

Being Spiritual: Learning By Doing
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O.T. Psalm 19 N.T. Matthew 19:16-22
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After temptation a person is in heaven as to the internal and in the world through the external, and therefore a conjunction of heaven and the world is affected in a person through temptations . . .

“I’m not religious, but I am spiritual.” How many times have we heard that? I hope we are beginning to be able to distinguish between religious and spiritual: religious has to do with being involved with organized religion of some kind, like being a member of a church; following the practices of an already established tradition; attending and participating in the group activities of a worship community. We all have experience with religious groups, people and activities of all kinds, from the most positive to the most negative. What works for some just doesn’t for others. What worked for us in the past may or may not work for us now, and it may or may not be a positive experience as we look back at it now.

But what does it mean to be a spiritual? How do we tell if we are a spiritual person? It is something we assume we know, but how exactly do we know?

As important as this question is, as many times as we may have asked ourselves this question, as much time as we may have spent trying to answer this question, in my opinion it is the wrong question! This question is based on a false premise. It is premised on the idea that somehow we are not spiritual and that only by learning the right information, by saying the right things, by acting in the right way or not acting in the wrong way, by eating the right things or wearing the right clothes, by praying the right prayers or chanting the right chants we can somehow change from what we are into something we are not. This whole pursuit of ‘being spiritual’ is premised on a fallacy. And that fallacy is that we are not spiritual already.

The fact is, just as Mareta pointed out yesterday, we ARE spiritual, whether we know it or not! If we are to take Swedenborg at his word, we are by definition spiritual beings clothed in a material body. We are already spiritual beings! We were born spiritual beings. And we will die spiritual beings. We are spiritual beings whether we want to be or not.

Yet people continue to ask the question. What is more, people have been asking the question since that rich young ruler went to the Lord and asked “What good thing must I do to have eternal life?”

Let’s get a few things settled:

1. God is. No matter what human beings believe or say or do we do not change God. God does not exist because we believe in him. Or her. Or it. God is. Nothing we do changes God one iota.
2. Human beings are spiritual beings clothed in a material body, what is more we are created in the image and likeness of God. There is simply a given.
3. All religions, and faiths and spiritual traditions are human responses to what already is, and always has been, and always will be. They are attempts to know and understand, with our finite and imperfect selves, what is infinite and perfect.

So why are we trying to be spiritual? And if we are already spiritual, why are we here this morning? Inquiring minds want to know. Perhaps that right there is the problem! Ever since that intuitive connection with God was broken, as symbolically portrayed in the story of Adam and Eve, we are seemingly out in the world on our own, either trying to find our way back into the loving arms of God, or acting like the disgruntled employee who says “You can’t fire me, I quit!” or the small child in a room full of adults who pulls the blanket over his head and thinks they can’t see him because they’re not there anymore. But here we are together this morning, spiritual beings wanting so badly to be spiritual people.

Let's talk for a minute about what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God. First thing, we are not God. However, there is, at least in potential if nothing else, something about how we are created that is similar to God, something that is compatible with what we understand God to be. I would propose to you that that something is the capacity to love, coupled with the capacity for wisdom.

Our physical bodies are. We can change them to a degree by taking good care of them and through training gaining some mastery over them; or by not taking care of them and not developing them and ultimately finding ourselves mastered by them. Within certain parameters there are variables, but only within certain parameters. But no matter what we do or don't do with our bodies that is not really the criteria for "spiritual." There are healthy fit people we would not call spiritual and there are chubby, weak and out of shape people we would call spiritual. There are young and old, pretty and homely, male female. The body is not what defines spirituality. That is not really what the image and likeness thing is all about.

I would propose to you that spirituality is defined by something within a person that is not really physical, but affects how we are who we are. If God is the marriage of love and wisdom, and we are created in the image and likeness of God, then it seems reasonable that being spiritual has something to do with our capacity to be loving and wise.

We have a heart and a brain, the two physical organs which serve their anatomical purposes, but which we also use to metaphorically refer to our passion and intellect. Even here we have parameters within which we function. Still it is these capacities wherein that "spiritual" thing is to be found.

