



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 2: The Freedom of Christian Spirituality

Summary of last week:

“Spirituality” describes the arena where faith and action meet, where we learn to practice what we believe. “Spirituality” is the way God the Father works His gospel right through our lives and experience as His children. “Spirituality” is what God is doing in us to conform us fully to the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Whilst we have responsibilities in this process, in fact God our Father takes prime responsibility for this growth. The regular pattern by which He does this is: (1) He brings us to acknowledge our need for the Holy Spirit to teach us and to grow us; (2) in answer to this need, the Spirit takes us to God’s Word, showing us all that is ours in Christ ; and (3) to work this through us so it is experience and not simply knowledge, God our Father leads us through trials, difficulties, hardships and temptations. “Spirituality” grows in the setting of conflict; there are powers under Satan’s leadership which oppose us as God conforms us to the likeness of His Son.

Additional note: “Spirituality” may actually be an interchangeable term for “discipleship” or “Christian living”. What is good about the term “spirituality” is it reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the main agent of all that happens in us.

The Goal of God’s Work in Us

James 1:3-4 “... the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work *so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*”

Hebrews 12:10-11 “... but God disciplines us for our good, *that we may share in His holiness.* No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on , however, *it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace* for those who have been trained by it.”

Eph: 4:13 “... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, *attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*”

1John 3:2 “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that *when he appears, we shall be like him,* for we shall see him as he is.”

Rom. 8:19-21 “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and *brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*”

The intention of God for us, the goal of all of His saving work, enacted in Jesus Christ and brought home to us by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, can be summarised in the phrase *glorious liberty*. The Scriptures talk about this freedom in ways which are not always the same as the way in which we as sinful human beings think about freedom. This *glorious liberty* is *freedom from* domineering and destructive powers (Satan, sin, the world, the flesh, and death) and *freedom into* full relationship with God as obedient children. It is freedom from the *supposed* freedom of sinful independence and self-assertion, which actually ends up in terrible slavery and bondage.

This freedom is spoken of in a *future* aspect in the verses above. It is not fully and finally our possession yet. It is freedom that we know primarily in hope. We look forward to the day when we will shall be unveiled in the full likeness of Christ, in every way conformed to his glorious freedom as the obedient Son of the Father who shares in all His Father’s holiness. And all this in a creation which itself has been freed from all bondage and is in full freedom. At the moment, however, we find outside us the fullness of freedom—we find sin still dwells within our mortal bodies (Rom. 7:14ff), that death that last enemy is still to be faced (1Thess. 4:13), that there is sorrow and suffering now, that the world still presses in on us with its attempts to squeeze us into its mould, and that Satan works his evil and destructive works in the world (1Pet. 5:8). But, whilst the *fullness* is not here, the Holy Spirit has been given to us as a foretaste or a guarantee of our future freedom (Eph. 1:13b-14). It is the Holy Spirit who is revealing to us the unimaginably great future that God has in store for us (1Cor. 2:9-10).

A Christian “spirituality of freedom” describes how this glorious future freedom works through in our day to day living in the Spirit now.

The Battle to be “Spiritual”

Within Christian circles often people find that there seems to be a large separation in their understanding of God’s dealings with us in Christ—which are all by grace freely received by faith which is also His gift—and their understanding of the dynamics of Christian living.

For some, it seems that salvation is itself a cause of great joy and delight, but that Christian living devolves into drudgery and dour doing of duty. “Spirituality” or “discipleship” or “Christian living” seems like the unpleasant pay-off for the free gift of salvation.

Or alternatively, it seems that salvation makes no difference at all to the lives some lead as Christians. They seem to receive God’s salvation in Christ, and then think that they can just go on living as they will, doing whatever pleases them without any thought of whether this pleases God and is according to His will.

On one side it seems like the joy of grace doesn’t enter into the dynamics of Christian life; on the other side it seems like grace makes no impact at all, but becomes a bland seal of approval on us and all our behaviour! The New Testament seems to face both these problems and much is written there specifically to counter these two dangers.

In Germany in the time of the rise of Hitler, these problems were faced by thoughtful Christians. At that time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote his very influential book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He saw the problem of what he called *cheap grace*. However, Christian joy disappears when we speak of dear or costly grace, if by that we mean dear and costly to us in the changes and demands that grace brings to us. Through these studies I am trusting that we will find what the New Testament says about these matters and that we will be gripped afresh with the joy of the holy freedom that is ours in Christ.

