

The Spiritual Life: 3. What Matters Most
1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13; Luke 18:9-14
February 18, 2018
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There is a difference between knowing someone and knowing about someone. For the past few years, I have served on the Board for Hamline University. I am also on the committee that is responsible for recruiting new members to the Board. Persons are nominated from a variety of sources, then vetted to be sure we have accurate information about them, and then before that person is contacted to see if she or he is even interested in serving we ask if a current member of the board who knows the individual could make the initial contact. We've learned that it makes a difference whether that initial contact is made by someone who knows the individual rather than someone who knows about the individual. I'm guessing you've experienced the difference between receiving advice from someone who knows you over someone who knows about you. It makes a difference – and the difference between the two – between knowing and knowing about is a relationship.

And in this series on The Spiritual Life, that's where the spiritual life begins. A lot of people know about religion and could talk for hours about God, but knowing God is a very different matter. Last week, I provided this quote from Pierre Teilhard du Chardin: ***You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience.*** We know the human experience. We see that every time we look in the mirror. We invest time, energy and resources into extending the human experience as long as humanly possible, but it is finite. The spiritual, however, is infinite – and though we cannot see that dimension when we look in the mirror, it is real and is known insofar as we establish a relationship with God. That's where this series began. What is spiritual life? **a relationship with God that shapes us into the person that God intends us to be.** And last week we looked to the Bible to find that God intends us to be shaped into the image of God. That's character. This morning, I want to return again to character and then what matters most as we grow ever closer to the image of God.

In this series, we've also used John Wesley's 21 Questions which he wrote in 1729 for a small group of students at Oxford University. John was an instructor and the group that included his younger brother, Charles, asked John to help them grow deeper in their faith, to be authentic Christians. And John felt that if they would ask one of these questions each day to examine their own heart and then come together to discuss these questions, they would grow into the person that God intended them to be. Again, this morning, our opening video presented the final seven questions. **Do I thank God that I am not like others? Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I am? In other words, am I a hypocrite? Do I confidentially pass onto others what was told to me in confidence? Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy, or distrustful? Am I honest in all my actions and words or do I exaggerate? Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold resentment toward or disregard? When did I last speak to someone about my faith?** Once again, we are invited to look inward and how we impact the people around us.

We see this in the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisees were a group in Judaism focused on purity and living a holy life. Tax collectors were considered the extreme opposite. In order to be a tax collector, you would buy the right for a particular area, pay this tax to Rome on behalf of the entire area, and then you had the right to collect tax from the people for the amount paid and whatever else you wanted to live on. Tax collectors were permitted to use any means necessary to collect this tax. They would bully and threaten and as

a result were despised by the people. And they were providing support to the Roman occupation. They were traitors – the worst possible sinners. So we have a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. In this parable, who is the better person? We tend to judge and compare, don't we? And that's the reason Jesus told this parable **To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.** (Luke 18:9) Sometimes our efforts to feel good about ourselves cause us to look down on others. When I was a child, we would play this game "king of the hill" and we would try to be the one to get to the top of the hill, because from the top of the hill, we could look down on everyone else. We felt superior, but it was hard to stay there because everyone else wanted to be king of the hill. Sometime we reach a place where we no longer do what we used to do and we can look down on others who still do. ("I used to drink diet coke all the time but I know better now. And you still drink it? What's wrong with you?")

We take delight that we are not where others are. It's as if we used a magnifying glass to look at others, seeing every little fault they do – and when it comes to ourselves we don't do that – so we look pretty good. This can happen in marriages. We start seeing our spouse's faults and none of our own and that's a path to being miserable. It can happen in workplaces and organizations. It also happens among Christian churches – where one church or denomination sees themselves as superior to another. We see this in Islam between the Sunnis and Shias. How atheists looks at those who are religious. How Republicans see Democrats and Democrats see Republicans. Or between Packer fans and Vikings fans. I thank God that I am not like that person over there. Is it any wonder we have problems in our world? Do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples? **Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye.** In other words, stop using the magnifying glass on other people. Start with you. When all someone seems to do is focus on what's wrong with you, does that make you want to get close to them? What Jesus saw was that the religious were focused on what's wrong with everyone but themselves. And Wesley is asking us to look in our hearts to see if we struggle with this. And I think there are moments when we all struggle with this.

How do we change this pattern of behavior? The Greek word is metanoia – repentance – to think differently, to have a change of mind which leads to a change of heart which leads to change of behavior. It must start on the inside. I have to recognize I have a problem. Change is never possible until I recognize the problem. Repentance is saying, I recognize and I want to change – "Fill me with the Holy Spirit and change me." If I do that every day for 28 days what I say with my lips begins to take hold in heart and actions begin to change. What if every day for the next week whenever you think about complaining about another person, you say something positive? What if whenever you meet another person, you say something encouraging?

