



Core Seminar How to Grow Class 1: Biblical Spirituality & Sanctification

I. Introduction

Welcome to the Spiritual Disciplines core seminar in our “Christian Life” track. Over the next 14 weeks, we will be looking at the practice of a number of personal spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines include things like Bible intake, prayer, confession of sin, fasting, evangelism, serving, and stewardship. We will also think about how we can cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

For today’s class, we want to **first** consider the broader topic of biblical spirituality. Then, **second**, we want to place the spiritual disciplines in an understanding of a Christian’s progressive sanctification.

II. Biblical Spirituality

Among Christians in recent decades, the notion of “spirituality” has been emptied of meaning. People, often those who disassociate themselves from any type of organized religion, describe themselves as “spiritual” if they have an unexplainable feeling. D. A. Carson put it like this, “Not all spirituality is spiritual.” Therefore, Christians must let Scripture determine what “spirituality” is. Otherwise, the pursuit of spirituality can devolve into nothing more than the pursuit of an experience. And the spiritual disciplines can become merely techniques that enable us to attain this experience.

Before we begin to discuss “biblical spirituality” we have to ask two questions. **First**, “What does it mean to be ‘spiritual’?” And **second**, “Since there is a wide range of people and ideas claiming this word ‘spiritual’, should Christians even use it?”

Let's answer the second question first. “Yes,” Christians should use the term “spiritual.” In his book, *The God Who Draws Near*, Michael Haykin writes that the Latin term *spiritus*, is where we get the English term spirituality. This term was first used in the 5th century to urge Christians to live a life in accord with the Holy Spirit. Haykin writes that the use of the word in its Latin origins help us to see that “true spirituality is intimately bound up with the Holy Spirit and his work.” As Christians, to be “spiritual” is central to what it means to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

How do we know how to be spiritual then? Well, this is why we will call Christian spirituality “biblical spirituality”.

The term “biblical spirituality” has a dual sense. **(1)** It refers to a spirituality that is biblical, that is, to a spirituality determined by the Scriptures. The Bible defines the shape and structure of spirituality. And **(2)** it refers to a spirituality that is driven by biblical content. In other words, the Bible is also the resource for spirituality. The Bible shapes and drives Christian spirituality.

So, what does the Bible say about spirituality?

A. True Spirituality Is Centered Upon Knowing the Triune God

This is the opposite of the self-centered “spirituality” that is so prevalent in the popular culture. Biblical spirituality is focused on knowing God, as He has revealed Himself in His Word. We know Him as the Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Spirit. As Christians, our relationship involves all three Persons of the Godhead. Consider Paul’s benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14, where blessing is pronounced through God the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 13:14

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

This verse captures the heart of Paul’s doctrine of salvation. Look at it again. In it, we see God’s loving determination to save His people through the Lord Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, and the ongoing application of that grace through the Holy Spirit. This verse also serves as a passageway into Paul’s understanding of God. The grace of God that lies at the base of the Christian life is found only in Christ and through the Spirit. For Paul, to truly encounter God in a meaningful way is to deal with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

B. It Consists of Knowing Ourselves in Light of Scripture

It’s only as we come to know the God of the Bible that we really begin to know ourselves. John Calvin puts it this way: “It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”¹

Before God’s majesty, we are humbled at our sinfulness in contrast to God’s righteousness and holiness. Without such a revelation of our true nature outside of Christ, there can be no spirituality. One of the classical descriptions of man’s encounter with God’s holiness is found in Isaiah 6:1-5.

Isaiah 6:1-5

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2** Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. **3** And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” **4** And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called. And the house was filled with smoke. **5** And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

To call God ‘holy’ is to speak of His transcendence and moral purity. Notice Isaiah’s response: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Now that Isaiah has seen the authority and majesty of the Lord, he sees himself as he really is—as all men actually are. We are all created in God’s image that we might glorify Him. But we have all rebelled against our Creator and fallen short of His glory. Apart from Christ, we are all spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins.

C. It Is Christ-Centered

¹ John Calvin, *Intitutes of the Christian Religion* (Battles Translation), 1.2.37

When we see ourselves in light of God's holiness, we realize our need for a Savior. The Bible, God's word, bears witness about this Savior in passages like Ephesians 1:3-14. All three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned in this passage, but there is a particular focus on the centrality of Christ in the Father's plan (v. 9-10).

