

Cultivating Love & Desire

*Toward a spirituality of the road
that I want to own...*

Over the next three weeks, as a way of wrapping up our theme of ‘Discipleship’, which we have been exploring in Luke’s Gospel these last few months, I want to look at “How Then Do We Live?” That is to say, not just *what* does the Christian life look like, but *how* are we *empowered* to live the life of Christ in this world?

In many ways these reflections come out of my own spiritual journey and so I offer them not so much as an unpacking of our scripture texts today but as something to “bump up” against them.

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I guess from the beginning of my new life in Christ, I’ve been on something of a quest; and the Holy Grail of which I’ve been in search, is to do with my need to go deeper into the life of God and to find that *sustaining liberty* and *peace* of Christ held out as the “spiritual life” but so seldom realised. This is the life characterised by John the Evangelist as the “abundant life”, and by Saint Paul as the “life in the Spirit”, full of “grace and peace”.¹ I haven’t finished thinking through these things and so this sermon is a work in progress and will, I suspect, remain so. Never-the-less, I have decided to put a few of my thoughts down and invite you to explore them with me. Maybe we can finish it together? Anyway, here goes.

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As I’ve said, for some years now, I have struggled to develop a disciplined

¹ e.g. Rom.8; Tit.1:4; 2Pet.1:2.
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inner life in God – a “spiritual life”. I have wanted a spirituality that works for an extrovert not just for introverted types, a spirituality that flows out naturally in business, or at the pub or movies, or on the sports field, or dealing with an aggressive person and so on... a spirituality that I can live anywhere, not just at church, retreats or contemplative prayer or study groups – but “a spirituality of the road”, as South African theologian David Bosch once put it.²

At the same time, in a related quest, I have been giving a lot of thought to ethics – how we live our lives with *each other*. I guess my question has been, “Can I have an ethic that works – that *empowers* rather than condemns, that brings freedom not guilt, that brings life not death?”

What I have come to see is that I do, of course, have an ethical life, a spirituality (call it what you will), only it isn’t necessarily the one I want. My spirituality, the spirituality I *actually* take with me and live out, not the one I *profess* to live out, is what stands behind the characteristic way I relate to my world. It is what drives my response to, and makes sense of, my relationship with God’s creation, with others, with myself and with God. My spirituality is how I put my life together and make meaning out of it. It’s that integration point, the deep centre, that motivates and shapes how I respond in life’s many situations.

The wise man once said in the Book of Proverbs: “Above all else guard your heart,³ for from it flow the issues of life”.⁴ The idea here that it is from the pre-cognitive ‘centre’ of ourselves, that place from which we make our fundamental religious commitment and from which we know, that all else flows. (Incidentally, the Old Testament view is that this applies to nations

² David Bosch, *Spirituality Of The Road*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001.

³ The Hebrew / biblical understanding of the heart was that it was the centre of ourselves – the source of all thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions. Refer to the *IVP New Bible Dictionary* for a good treatment of this.

⁴ or: “...for it is the wellspring of life”. Prov.4:23. See also Prov.16:23.

and societies not just individuals⁵ – but that’s another story). Jesus put it this way: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”.⁶ And again, as we heard in our reading today, “For it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks”.⁷

Over the last few years I have spent a lot of time trying to identify honestly just what this “abundance of the heart” is for me – the *real* contours of my inner life, my *actual* spirituality, as distinct from the one I may say I want or even believe I live. I’ve been asking myself questions like: How do I characteristically respond to this or that person or situation? How do I behave towards others and myself? What does this tell me about what drives me – where my treasure *really* lies?

This has been an interesting journey, if not a somewhat self absorbed one at times. Self knowledge is good, even if elusive and at times obscured behind my self deceits and limited horizons.⁸ Yet the real questions, the questions I probably mean to ask, remain: How can I have a God centred spirituality that is useful in my daily life – a Jesus centred spirituality of the road? How can I have a spirituality that is *sustainable, life giving* and *empowering*?

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Christian spiritualities that I have generally encountered tend to be based either on a ‘Retreat’ model or a form of rigorous discipline concerned with doing what is right.

We tend to retreat from the world to church, camps, retreats, conferences, study groups etc, in order to build up our spiritual head of steam. We then

⁵ Jer.24:7 “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.”

⁶ Matt.26:21.

⁷ Lk.6:45.

⁸ Jer.17:9. “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

rocket off “into the world” until we lose power and need another escape from daily life to build up steam again.⁹ As life goes on many of us lose interest in this kind of spiritual dynamic, either finding it exhausting and unsustainable or simply unreal. I know it doesn’t *have* to be like this: taking time out, or setting aside time to come away from our daily lives so we can then critically reflect on them and invite God into our ordinary lives, can be helpful. For many, though, ‘retreat spirituality’ often means “escapist spirituality” with little connection to daily life.

