

## Cultivating Love & Desire

*Toward a spirituality of the road  
that we want to own...*

Romans 7:14-25<sup>1</sup>; Luke 6:43-49<sup>2</sup>

Over this and next week, I want to come back to our theme of ‘discipleship’, which, one way and another, we have been exploring in Luke’s Gospel this year. I want to look at the question: how then do we live? That is to say, not just *what* is the Gospel nor even *what* does the Christian life look like, but *how* are we *empowered* to live the life of Christ in this world?

In many ways my reflections today and next week, come out of my own spiritual journey and so I offer them not so much as an unpacking of our scripture texts today but as something to “bump up” against them.

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I guess from the beginning of my new life in Christ, I’ve been on something of a quest; and the Holy Grail of which I’ve been in search, is to do with my need to go deeper into the life of God and to find that *sustaining liberty* and *peace* of Christ held out as the “spiritual life” but so seldom realised. This is the life characterised by John the Evangelist as the “abundant life”,<sup>3</sup> and by Saint Paul as the “life in the Spirit”,<sup>4</sup> full of grace and peace”.<sup>5</sup> I haven’t finished thinking through these things and so this sermon is a work in progress and will, I suspect, remain so. Never-the-less, I have decided to put a few of my thoughts down and invite you to explore them with me. Maybe we can finish it together? Anyway, here goes...

As I’ve said, for some years now, I have struggled to develop a disciplined inner life in God – a “spiritual life”. I have wanted a spirituality that works for an extrovert not just for introverted types, a spirituality that flows out naturally in business, or at the pub, or the movies, or on the sports field, or dealing with an aggressive person who has just pinched my park and so on... a spirituality that I can live anywhere, not just at church, weekend retreats or contemplative prayer or ‘Life Groups’ – but “a spirituality of the road”, as South African theologian David Bosch has put it.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, in a related quest, I have been giving a lot of thought to ethics – how we live our lives with *each other*. I guess my question has been: Can I have an ethic that works – that *empowers* rather than condemns, that brings freedom not guilt, that brings life not death?

What I have come to see is that I do, of course, have an ethical life, a spirituality (call it what you will), only it isn't necessarily the one I really want. My spirituality – the spirituality I *actually* take with me and live out, not the one I *profess* to live out – is what stands behind the characteristic way I relate to my world. My spirituality is what drives my response to, and makes sense of, my relationship with God's creation, with others, with myself and with God. In other words, my spirituality is how I put my life together and make meaning out of it. It's that integration point, the "deep centre", that motivates and shapes how I respond in life's many situations.

The wise man once said in the Book of Proverbs: "Above all else guard your heart,<sup>7</sup> for from it flow the issues of life".<sup>8</sup> The idea here that it is from the pre-cognitive centre of ourselves, that place from which we make our fundamental religious commitment and from which we "*know*", that all else flows.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus put it this way: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also".<sup>10</sup> And again, as we heard in our reading today, "For it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks".<sup>11</sup>

Over the last few years I have spent a lot of time trying to identify honestly just what this "abundance of the heart" is for me – the real contours of my inner life, my *actual* spirituality, as distinct from the one I may say I want or believe I live. I've been asking myself questions like: how do I characteristically respond to this or that person or situation? How do I behave towards others and myself? What does this tell me about what drives me – where my treasure *really* lies? What is my *deep desire*?

This has been an interesting journey, if not a somewhat self-absorbed one at times. Self-knowledge is good, even if elusive and obscured behind my self-deceits and limited horizons.<sup>12</sup> Yet the real questions, the questions I probably mean to ask, remain: how can I have a God centred spirituality that is useful in my daily life – a Jesus centred spirituality of the road? How can I have a spirituality that is *sustainable, life giving* and *empowering*?

Christian spiritualities that I have generally encountered tend to be based either on a ‘retreat’ model or a form of rigorous discipline concerned with doing what is right.

We tend to retreat from the world to church, camps, conferences, monasteries’, spiritual retreats, weekly study groups and son on, in order to build up our spiritual head of steam. Wheels spinning, we then rocket off “into the world” until we lose power and need another escape from daily life to build up steam again.

As life goes on many of us lose interest in this kind of spiritual dynamic, either finding it exhausting and unsustainable or simply unreal. I know it doesn’t *have* to be like this: taking time out, or setting aside time to come away from our daily lives so we can then critically reflect on them and invite God into our ordinary lives, can be helpful. For many, though, ‘retreat spirituality’ often means ‘escapist spirituality’ with little connection to daily life.

But while this type of spirituality can at times appear disconnected from daily life, the alternative approach can seem devoid of grace and inner sustenance. The tendency is to either embrace some sort of aesthetic discipline – a kind of modern version of pole sitting – or adopt some sort of full on exclusive lifestyle with the idea of practicing “*real*” Christianity, something unattained apparently, by lesser, luke warm types.

