

February 14, 2010

## How to Be Spiritual (without Being Arrogant)

a sermon on 1 John 4.7-21

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

The most spiritual people I have known did not consider themselves spiritual. They are ordinary Christians who enjoy using their gifts to serve God and others in practical ways. They teach children. They visit the sick and lonely. They cook meals and cut lawns. They give. They lead. They make peace when there's trouble, and they are the glue that holds their families, church, and community together. They don't show off their piety. And the supremely spiritual among them are hard to offend and impossible to alienate, because their egos are not sensitive. You know you are dealing with a spiritually mature person when he or she sets aside a disagreement or a problem in the relationship and keeps working with you.

On the other hand, I have known lots of people who considered themselves spiritual. I hear that a lot, actually, especially once people find out I'm a pastor. They'll say, "Oh, yes, I'm a very spiritual person." And I can't always tell whether they mean, "If you are a pastor, you must be spiritual, and hey! I am too!" Or, "I'm already spiritual, so I don't need any help. Thanks."

The word *spiritual* is slippery. It seems to mean different things to different people. Whenever someone tells me he or she is spiritual, I like to ask, "What do you mean?" Sometimes they look at me as if I'm crazy. "How can a pastor *not* know what 'spiritual' means?" When they explain what they mean, though, the answers usually vary. "I'm spiritual" can mean: "I pray (or meditate) regularly." "I am sensitive to other people's moods or feelings." "I feel things deeply; I am an emotional person." "I notice things like flowers and sunsets." "I live with a sense of gratitude and reverence for life." "I am a good person (or a nice person or a kind person)." "I read religious books and/or think about God."

Those answers are typical, and they have two themes in common. (1) Spirituality, whatever it is, seems to be about me, the individual. It is something I feel or do privately or who I am. (2) Spirituality, whatever it is, is about my *interior* life. It is what I think or feel. It is an attitude or a disposition. Very often, spirituality becomes an alternative to "organized religion." Whenever someone tells me, "I don't believe in organized religion," I always respond, "Then you ought to come to my church. You'll love it." Of course that's not really true. We are very organized. And we have a good reason to be. Being organized helps us get along well and work together efficiently. In

fact, when problems arise here at Westminster, the cause is almost always too little organization or too little communication. If your religion is just about you, then of course organization gets in the way. But if you are part of a people, if you live and worship in a community, you need some organization. Anyway, back to my point, people will say, "I don't go to church, but I am spiritual." "I don't worship or give or volunteer, but I am spiritual." I wonder, "How do you love God if you don't love his people?"

Spirituality seems to be (1) about me and (2) about my interior life. That's how most people use the word, including many Christians. This, however, is the exact *opposite* of Christian spirituality.

Christian spirituality is other-focused. It's not all about me. Christian spirituality is also about my *actions*. How do I treat other people? How do I love God's people? How do I love the community or city I live in? That's how Christianity defines "spiritual." This sermon is about how to be spiritual in the Christian sense. Our text in 1 John makes it so simple. You say, "I want to be spiritual. (Or, I want to be more spiritual.) How do I do it?" First John says, "Piece of cake: believe in Jesus ('God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God') and love one another ('God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them')." It's so easy a child can understand and so difficult you'll spend your whole life learning to live it more and more.

First John is not really a letter. It is more like a sermon. Possibly it was written to be circulated and read in a number of churches. It was written because the faith and spirituality of these Christian communities was threatened. What was this threat? This threat did not come from outside forces, like Roman persecution. It came from inside, from Christians who had changed the Christian faith radically and they were trying to sell their new hybrid religion to other Christians.

This threat came from "progressive" Christians, who thought they had advanced beyond the basic teachings of Christianity, especially those of the gospel of John. The gospel of John figures into this because their errors came from misreading it. They, however, thought they had uncovered its deeper, hidden, true meaning. These progressives did not like all this talk about "sin." They preferred to live and let live. You do what you want, and I'll do what I want, because salvation has nothing to do with that. God doesn't care what we do. They thought true Christianity is all in your head. It's about what you know, not how you act. And, they thought their knowledge made them better than other, less "spiritual" Christians.

You may think I'm grinding an ax by calling them progressives, because that's a word liberals today like to use in the church and in politics, but I'm not. I am not reading liberal Christianity back into the text of 1 John. That's how these so-called spiritual

Christians talked about themselves back then. Second John, verse 9, says, “Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, *but goes beyond it*, does not have God.” In Greek the word for “goes beyond” also means “runs ahead” or “progresses beyond.” Who were the people claiming they had run ahead or progressed beyond the church’s teachings about Christ? They were these progressives who stirred up so much trouble.