What John Wesley was doing was forming Christian character. The Greek word is CHARAKTER, which was a tool for engraving – "to etch or to engrave". Your character has been etched by something. We come here to be shaped by Jesus Christ, to allow the Holy Spirit to etch into our soul the image of God. That's Christian. And what's the proof that someone is Christian? It's not showing others how good or holy or righteous you are. It's not the ability to point out the faults of others. The defining character is love. Jesus said, this is how the world will know you are my disciples, if you love one another. He said, you can summarize the entire teaching of the Bible to the command to love God and love your neighbor. Paul says you have

everything in the world, but if you do not have love, you have nothing. This love is not the warm fuzzy feeling we often associate with love. This love is AGAPE, self-less, sacrificial, putting the needs of others before your own needs. It's seeking ways to bless and build others up. And when we live that, it draws others in and it draws us closer to the image of God.

It's like the story of Witold Pilecki. I came across his story last week. He was a Polish army captain just prior to the Second World War. He was also a deeply committed Christian. He believed human beings were the most precious thing and he would do anything to help them. In 1940, when the Nazi build what everybody thought was a prison camp for POWs, Pilecki was suspicious that Auschwitz was being used for something else – and he knew he had to find out. So he went to his commander and volunteered to be arrested by the Nazis and put in prison. But at first, his commanders would not approve the mission. That would be a death sentence. But Pilecki was determined to find out what was happening and finally his commanders approved. He left his wife and two kids whom he loved. He changed his name with forged papers and placed himself in the middle of a group of 2000 Jews who were rounded up and taken to Auschwitz. What Pilecki found was far worse than anyone had imagined. He was beaten and abused. Food rationed so prisoners would not live beyond six weeks. He smuggled out information about ovens and gas chambers and injections to kill – and at first people didn't believe his reports. They thought he was exaggerating. He spent 2 ½ years in Auschwitz until he escaped and authored the first intelligence report on Auschwitz. His intelligence helped the Allied forces capture that part of Poland, including Auschwitz. After the war, he joined the resistance movement against the Communists and two years later he was captured and shot. A Jewish journalist would write of Witold Pilecki: *"When he set his mind to the good, he never wavered, he never stopped. He crossed the great human divide that separated knowing the right thing from actually doing the right thing."*

Most of us will never be called upon to do anything like Witold Pilecki. Most of us will never find ourselves in a place where we must choose whether to risk our lives. So what does LOVE, agape kind of love, look like for us? A lot of little things – like serving on Martin Luther King Day to assemble health kits for people in need; serving a meal at Simpson for people who are homeless; listening to children read at Oakwood School. It's the decision you make every morning when you say: Lord, here I am. Send me. It's choosing to bless every person you meet with some word or act of kindness or encouragement – because the love of Christ has been etched into your character and that's who you are.

It's what the apostle Paul writes. **Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.** What if we made a word substitution, and every day this week you repeated these words but replaced the word "love" with your name. "Steve is patient, Steve is kind. Steve does not envy, does not boast, is not proud..." Speaking truth into your life and etching it into your character.

That's the defining character of the spiritual life. Wesley called this being perfected in love so that our thoughts, words and actions are not our own but the image of Christ etched into our character. It remains my hope that when people look at this church, they can say – "that's what love looks like."

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of February 18, 2018

Weekly Prayer: God, teach me to see others as you see them—through a lens of love, compassion and mercy. I pray that I might always remember that we are all lost without you. Amen.

Monday, February 19

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-8, 2 Timothy 1:6-9

Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Because of this, I'm reminding you to revive God's gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. God didn't give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled. So don't be ashamed of the testimony about the Lord or of me, his prisoner. Instead, share the suffering for the good news, depending on God's power. God is the one who saved and called us with a holy calling. This wasn't based on what we have done, but it was based on his own purpose and grace that he gave us in Christ Jesus before time began.

Observation: This is a hard question to ask yourself, but John Wesley prompted it for a very good reason. Pretending to be better than we are actually keeps us from knowing who we are and how we are doing. You don't need to create an impression that you are better than you are. God's grace says that you, just as you are, with all your cracks and flaws and blemishes, are amazing.

Application: Who do you have in your life who knows the real you? Seek one or more trustworthy people who can know you honestly and caringly, and give you honest feedback and guidance. Also remember that you need to do all you can to know the "real you" yourself. Write a letter to yourself identifying three areas of your life you would like to see grow. Seal it and save it (send a future email to yourself at futureme.org).

Prayer: God, help me to see myself as I truly am. Keep me from creating false versions of myself, and let me surround myself with people who I can be real with. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?

Tuesday, February 20

Scripture: Proverbs 11:11-13, Daniel 6:3-4

A city is honored by the blessing of the virtuous; it is destroyed by the words of the wicked. Whoever despises their neighbor lacks sense; a sensible person keeps quiet. A slanderer walks around revealing secrets, but a trustworthy person keeps a confidence.