Now we all have emotions and we all have thoughts. In and of themselves this does not define “spirituality.” There are some really passionate people, and there are some really smart people, to whom we would not attach the word “spiritual.” So what is the difference between being passionate and being loving? Between being intelligent and being wise?

Being passionate is giving over to powerful emotions, and this something that we often admire, but at the same time we can have powerful emotions that lead to really destructive behaviors that would not be defined as spiritual.

And being intelligent is the effective mastery of knowledge, having a good memory and knowing how to make logical deductions. Again something we often admire, and yet we are all familiar with really smart people who are far from anything we would call spiritual.

There must be some other point of reference by which we judge someone to be spiritual. There must be something specific that transforms these non-physical capabilities that we all have to one degree or another, into what we call spiritual.

It is learning what this is, and pursuing, in the attempt to engage, encourage and cultivate within us what this is, that is the reason we are here to today. I personally believe that what we call ‘being spiritual’ hinges on what makes a person not just intensely passionate and really smart, but loving and wise.

I confess to some semantic nit picking in my opening premise. We are all created in the image and likeness of God, we are all spirits clothed in a body and so, in that sense we are all spiritual. But even so we do not automatically or even typically attach the label “spiritual” to everyone. Nor do we automatically fulfill our own sense of spirituality. So here we are together, trying to be spiritual. In one sense, we are all just like the young ruler coming to the Lord and asking: “How do I acquire eternal life?” And God’s answer to us is no more complicated now than was the Lord’s answer to the rich young man so long ago.

But beyond following the commandments I offer this observation:

If God is the marriage of love and wisdom then the more loving and wise we are the more we become the image and likeness of God.

If God is spirit, then the more we become the image and likeness of God, the more spiritual we are becoming.

If you want to know if someone, or something, is “spiritual” I ask yourself:

Is this loving and is this wise?

The loving part looks to intentions. The wise part looks to results.

As criteria for judging what is spiritual, this is pretty simple. But as so many things in life, it is simple in concept but it can get very challenging in application. We all know the commandments Jesus refers to when he offers them as the answer to the man’s question:

Love God with everything and in everything and love your neighbor as yourself; The Ten Commandments, which, by the way, if you follow them become the Ten Promises; do unto others as you would have done unto you,

It’s just not that hard, and yet how many of us are responding in the same way: “I already do all of those things, what more can I do?”

Well Jesus answers that question too. What does he offer as the way to true spirituality? Well if you read his answer, it has nothing to do with learning a specific theology. It has nothing to do with dressing or eating in a certain way. It has nothing to do with practicing a specific discipline, praying or meditation or improving one’s self. He says in so many words, “give up all that you have gathered for yourself, give all that you value in service to those who do not have, and devote your life to following in my path.” And, I dare say, that is no more easy to hear for us today than it was for the rich young man so long ago.

But here is what I can offer you. In Psalm 19 we begin with joyously, reverently singing the love of God portrayed for us and experienced by us in the beauty of creation. The second part extols the virtue and beneficial of the effects of following Gods laws on our lives. And then Psalm ends offering our devotion and praying to God that our best efforts be worthy. To me there is something to be emulated here. this the poetic portrayal opening hearts in love and nurturing our minds in wisdom and offering ourselves in service.

If you truly want to be spiritual put yourself to the test. For, as we heard in the quote from Swedenborg, it is in the test that heaven and earth are joined. In every moment, in every action, in every thought, in every passing emotion, ask yourself: Is this loving? Is this wise? Is this useful to God and my neighbor? If you can answer “Yes” then offer your best effort knowing that in and of yourself it likely will not very good, but in being willing to humble yourself in the effort you open the door and invite God to enter in and make it better than we could ever do on our own. And if you quiet your mind and listen you will hear, “Behold I stand at the door and knock.”

Stop asking how can I become spiritual, and instead ask: Is this loving? Is this wise? Is this useful? Never stop asking these questions. And then let God worrying about whether or not you are spiritual.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my foundation and my salvation. Amen.

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