Maybe it was inevitable that a group like this appeared. What we have here is a clash of worldviews. Ancient Greeks tended to see life in terms of struggle. I’ve seen bumper stickers that say “Life’s a (I’ll say “unpleasant experience,” though that’s my translation), and then you die.” If they had bumper stickers in the ancient world, that one would have been popular. They took a dark view of life. Life was hard. Life meant suffering. They did not have bumper stickers, but they did have tomb inscriptions, and one of the most popular was: “I was not, I was, I am not, I care not.” Or another variation, “I did not exist, I was born; I existed, I do not exist; so much for that.” [*Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament*, p. 437]. Talk about dark and cynical! They had this deeply imbedded belief that the physical world is bad. What you want is to escape it. Philosophy offered one way to do this. Mystery religions offered another. Mystery religions used a combination of secret knowledge and rituals to move your souls to a higher spiritual plane, or to assure you of spiritual immortality. Notice that for them “spiritual” is the opposite of physical. That’s a mistake people continue to make today. They think “spiritual” – the stuff you can’t see – is good; physical stuff you can see is bad. Our bodies, for example, get old and wear out. Work is hard. Taking care of other people is hard. You can see where they get this stuff.

The Jewish view, and the Christian too, avoids this mistake. Life is good. Our physical existence is good. God created the world, and he called it good. God gave us bodies, and with them we can enjoy life and praise him. Don’t misunderstand, life was hard for Jews and Christians too, often much harder than for affluent pagans. But they saw clearly the goodness and God-given character of creation.

Christianity was different from the mystery religions and from pagan philosophy, but you can see how people steeped in that sort of thing might encounter Christianity and think it was one more mystery religion or one more philosophy. And if you start with the idea that the physical world is bad and you misread the gospel that way, then you end up with a crazy mess, and that is what John had on his hands.

So how did he deal with it? He hammered four ideas, and we won’t explore them all, just the last one mainly. He said (1) Jesus came in the flesh, and the teaching about him handed down from the apostles is solid and trustworthy. He begins by proclaiming, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.” He was an eyewitness. Spirituality is not about escaping this world. Spirituality is about the glory of God transforming it. Jesus came in the flesh, and he took children on his knee. He

spit and made clay to heal a blind man. He washed his disciples' feet. That's spirituality. It is earthy. It is humble. It honors the Creator, and it blesses his creation, especially the part of his creation made in his image, human beings.

John also said (2) sin is serious, because God does care how we treat one another. Spirituality is about relationships. Sin means doing something that damages relationships, whether it's your relationship with God or another human being. The progressives didn't have much use for community. They tended to be more individualistic, certainly more elitist. Our culture is that way too. Christianity is not. Christianity is about being part of God's people. Once you have a relationship with Jesus Christ, you have a relationship with all his followers (the church) and with the world he loved enough to die for.

John said (3) the cross is important. The progressives didn't like the cross very much. That's something they have in common with progressives today, who like to think that God loves everybody just the way we are, so what we need to do is simply accept one another. But the cross is the center of Christianity, reminding us that our freedom and our relationships came with a very high price. I remember another seminary student commenting once on how he didn't like the "blood imagery" in Christianity. You have crucifixes with a bloody Jesus hanging on a cross. You have hymns about being washed in the blood or the power in the blood. Even at the Lord's Table, "This is my blood of the new covenant." This guy thought it was all primitive, repulsive, and unnecessary. It was something he wished the church could progress beyond. But how can we? If the cross were unnecessary, why would Christ suffer like that? If our freedom, forgiveness, and eternal blessedness could have been procured in some other, less painful and humiliating way, why would God send Jesus to the cross? The fact that he went proves it was necessary, and that says a lot about our need and God's grace.

Finally, John said (4) what proves a person has a relationship with God? How do we know? Where's the evidence? It's love. Love demonstrates that we know God, that he has changed us. Again, John is going back to the basics. At the last supper, in John's gospel, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." That's why we can the day before Good Friday *Maundy* Thursday. *Maundy* from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning "commandment." On that day Jesus gave us his new commandment: Love one another.