Moreover, it seems to me that this sort of spirituality has a built in assumption of failure. I’m never good enough so I crawl back to God, get excused, embrace the impossible set of ideals I call the Gospel and then go out to fail again.

Both Jesus and Paul reserved their harshest criticism to this sort of spirituality. For Jesus it is what lay beneath his critique of the Pharisees.<sup>13</sup> For Paul it is what motivated in polemic with the so called ‘Judaisers’ and their list of things that were required if people are *really* to follow Jesus and worship the one true God.<sup>14</sup>

There is a sense in which both of these approaches to spirituality are *doectic*<sup>15</sup> in essence. That is, they seem to me to be “*world denying*” rather than *affirming* of our mundane material lives as we experience them. They seem to affirm that our common experience is somehow lesser than a life we can achieve through pursuing this course or that at a ‘higher’ level.

In this regard, they have more in common with Aristotle's "virtuous life" than they do with the Christian spirituality.<sup>16</sup> Both for the spiritual aesthete or the activist, prayer easily becomes "self-talk", talk that is ostensibly directed to God but is in fact "talking up" the behaviour we believe desirable.<sup>17</sup> Rather than entering into the mystery of God's immanence – God's *activity* in this world and in our lives together with God – prayer and spirituality, along with activism and personal discipline become all about us.<sup>18</sup>

But it's not just that these approaches lend themselves to Pelagianism,<sup>19</sup> ultimately, they just seem not "doable" if we take living an ordinary life well – a reality with which the Apostle Paul also wrestled.<sup>20</sup>

The task here, then, is to move our life in God beyond spiritual new-year resolutions, or narcissistic psychobabble, or cultural or political boundary markers of identity, or a spirituality that sets us up for failure.

So where to from here?

Thinking through all this and trying to put it together, the thing that has been coming to me is that, in the end, it is all to do with *love* and *desire* – God's love for me (and all creation), and, as a response to this love, my desire to love God back. In this way, Christian spirituality and Christian ethics are inextricably linked, since they are about *devotion*; or, as Augustine argued, the Christian life is about my deep-seated, underlying commitment to doing what we *really* want.<sup>21</sup>

If, for a moment, we accept this, two issues emerge: knowing what I *really* want *and* being able to live it. Let me unpack this a little taking the last issue first...

When I behave well toward my wife and family, it is not because there is a law which tells me I have to (though there are such a laws), nor even any nagging hunch that I should. No: I behave as I *should* and *must* because I *want* to, because I love my wife and family and want only good for them – and so I am devoted to my family and them to me. With each of us behaving the same toward the other, this is what sustains our family life together and becomes our family spirituality, our family culture and ethic. This is, of course, Augustine's understanding of the life of God in trinity. A relational dynamic held together *not* by rule of law, but by love, springing from a nature that truly *desires* to love.

Getting to the point here... It is *love* and *desire* which *empower* us to do the right thing, not our knowledge of what we should or ought to do.

By analogy, then, it is our relationship with Jesus – the one who loves us,<sup>22</sup> the one full of grace and Truth,<sup>23</sup> the one who gives us life in its fullness<sup>24</sup> – which empowers us to live the spiritual life.<sup>25</sup> We love because we are connected to the beloved who loves us.<sup>26</sup> Augustine put this succinctly when he said the Christian life is to “love God and do what you want”.<sup>27</sup>

There are, of course, a couple of problems with this. The example I have given above may seem self-evidently true but it may not be, given certain circumstances or in different cultural, social or political contexts. We may think we know what we want, what our felt needs are – perhaps through life experiences, self-reflection or even therapy – but we don’t always.<sup>28</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah says that “the heart is deceitful above all things”.<sup>29</sup> We are told in the book of Genesis that, “The Lord saw how great human wickedness on earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the time”.<sup>30</sup>

Eve and Adam *thought* they knew what they wanted, they desired knowledge and autonomy, to be like God. They found instead, not just loss of innocence, but alienation from themselves, each other and the world around them.

The apostle Paul also talks about our deep-seated blindness as human beings separated from, even enemies of, God and, therefore, of ourselves.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, we often don’t recognise or can’t accept being told what our *real* or *deep* desires are – as opposed to our *felt need* or *surface* desires, because we do not fully know ourselves as God created us to be.

By contrast the Evangelist John recalls Jesus saying, “If you love me, you *will* keep my commandments.”<sup>32</sup> It is love for Jesus which empowers the commandment keeping, not the other way around.

So then, do we do away with the law and simply do what seems the natural and loving thing? No, we need the law,<sup>33</sup> *not* as an ideal to which we *aspire* nor as a set of *rules* to apply to life situations; rather, we need the law to point us to *the truth about what love is*<sup>34</sup> – and so our need for that love found in Christ.