Ephesians 1:3-14

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹²so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Such Christ-centeredness is evident in the rest of the New Testament as well. The Gospels reveal who Jesus is and what He came to do. Jesus is declared to be the fountain of all knowledge and wisdom (Col. 2:3), the One who sustains every particle of the universe and every fiber of our being (Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:3). He is set forth as the supreme reason for living (2 Cor. 5:9). Christ is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature (Heb. 1:3). The name of Jesus is supreme, for there is no other name by which sinners can be saved (Acts. 4:12). Christ is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! (Rev. 5:12)

D. It Is Gospel-Centered

How can sinners like us approach a perfectly holy God? If we are still in our sins, the presence of God will terrify rather than invite us. Isaiah understood this when he cried out, "Woe is me!" Our sins have separated us from a holy God. Because He is righteous and just, He cannot let sin go unpunished. Therefore, His wrath remains on those who continue in their rebellion against Him. We were once, like the rest of mankind, rebels against God, children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). While we were still in our sins, there was alienation and enmity between God and us. But Jesus bore God's wrath in the place of those who trust in him, and then he rose from the dead in victory over sin and death. If we trust in Jesus and what he's done for us, then we can be forgiven and reconciled to God. This is the good news of the gospel.

What does this mean for biblical spirituality? It means that the center of our worship and spirituality rest on Christ and what he's done for us. We cannot think about Jesus too much. Access to God in prayer, worship, fellowship -- all of this is available to us because of the gospel. A passionate focus on the crucified Christ must be a central feature of any spirituality that claims to be biblical and evangelical.

E. It Is a Spirituality of the Word

It is especially important that we emphasize this point, because today it is assumed that spirituality is something more profound than just words. The Bible is left behind in favor of dreams, feelings, and ecstatic experiences. The Bible, however, attests to its own divine authorship, its authority, and its sufficiency.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

As Christians, we should therefore be “people of the book.” Peter Adam, in his book "Hearing God's Words," describes the shape of biblical spirituality this way:

- *Its content and focus is God in Christ.*
- *Its practice is hearing the word of God by faith.*
- *Its experience is that of meeting God in His Spirit-given words.*
- *Its result is trust in Christ and our heavenly Father.*

F. It Is a Corporate Spirituality, Lived Out in Loving Fellowship with Other Believers

Spirituality is often assumed to be a personal if not private matter, and spiritual growth is assumed to be individual rather than corporate. But we are fundamentally members of communities, members of the body of Christ, part of the people of God. Therefore, we are affected more than we realize by the communities to which we belong.

In other words, although this is a class about the personal spiritual disciplines, we must be careful not to neglect the corporate nature of the Christian life. The personal spiritual disciplines complement our life together as a church.

Indeed, all the personal spiritual disciplines have a significant corporate element. Our Bible intake not only nourishes us, but it also equips us to counsel and edify others. Similarly, there ought to be a component of intercession for others in our prayers. Confession of sin is not only individual, but we also confess sin corporately as a community of God’s people. The practice of evangelism, service, and stewardship are also carried out in partnership with other believers. Finally, the fruit of the Spirit cannot be cultivated in isolation from other believers.

Spirituality that is personal and not corporate is sure to be unfruitful because maturity is fundamentally corporate in the New Testament. Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 4:11-13.

Ephesians 4:11-13

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

G. Summary

To summarize, understanding biblical spirituality has tremendous significance for how we think about the personal spiritual disciplines. Our practice of the spiritual disciplines must be God-centered, Christ-centered, and word-centered. The Bible is foundational. Bible intake is not just one of many spiritual disciplines—it is *the primary resource* that fuels our practice of the other spiritual disciplines. Finally, we do not practice the spiritual disciplines in isolation from other Christians. Rather, we grow in maturity together as members of a local church.

III. Sanctification and the Spiritual Disciplines

To better understand how the spiritual disciplines relate to our sanctification, let us first examine what the Bible teaches about sanctification. The word “sanctify” means “make holy” or “grow in holiness.”

A. Sanctification Has a Definite Beginning at Conversion

This is what theologians refer to as “positional sanctification.” We see this in passages that imply that believers have been once and for all sanctified. It involves a definite break from the ruling power and love of sin, so that a believer is no longer ruled or dominated by sin and no longer loves to sin. There is a reorientation of our desires so that we no longer have a dominant love for sin in our lives.

This is the reason why all Christians are commonly described as “saints” in the New Testament. The term “saint” isn’t only reserved for some sort of elite group of Christians. In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul tells the Corinthians that they have been sanctified by virtue of their conversion.

1 Corinthians 1:2-3

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we are in Christ, in other words, we belong to the realm of the holy. We are sanctified definitively in relation to God.