John goes so far as to say that if you do not love, you do not know God. If you do not love your brother or sister whom you can see, you do not love God whom you cannot see. That's strong. But he's right. When God overwhelms you with his love, when he captures you with his grace, you are changed. When Jesus comes to live inside you, you are changed. Your loving actions are not the cause of your relationship with him. He does not deem you worthy because he sees how much you love others and all the good you do. Not at all. He knows you do not love either God or your neighbor as you

ought. When it comes to love, we are all incompetent. At our best, we still fall far short of the love God wants us to do. And yet, because he loves you, he comes to you anyway, and calls you to faith and obedience. He offers you life. And when you respond to him in faith, he lives in you. Your love and good works then are the result of your relationship with God. You do not become a child of God by passing the exam. You become a child of God by grace, because Jesus died for you. But once you are a child of God, you change. God's love for you makes you his child. Your love for God and others shows that you are his child.

I want to tell you now about a word with no color. Words are like pictures. Some are clear and sharp, some are grainy and fuzzy. Some are bright and vivid – they make us *feel* their meaning. Some are dull and gray. We hardly notice them. *Spirituality* is a word with lots of color, but the way most people use it it's very fuzzy. I am trying to bring it into focus by showing you that faith in Christ and loving others in practical ways is what it's all about. *Love* is another word that can be fuzzy, but did you know it was once bland and colorless.

Most Christians who have spent much time in the pew know that the Greek word for love in our passage is *agape*. Ever since C.S. Lewis wrote that book *The Four Loves*, preachers have been preaching about the different Greek words for love. *Agape*, of course, is the word that describes God's self-giving love. But did you know that wasn't always the case? Once upon a time, before Jesus, the word *agape* was the weakest and least colorful word to describe love. Before the New Testament was written, the word was rarely ever used. It meant "to be content with," "to like," "to prefer." It would have been the word a person might use to say, "I love to sit on the back patio and watch the squirrels." I'll grant you that squirrels can be quite entertaining, but there is a world of difference between that and "I love you enough to die for you." In fact, when pagans wrote about their gods loving someone, they used a different word. They used *eros*. So how did *agape* rise from a weak, colorless word to the most powerful, vibrant word for love? Two things happened. First, about 200 years before Jesus was born, the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament) were translated into Greek. The translators used *agape* to describe God's love, because it did not have the baggage of *eros*. That opened the door. But what really gave this word power was Jesus. Jesus died on the cross, for us, as an act of love. And when that supreme act of love was labeled *agape*, the act defined the word. So when John writes, "God is love," we know he's not talking about a feeling or a preference, he's talking about action and power. "God's love was revealed to us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." Love has a name. Love has a face. Jesus. Even the word *love* is not the same after he gets through with it.

I'm not going to spend any more time on love. I have always thought that telling Christians to love one another is a lot like telling high school boys to notice girls. You

don't have to tell them. It's something they do naturally. Keep in mind that love is always an action. It is a helping hand, a friendly smile, a listening ear.

I close with a story: A man went to his pastor and said, "I am a Christian, but I feel I'm missing something. I'm not spiritual. I want to know God better, have a stronger faith. I want spiritual growth." His pastor said, "That's easy. Start with worship. Don't just come. Put your heart into it. Pay attention to what you sing and pray and mean it. Next comes Bible study, a class at church or on your own, preferably both. Private prayer. Those are basic, but you can't ignore the most crucial part: ministry. You have to serve others in Jesus name." That church had an afterschool program where folks from the congregation tutored disadvantaged children. The pastor suggested that. "Try it on for size."

The man did. He was sincere, and he put forth an effort. He prayed and read his Bible and a little devotional guide every day. He never missed worship, and he was engaged with it. He volunteered with the tutoring program, which he liked OK. The kids were sweet but unmotivated in their studies. After about six weeks he went back to his pastor. "I'm not seeing results," he said. "I'm not surprised," answered the pastor. "What am I doing wrong?" "Nothing." "Then why no results?" "You need one more thing ... patience. Spiritual growth doesn't happen over night. It's like physical growth. It happens over time, almost imperceptibly. You may have milestones. When a child loses her first tooth, that's a milestone; and those sorts of things happen in our spiritual growth as well. But God works patiently on us. He has to. He's creating a masterpiece, and those can't be rushed. So keep doing what you are doing. At some point you might want to find a spiritual director or an accountability group. Go on trusting God and loving God and his people. You will grow."

On Wednesday I lead chapel for our preschool, and the kids have taught me a new song: "He's still working on me." It goes, "It took him just a week to make the moon and the stars, the sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars. How loving and patient he must be! He's still workin' on me!"

That's it. That's all you need to know to be a spiritual person: faith in Christ, love for God and others. Put your love into action, and be patient. Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com