks through, out past the boughs and birds and nevels and the blue sky, to the blazing Source whose vision is branded upon us.

"The renewal of our natures is a work of great importance. It is not to be done in a day. We have not only a new house to build up, but an old one to pull down. "
 --- **George Whitefield**,
 in a letter.

Within a devotional outlook on life, spiritual growth never ends. No matter how well you may think you have done, there's always a whole lot more around the corner. This is a challenge, not a problem, but it doesn't always feel that way. No matter what practices and disciplines you use, progress will often be like trying to run through a quagmire; the feet are weighed down by the thick mud, the legs pull, and you go very slowly. But you go nonetheless.

A devotional outlook brings many blessings and gifts. One of the surest signs of shallow belief is if you're constantly [seeking gifts](#) and blessings for yourself and those closest to you. The truly devoted understand why the gifts are given, namely, to further God's Kingdom, and to build up others in Christ's fellowship and beyond. They understand why God gives blessings of material or status : as a tool for spreading the Good News and for making the Body's ministries function better. Seeking gains for self or clique or clan is, to be blunt, the sin of greed.

Holiness does not exist for its own sake; the moment it does, it's no longer holy. The root of holiness is love. One can't be holy for one's own sake; the best of our own holiness is rags before God. As Paul pointed out about holiness, 'it is not me, but Christ who lives in me'. Working on your own holiness for its own sake misses the point. If you look in the Bible at where God commands or commissions -- say, at the Ten Commandments, or the Great Commission -- you'll find that they're not focused on you. It's 'your neighbors', 'your mother and your father', 'the Kingdom of God', 'love your enemies', 'lend to others, expecting nothing in return', 'go therefore and make disciples'. God's commands **go outward** from us,

not inward. So, any turning inward is, at best, a temporary strategy for becoming whole enough to follow God the way we ought : by serving others and bearing witness. God's own concern is directed out towards others; we are to live the same way.

QUOTES

"When He wore a crown of thorns, do you wish to wear a crown of gold?"

Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*.

"Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things."

Blaise Pascal

"Frightful this is in a sense, but it is true, and every one who has merely some little knowledge of the human heart can verify it: there is nothing to which a man holds so desperately as to his sin."

Søren Kierkegaard

"The reigning cliché of the day is that in order to love others one must first learn to love oneself. This formulation -- love thyself, then thy neighbor -- is a license for unremitting self-indulgence, because the quest for self-love is endless. By the time you have finally learned to love yourself, you'll find yourself playing golf at Leisure World."

Charles Krauthammer in *Time* magazine, 28 June 1993

"Everyone thinks of changing humanity, and no one thinks of changing himself."

Leo Tolstoy

"Pietists believe that evangelism is the preaching of the Law, to show man what he is in himself, and of the Gospel, to show how differently God now sees him in Christ and his responsibility to live in this new light. This is the theology of Word and Sacrament -- a creative 'can do' which replaces that 'can't do' of the Law. We reject the cognitive theory of religion that says a man can learn what is right and follow it. We also reject that peculiar... idea that says when you know the right theology you have reached the goal. We hold that a belief which does not accomplish change has not been assimilated and cannot be classified as Luther's 'true and living faith.'"

Ron Zess

"I find it interesting that the meanest life, the poorest existence, is attributed to God's will, but as human beings become more affluent, as their living standard and style begin to ascend the material scale, God descends the scale of responsibility at a commensurate speed."

Maya Angelou

"Men will wrangle for religion; write for it; fight for it; die for it; anything but **live** for it."

Charles Caleb Colton

"For perfection, it is better for us to go through the crucible and conquer ourselves; to love God, it is better not to be perfect. How much better it is to be with Him than to compose one's perfection."

Eugraph Kovalevsky, *A Method Of Prayer* (Praxis, 1993)

Every time we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," we mean that we believe that there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it.

J. B. Phillips, *Plain Christianity*

Illumine our minds, our souls inspire
Vouchsafe to us love's holy fire
Thy wondrous pow'r on us bestow,
That we in grace and strength may grow.
"Creator, Spirit, Heavenly Dove", verse 3

(**unknown** 8th cent., translated by Luther into German, later translated into English)

"Glory be to 'the Holy Ghost.' Oh, I'm full of spirit, I am not unenlightened. I also have feeling, heart, sentiment, and imagination. But do I ever hold still in order that the wholly Other may fill me with his Spirit and give me a sense of the true priorities in life?"

Helmut Thielicke (as published in *Leadership Journal*, Fall 95)

"Holiness is a state of soul in which all the powers of the body and mind are consciously given up to God."

Phoebe Palmer

"You may as well quit reading and hearing the Word of God, and give it to the devil, if you do not desire to live according to it."

Martin Luther

"You may as well quit reading and hearing the Word of God, and give it to the devil, if you do not desire to live according to it."

----- **Martin Luther**

"At the back of it there lies the central citadel of obstinacy: I will not give up my right to myself--the thing God intends you to give up if ever you are going to be a disciple of Jesus Christ."

----- **Oswald Chambers**, in *My Utmost for His Highest*

"The devil sees nothing more abominable than a truly humble christian, for [that Christian] is just the opposite of [the devil's] own image."

----- **Hans Nielsen Hauge**

No pain, no palm;
no thorns, no throne;
no gall, no glory;
no cross, no crown.

----- **William Penn**, *No Cross, No Crown* (1669)

"Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this day without being found out."

----- **Samuel Butler**

Have thine own way, Lord,
have thine own way!
hold o'er my being
absolute sway
Fill with thy Spirit
till all shall see
Christ only, always,
living in me.