But while this type of spirituality can at times appear disconnected from daily life, the alternative approach can seem devoid of grace and inner sustenance. The tendency here, is to either embrace some sort of esthetic discipline – a kind of modern version of pole sitting – or adopt some sort of full on exclusive lifestyle with the idea of practicing “real” Christianity, something unattained apparently, by lesser, luke warm types. It seems to me that this latter variant of spirituality has a built in assumption of failure: I’m never good enough so I crawl back to God, get excused, embrace the impossible set of ideals I call the Gospel, and then go out to fail again.

There is a sense in which *both* of these approaches to spirituality, seem to me to be world *denying* rather than *affirming* of our mundane lives. In this regard, they have have more in common with Platonic idealism or Aristotle’s “virtuous life” than they do with the Christian spirituality.¹⁰ Here, prayer easily becomes “self talk”; talk that is ostensibly directed to God but is, in reality, “talking up” the behaviour modification we believe is desirable, rather than entering into the mystery of God’s immanence – God’s activity in this world and in our lives together with God in this activity. Even practising certain forms of “mindfulness”, centering prayer and contemplation can seem to have more in common with stress management and other self

⁹ Think of a steam engine in this regard...

¹⁰ See *The Puzzle Of Ethics* (Peter Vardy & Paul Grosch, Fount/ Harper Collins, 1999) for a good summary of this.
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improvement techniques than they do growing us into an active, Christ centred, Spirit filled life.

But it's not just that these approaches lend themselves to Pelagianism,¹¹ ultimately, they just seem not “doable” if we take living an ordinary life well – a reality, as we heard, with which the Apostle Paul also wrestled.¹² The task here is to move our life in God beyond spiritual new year resolutions and psychobabble and into a genuinely Spirit filled life.

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Thinking through all this and trying to put it together, the thing that has been coming to me is that, in the end, it is all to do with *love* and *desire* – God's love for me (and all creation), and, as a response to this love, my desire to love God back. In this way, Christian spirituality and Christian ethics are inextricably linked, since they are about *devotion*; or, as Augustine argued, the Christian life is about my deep-seated, underlying commitment to doing what I *really* want.

If, for a moment, we accept this, two issues emerge: Knowing what I *really* want *and* being able to live it. Let me unpack this a little taking the last issue first...

When I behave well toward my wife and family, it is not because there is a law which tells me I have to (though there is such a law), nor even any nagging hunch that I should. No: *I behave as I should and must because I want to*, because I love my wife and family and want only good for them – and so I am devoted to my family and them to me. With each of us behaving the same toward the other, this is what sustains our family life together and becomes our family spirituality, our family culture and ethic. This is, of course,

¹¹ Pelagianism is a theology named after Pelagius (AD 354 – AD 420/440). It is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid. See for a reasonable summary.

¹² ...and, for that matter, the entire Jewish nation - see NT Wright's Treatment of Rom.7 in, '*Romans In A Week*', Regent College Taped Lecture Series, www.regent-bookstore.com
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Augustine's understanding of the life of God in trinity. A relational dynamic held together not by rule of law, but by love, springing from the *desire* to love.

Get the point here... It is love and desire which empower me to do the right thing, not my knowledge of what I should or ought to do. By analogy, then, it is my relationship with Jesus – the one who loves me,¹³ the one full of grace and Truth,¹⁴ the one who gives me life in its fullness¹⁵ – which empowers me to live the spiritual life.¹⁶ Augustine put this succinctly when he said: The Christian life is to “love God and do what you want”.¹⁷

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There are, of course, a couple of problems with this. The example I have given above may seem self evidently true but it may not be, given certain circumstances or in different cultural, social or political contexts. I may think I know what I want, what my felt needs are – perhaps through life experiences, self reflection or even therapy – but I don't always.¹⁸ The prophet Jeremiah says that “the heart is deceitful above all things”.¹⁹ We are told in the book of Genesis that, “The Lord saw how great human wickedness on earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the time”.²⁰ Eve and Adam though they knew what they wanted, they desired knowledge and autonomy, to be like God; they found instead, not just loss of innocence, but alienation from themselves, each other and the world around them. The apostle Paul also talks about our deep-

¹³ 1Jn.4:9.

¹⁴ Jn.1:14.

¹⁵ Jn.10:10b.

¹⁶ 2Cor.5:14.