A quote of Helmut Thielicke to mull over:

In the structuring of our whole life we begin by reckoning with the fact that this Creator has a demanding will and therefore demands to make upon us.... We also accept as necessary from his hands the hard – and the hard to understand – lot that may come to our personal life or country – not only the pleasant things such as the magic of an alpine sunrise or sunset....¹

Is Spirituality About Escape?

And also there is the problem that normal life in this world seems to *get in the way* of our spirituality, our Christian living. Concern for work, relationships, marriage, raising a family, managing finances, buying a house, even responsibilities at church (1) all seem to compete with, or detract from the real spiritual side of life. All these other things seem so *unspiritual*. Many Christian people feel guilty about all this.

In the Scriptures as a whole, the basic view of a human being is that of a unified entity, not a split and fractured one. It is true that the New Testament speaks of us being “spirit, soul and body”—but these elements cannot be separated out from one another. Moreover, none of them is more “godly” or “spiritual” than the other, the spirit included! Our spirit is as much part of our created reality as our bodies. Our spirit is more likely to be the throne of our fleshliness and sinfulness than our bodies!

The Scriptures do not make categories of human activities some of which are more spiritual than others. In Romans 12:1 we are urged to present our bodies to God as an act of spiritual worship. What we do with our bodies in this worship is spelled out in the next few chapters: and it includes such things as not being proud, but associating with the lowly, not just the well-to-do or popular (12:16); being constant in prayer (12:12); obeying government regulations (13:1ff); paying your taxes (13:7); using the particular gifts God has given you to serve Him and your brothers and sisters (12:3ff); not being a burden and debtor to others (13:8ff); being gracious and tolerant with those who seem to have more sensitive consciences than you (14:1ff).

For this reason we must not see spirituality as an escape from life in this world. It is in fact about full participation in this world in the createdness of our nature.

Where we are going this term

For the rest of this term, we are going to spend time looking at the freedom that is granted us by the Holy Spirit as he brings the gospel to bear its fruit in our lives. This will mean taking some time to examine just how we have been in slavery and bondage.

¹ Helmut Thielicke, *Man in God's World: The Faith and Courage To Live and To Die*

Jesus said, right at the start of his ministry, that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him because the Father had anointed him to

“... preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:16-21)

This freedom and release was being announced and effected even as he read out this passage from Isaiah. Everything Jesus was doing in his gospel work was for freedom’s sake! He said to those who showed interest in his teaching that holding to his word would bring them to know the truth, and that the truth would make them free. This was to people who thought themselves free, but who were in terrible slavery, bound up in servitude to sin and to their false father, the devil (John 8:31ff). It is my hope that the joy of the freedom we have in Christ will infect us and overwhelm us!

So, for this term the studies will be:

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| Mar 1 | Free from Satan’s snare to knowing the Father |
| Mar 8 | Free from guilt and judgment to peace and righteousness |
| Mar 15 | Free from sin’s power into obedience |
| Mar 22 | Free from death’s grip into abundant life |
| Mar 29 | Free from hatred and selfishness into love and service |
| Apr 5 | Free from idols into worship and joy |
| Apr 12 | Free from futility into fruitfulness |

Finally, a hymn...

1. Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my
sword,
And I shall conqueror be.
I sink in life’s alarms
When by myself I stand;
Imprison me within Thine arms,
And strong shall be my hand.
2. My heart is weak and poor
Until it master find;
It has no spring of action
sure—
It varies with the wind.
It cannot freely move,
Till Thou hast wrought its
chain;
Enslave it with Thy matchless
love,
And deathless it shall reign.
3. My power is faint and low
Till I have learned to serve;
It wants the needed fire to
glow,
It wants the breeze to nerve;
It cannot drive the world,
Until itself be driven;
Its flag can only be unfurled
When Thou shalt breathe from
heaven.
4. My will is not my own
Till Thou hast made it Thine;
If it would reach a monarch’s
throne
It must its crown resign;
It only stands unbent,
Amid the clashing strife,
When on Thy bosom it has
leant,
And found in Thee its life.

George Matheson, 1842—1906