-- "Have Thine Own Way", last verse, by **Adelaide Pollard** (© Hope Publishing Co.)

Breathe on me, Breath of God
Till I am wholly thine;
Until this earthly part of me
Glow with thy fire divine

----- "Breathe On Me, Breath Of God", v.3, by **Edwin Hatch**

"If you have really handed yourself over to Him it *must* follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you."

----- **C.S. Lewis**, **Christian Behavior** (Macmillan, 1943), p.66

"The Holy Spirit also teaches the difference between asceticism and sacrifice, and shows us that for a Christian, asceticism is not enough. Asceticism is content systematically to mortify and control our nature. Sacrifice does something more : it offers our nature and all its faculties to God. A self-denial that is truly supernatural must aspire to offer God what we have renounced ourselves."

----- **Thomas Merton**, as in **No Man Is An Island** (Octagon Press, 1983), p.173

"Sweet Spirit, grant us the faith to resist our resistance to Thee!"

----- **James Melvin Washington**, **Conversations With God** (HarperCollins, 1994), p.285

"The holy life is the grace of forgiveness transformed into reality."

Fredrik Wisloff, **I Believe In the Holy Spirit**

"We are all full of fine talk about how desperately our society needs it, but, when push comes to shove, we would just as soon be on the winning side."

Stephen L. Carter, about integrity

"Always do right -- this will gratify some and astonish the rest."

Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens)

"Every believer must be a spark of light, a center of love, a vivifying leaven amidst his fellow human beings: and he will be this all the more perfectly the more closely he lives in

communion with God. In fact, there can be no peace between humans unless there is peace within each one of them"

Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, p. 164-165, 1963.

"He is a self-made man and worships his creator."

UK politician **John Bright**, about his opponent, UK politician Benjamin Disraeli

"The Holy Spirit also teaches the difference between asceticism and sacrifice, and shows us that for a Christian, asceticism is not enough. Asceticism is content systematically to mortify and control our nature. Sacrifice does something more : it offers our nature and all its faculties to God. A self-denial that is truly supernatural must aspire to offer God what we have renounced ourselves."

Thomas Merton, as found in *No Man Is An Island* (Octagon Press, 1983), p.173

"A Christian should always remember that the value of his good works is not based on their number and excellence, but on the love of God which prompts him to do these things."

--- **St. John of the Cross**

Come, Holy Spirit,
Come on the winds and cleanse us,
Come in the fire and burn,
Come on the waves and wash our sins away.
Come, Holy Spirit,
come and convict us
come and convince us
come and convert us.

----- "Come, Holy Spirit", by **Linda Snow**

Once you begin being naughty, it is easier to go on and on, and sooner or later something dreadful happens.

--- **Laura Ingalls Wilder**, *On the Banks Of Plum Creek*

"Conscience : the inner voice which warns us that somebody may be looking."

--- **H.L. Mencken**, in *A Little Book in C Major*

"O Lord, do not turn me away, lowly as I am, ashamed! Send upon me the grace of the Holy Spirit : make me worthy to stand before your holy altar!"

--- **Gregory of Nazianzos**

The Holy Spirit of grace desires to disturb your sleep. Blessed are you if you awaken.

----- **Lars Linderot**, cited in Wisloff, *I Believe In the Holy Spirit*

Self-respect is the fruit of discipline : the sense of dignity grows with the ability to say no to oneself.

----- **Abraham J. Heschel**

Revenge is often like biting a dog because the dog bit you.

----- **Austin O'Malley**

The detachment from the confusion all around us is in order to have a richer attachment to God. Christian meditation leads us to the inner wholeness necessary to give ourselves to God freely.

----- **Richard Foster**, **Celebration Of Discipline** 2nd ed. (Harper, 1988), p.21

Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in *life* .

----- **Thomas Merton**, **Contemplative Prayer** (Doubleday, 1969), p.39

By means of the imagination, we confine our mind within the mystery on which we meditate, that it may not ramble to and fro...

----- **Francis deSales**, **Introduction To the Devout Life**

If you get the idea to do something good, just do it. It might be the Holy Spirit.

----- **Mary Stearns Sgarioto**, in **Lutheran Woman Today**, May 1995.

Some questions :

1. In Scripture, it's said that Christians are 'in the world, but not of it'. How are you not "of" the world or of the culture, lifestyle, or worldview around you? How does that reflect your beliefs?
2. How are you taking part "in", adding to, building up, or shaping the world around you? How does that reflect your faith?
3. In your own life, have you found Jesus to be any of the aspects of light mentioned here? Or even any that's not mentioned here? (If in a group: share with others about one such time.)
4. What is the difference between 'expectation' and 'demand'? Between 'trust' and 'knowing'? In what ways are they alike?

Picture in your mind what the 'walk' of faith is like, as **you** envision that ['journeying'](#) imagery.

- What is a part of that walk?
- Where is it taking you?

(Again, groups: share your imaginary picture of this 'walk' with those around you -- but only after you've savored it for a while. Be honest; don't be afraid to say what you think might be stupid or trivial.)

People who strive to be pleasing to God often struggle with a tension between two things God does: (a) God gives freedom; (b) God provides limits.

- Have you ever come upon this tension in your own life?
- What one incident best serves as an example?

- How did you deal with it?

Think of a time when you knew (or discovered) that God had somehow changed you :

- What was that change?
- Was there something that signaled this change?
- Did anyone else notice this change? And how did they react to it?
- How has that shaped you as you are now?

Can you think of a time when you chose not to turn away from what you knew was wrong?

- why didn't you turn away?
- What were the consequences?
- Did you ever eventually come to grips with it?

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