¹⁷ Augustine wrote *Dilige, et quod vis fac* meaning “Love, and do what you will”, though it is also seen quoted as *Ama Deum et fac quod vis* (Love God, and do what you want). See, for instance, Russell, Rev. James S.J., Ed. “The Irish Monthly: A Magazine of General Literature.” *Pigeonhole Paragraphs*. Vol 25, pp. 186. 1897. Available Online Books.google.com^[6]

¹⁸ This is the problem with an approach to spirituality that focuses upon what I think and I feel, upon what I do and don't do etc., rather than upon what God has created us to be and to do. The assumption that I have the truth within me waiting for me to discover it (as opposed to it being revealed to me in God's Word through the Spirit – 1Jn.4:13.), also underlies Rogerian counselling and much contemporary human development thinking.

¹⁹ Jer.17:9.

²⁰ Gen.6:5.

seated blindness as human beings separated from, even enemies of, God and, therefore, of ourselves.²¹ In other words, we often don't recognise or can't accept being told what our *real* or *deep* desires are – as opposed to our felt and often surface desires, because we do not fully know ourselves as God created us to be.

By contrast the Evangelist John recalls Jesus saying, “If you *love* me, you will keep my commandments.”²² It is love for Jesus which empowers the commandment keeping, not the other way around. We need the law,²³ not as an ideal to which we aspire nor as a set of rules to apply to life situations; rather, we need the law to point us to the truth about what love is ²⁴ – and so my need for that love found in Christ. The law calls out to me, it asks me, “isn't this what you really desire? Don't you really hunger for a deeply meaningful life? Then put God before all other commitments. Don't you want a healthy family? Then respect your parents and show fidelity to your spouse. Don't you want a society that works? Then love your neighbour as yourself, don't cheat, steal or lie” – and so on. God's law, then, is not empowering, rather, it functions to tell me what my deep desires really are. God's law shows us the *shape* of love.

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So far so good... I live my life out of my deep desires and God's word reveals to me what these desires are. Not that easy... The problem is that my experience contradicts this. Even when I do recognise not only what I want to do (out of

²¹ Rom.1:18, 21.

²² Jn.14:15. *c.f.* also 1Jn.4.

²³ The *torah*, quintessentially expressed in Ex.20:1-17 and summarised by Jesus in Mt.22:37-40 “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”. Again this summary is found within the *Torah* itself (Dt.6:5 & Lv.19:18 – before and after).

²⁴ “...having in the law the embodiment of truth...” (Rom.2:20b).

love) but also what I should do (from scripture), I seem powerless to do it. As we heard the Apostle Paul put it,²⁵ “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do”.²⁶

Worse still, knowing the truth seems to only provoke in me a desire to do the opposite. “For when we were controlled by the sinful nature,²⁷ the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.”²⁸

Paul says that when our consciences prick for transgressing the law, we show that the law is good (otherwise we wouldn’t feel bad about it).²⁹ The problem is we somehow don’t seem to love God in such a way that we are empowered to do what is right. Quite the opposite in fact.³⁰

Paul’s solution to this is to urge us toward laying hold of the life in the Spirit and our future hope in Christ.³¹

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

(Rom.8:5)

But how does this happen? How do we appropriate this life in Christ’s Spirit to ourselves? How do we cultivate this whole hearted devotion to God, this empowering love of the Spirit filled life that bears the fruit of the Spirit? How

²⁵ Again, see NT Wright’s Treatment of Rom.7 in, ‘Romans In A Week’, Regent College Taped Lecture Series, www.regent-bookstore.com for a very useful summary of the various interpretations which have been offered by exegetes of this passage. This includes Wright’s own thesis that Paul is recounting in personal terms the experience / history of Israel. This is a more compelling explanation than it may first appear. In any case, since we are the covenant people of God the same applies of us as to Israel – basically the same point Paul was making to the mixed church in Rome.

²⁶ Rom.7:14-15 but also 18b-19; 8:7-8.

²⁷ That is, our “carnal” or “fleshy” nature in Paul’s thinking: Rom.7:5 c.f. Rom.6:6; 8:3 etc. Paul’s meaning here is our “natural” selves alienated and autonomous from our creator.

²⁸ Rom.7:5.

²⁹ Rom.7:16 and also before Rom.7:7-12.

³⁰ Rom.7:10-11.

³¹ See Rom.8 where he devotes a large part of his letter to this.

do I make my relationship with God as real and life giving – even more so – as it is with my lover, or family, so that I do what the law calls out for me to do? And how can what the law requires become what I *really* desire to do, so that I can live an everyday spiritual life which sustains and nurtures – a spirituality of the road?

It is to these questions I will be returning over the next two weeks...