B. Sanctification Increases Throughout Life

This second sense of sanctification is commonly understood as the progressive growth in godliness in the Christian life. Understood in this way, sanctification is a process. Much of the New Testament contains instructions to believers in various churches on how they should grow in likeness to Christ. All of the moral exhortations and commands in the New Testament exhort believers to greater sanctification in their lives.

Romans 6:19

¹⁹I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

Those who have been liberated from slavery to sin and have become slaves of righteousness should live in a holy way. As Christians, we are to grow more and more in sanctification, just as we previously progressed more and more in sin.

Paul himself is an example of this. He speaks in Philippians 3 of pressing forward in the Christian life. In fact, this recognition of the need for constant growth and progress is a mark of maturity.

Philippians 3:12-15

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.

Similarly, the author of Hebrews tells his readers to, “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely,” and to run the race of the Christian life with endurance (Heb. 12:1). Hebrews 12:14 exhorts us to, “strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

C. Sanctification Is Completed when Christ Returns

Our sanctification will never be completed in this life. Sanctification involves the whole person, including our physical bodies. Once we appreciate this, we then realize that sanctification will not be entirely completed until the Lord returns and we receive new resurrection bodies (cf. 1 Cor. 15). We await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ from heaven. At that time, he will, “transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). We can hear this idea in 1 John 3:2.

1 John 3:2

² Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

The ultimate goal of sanctification is Christ-likeness. If we are in Christ, then God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son.

Our glorification is the ultimate end that God has purposed for His people. God chose us in Christ with the ultimate goal that we would be holy and blameless before Him when we appear in His presence (Eph. 1:4). Those whom God has called and justified, He will also glorify (Rom. 8:30). God, who began a good work in us, “will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil. 1:6)

D. Implications for Our Practice of the Spiritual Disciplines

1. *We practice the spiritual disciplines because have already been sanctified in Christ.*

- Our practice of the spiritual disciplines flows from the newness of life that we have by virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection. The spiritual disciplines do not earn us new life; rather they are the fruit of our new life in Christ.
- The ethical demands (imperatives) of Scripture always flow from our being in Christ (indicative).
- Being in Christ means that the Holy Spirit, who grants new life, dwells in us. The Spirit strengthens us so that we are able to live in a way that is pleasing to God. Romans 8:3-8 is a description of life in the Spirit. Paul affirms that all who are in Christ now walk according to the Spirit and think on spiritual things. Practicing the spiritual disciplines is a part of what it means to walk in the Spirit.

2. *We practice the spiritual disciplines because we need to grow in godliness.*

- We live in the interval between the “already” and the “not yet.” We have already been sanctified in Christ, but our sanctification is not yet complete and will only be completed when Christ returns. We still need to make progress in our sanctification.
- This is why we experience tension and struggle in our pursuit of holiness. We need constant exhortations to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- The work of the cross is complete; believers are forgiven, transformed, ransomed and saved. At the same time, the imperatives of the Bible urge us to live in way that honors God. They are also consistent with our salvation in Christ.
- We have been freed from sin’s dominion. Yet, we must consciously choose to present ourselves in obedience to God and to prevent sin from exercising its rule in our lives (Rom. 6:6-14).
- The spiritual disciplines are a means to godliness. Paul exhorts Timothy in 1 Timothy 4 to train or discipline himself for godliness. This verse tells us that our goal in the Christian life should be godliness, and that the pursuit of this goal requires effort and exertion on our part. We cannot be passive if we are to grow in our sanctification.

3. We practice the spiritual disciplines because our hope of glory in Christ is certain.

- We saw earlier in 1 John 3:2 that when Christ returns, we shall be like Him because we shall receive new, glorious resurrection bodies.
- This hope of glory in Christ ought to motivate us to pursue godliness and the practice of the spiritual disciplines.
- Our hope is certain. Let us therefore persevere in our pursuit of holiness, knowing our labor is not in vain in the Lord Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS [Consider Phil. 1:6, we grow into what we have definitively been saved into. Rom. 6:19]

IV. Why This Matters

A biblical understanding of spirituality and sanctification is vital for the right practice of the spiritual disciplines. As we have seen, biblical spirituality and sanctification both have their foundation in Christ and His gospel. We therefore need to guard against a legalistic view of the spiritual disciplines. If we think that the spiritual disciplines earn us God’s favor and approval, they will become distasteful duty or bitter pride. Instead the spiritual disciplines “enable us, who have been made righteous by Christ, to breathe more deeply the resources that God freely and lovingly provides for the wisdom, joy, and strength of Christian living.”² The spiritual disciplines are *means of grace*, as well as a *response* to God’s grace.

² Chapell, Bryan *Christ-Centered Preaching, Redeeming the Expository Sermon, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 293.