Because of his extraordinary spirit, Daniel soon surpassed the other officers and the chief administrators—so much so that the king had plans to set him over the entire kingdom. As a result, the other officers and the chief administrators tried to find some problem with Daniel's work for the kingdom. But they couldn't find any problem or corruption at all because Daniel was trustworthy. He wasn't guilty of any negligence or corruption.

Observation: We know that trust is fundamental to establishing and sustaining strong relationships. So why do we feel the need to break trust by sharing matters told to us in confidence? Usually we feel the urge to relay private information because information is power. Humans love to let others know that we have access to powerful information. But as Christians when we cannot keep confidential matters private, we sabotage the very sense of community Jesus came to create.

Application: Has anyone ever betrayed your confidence? What happened after you discovered that your trust was broken? How did that experience affect that specific relationship, other relationships (especially if they were touched by the information wrongly shared), and your overall willingness and ability to trust others?

Prayer: Help me, God, to control my desire to reveal information that was told to me in confidence. Guard my tongue, and help me to think before I speak and act. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Do I confidentially pass on to others what was told to me in confidence?

Wednesday, February 21

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 7:1, Proverbs 14:29-32

My dear friends, since we have these promises, let's cleanse ourselves from anything that contaminates our body or spirit so that we make our holiness complete in the fear of God.

Patience leads to abundant understanding, but impatience leads to stupid mistakes. A peaceful mind gives life to the body, but jealousy rots the bones. Those who exploit the powerless anger their maker, while those who are kind to the poor honor God. The wicked are thrown down by their own evil, but the righteous find refuge even in death.

Observation: The behaviors John Wesley named in this question live inside all of us. We don't like that we possess these types of behavior, but we do. We work on becoming less of all of the above because when we express them, they have an adverse impact on our life and the lives of others around us. That's why God calls us to grow in our capacity to live above and beyond the above characteristics.

Application: Which of the characteristics in today's question do you struggle with most? The next time you find yourself reacting irritably, or feeling jealousy towards another person, take the time to question yourself and understand what is triggering your negative responses. Then identify healthy outlets for your negative feelings—like exercise (even a short walk), breath prayers, meditation, a gratitude journal, or playing with your dog.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, breathe in me so that my thoughts may be pure. Move in me so that my work may be pure. Pull me into your love so that I love only what is pure. Give me strength to guard my heart so that all I do is pure. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy, or distrustful?

Thursday, February 22

Scripture: Colossians 3:9-11

Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it. In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.

Observation: Wesley's question can help you evaluate your level of contentment with life. It can help you be true to your identity in Christ, remembering that Christ loves you for who you are as a child of God, not for what you do or have. And it can challenge you to reflect on your character, to discover how free you are to be content, be grateful, be you—and live inspired by your heavenly worth!

Application: Is there a truth about yourself that you need to tell someone? Is there something you need to “come clean” about, some exaggeration or falsehood that takes more and more energy to maintain? Set aside some private time with that person or group, confess your truth honestly, and set yourself free.

Prayer: Jesus, you modeled honesty—from your birth to your death, burial and resurrection. I pray that honesty may become one of my most valued and tangible virtues. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Am I honest in all my actions and words or do I exaggerate?

Friday, February 23

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end.

Observation: Today's question covers a lot of ground. Taking into account the people we fear, those we feel disdain or indifference towards, and the people we resent, the sum total can be a few people or many. We cannot fully live the Christian life, as Jesus meant us to, until we are at peace not only with God and our self, but also with others.

Application: Read Romans 12:9-17 (aloud if possible). Reflect on how living out those Scriptural principles can produce a positive response to today's question. As a first step, find a moment today to say something kind to someone you dislike or have intentionally steered clear of.

Prayer: Lord, change me. Replace comparison with compassion in my heart and mind, and make me more like Christ is—loving to all. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold resentment toward or disregard?

Saturday, February 24

Scripture: Matthew 28:19-20

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Observation: When John Wesley challenges us with the question, "When did I last speak to someone about my faith?" he is directly encouraging us to take up the challenge Jesus gave his disciples in Acts 1 to be his witnesses. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus challenged his followers to continue the mission and message of God's work. To respond faithfully to Wesley's question is to live a life of going, obeying and listening to the Holy Spirit, realizing that each one of us is sent into the world to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Application: Think through your story of personal transformation. How has your faith in God changed your life and made you a better person, who has a better effect on the lives of others? Spend some time writing your story down. When did you last speak to someone about your faith?

Prayer: God, you sent Jesus to show us the way. I pray that I would profess my trust in the saving grace of the gospel with courage and direction from the Holy Spirit, helping you draw my family and friends to your transforming love. Amen.

Growing Deeper: When did I last speak to someone about my faith?