Seen this way, the law calls out to us, it asks us, “isn’t this what you really desire? Don’t you really hunger for a deeply meaningful life? Then put God before all other commitments. Don’t you want a healthy family? Then respect your parents and show fidelity to your spouse. Don’t you want a society that works? Then love your neighbour as yourself, don’t cheat, steal or lie” – and so on. Don’t you want justice? Then don’t settle for revenge.

God’s law, then, is not empowering, rather, it functions to tell us what our deep desires really are. God’s law shows us the *shape* of love.

So far so good... We live our lives out of our deep desires and God’s word reveals to us what these desires are. Not that easy...

The problem is that our experience contradicts this. Even when we do recognise not only what we want to do (out of love) but also what we should do (from scripture), we seem powerless to do it. As the Apostle Paul put it,<sup>35</sup> “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do”.<sup>36</sup>

Worse still, knowing the truth seems to only provoke in us a desire to do the opposite. “For when we were controlled by the sinful nature,<sup>37</sup> the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.”<sup>38</sup>

Paul says that when our consciences prick for transgressing the law, we show that the law is good (otherwise we wouldn’t feel bad about it).<sup>39</sup> The problem is we somehow don’t seem to love God in such a way that we are empowered to do what is right. Quite the opposite in fact.<sup>40</sup>

Paul’s solution to this is to urge us toward laying hold of the life in the Spirit and our future hope in Christ.<sup>41</sup>

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the *Spirit* have their minds set on what the *Spirit* desires.<sup>42</sup>

But how does this happen? How do we appropriate this life in Christ’s Spirit to ourselves? How do we cultivate this whole hearted devotion to God, this empowering love of the Spirit filled life that bears the fruit of the Spirit? How do we enter into a relationship with God that is as real and life giving (even more so), as that which we have with our lover, or family, or friend, so that I

do what the law calls out for me to do? And how can what the law requires become what we *really* desire to do, so that we can live an everyday spiritual life which sustains and nurtures – a spirituality of the road?

It is to these questions we will be returning over the next two weeks...

## Endnotes:

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- <sup>1</sup> ROM.7:14-25 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.
- So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!
- <sup>2</sup> LK.6:43-49 "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn-bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.
- "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete."
- <sup>3</sup> Jn.10:10.
- <sup>4</sup> See all of Rom.8 for what this means – read Rom7. To understand the issue that Paul is dealing with.
- <sup>5</sup> Rom.1:7; Tit.1:4; 2Pet.1:2.
- <sup>6</sup> David Bosch, *Spirituality Of The Road*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> The Hebrew / biblical understanding of the heart was that it was the centre of ourselves – the source of all thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions. Refer to the *IVP New Bible Dictionary* for a good treatment of this.
- <sup>8</sup> or: "...for it is the wellspring of life". Prov.4:23. See also Prov.16:23.
- <sup>9</sup> Jer.24:7 "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart." Note that this applies to nations and societies not just individuals. Similarly, throughout scripture – not just the Old testament – it is always the nations" that are in view in talk of God's redemptive purposes – but that's another story.
- <sup>10</sup> Matt.26:21.
- <sup>11</sup> Lk.6:45.
- <sup>12</sup> Jer.17:9. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"
- <sup>13</sup> Matt.23:1-12, see especially v.4.
- <sup>14</sup> Gal.1:6-9. This conflict can be seen fully blown at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. For Paul there can be no agenda that sits between the person and Jesus and has to be met before this relationship can exist.
- <sup>15</sup> In Christian terminology, Docetism (from the Greek δοκεῖν/δόκησις *dokein* (to seem) /*dókēsis* (apparition, phantom), is broadly taken as the belief that Jesus only seemed to be human, and that his physical body was a phantasm. In more general terms Docetism is the elevation of the spiritual over the physical or mundane. The word *docetai* (illusionists) referring to early groups who denied Jesus' humanity. It appears to have arisen over theological contentions concerning the meaning, figurative or literal, of a sentence from the Gospel of John: "the Word was made flesh". (Jn.1:1.) Docetism was unequivocally rejected at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 and is regarded as heretical by the Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, and many others.
- <sup>16</sup> See *The Puzzle Of Ethics* (Peter Vardy & Paul Grosch, Fount/ Harper Collins, 1999) for a good summary of this.
- <sup>17</sup> Even practising certain forms of "mindfulness", centering prayer and contemplation can seem to have more in common with stress management and other self improvement techniques than they do growing us into an active, Christ centred, Spirit filled life.
- <sup>18</sup> Lk.17:20b-21.
- <sup>19</sup> Pelagianism is a theology named after Pelagius (AD 354 – AD 420/440). It is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid. See for a reasonable summary.
- <sup>20</sup> ...and, for that matter, the entire Jewish nation - see NT Wright's Treatment of Rom.7 in, '*Romans In A Week*', Regent College Taped Lecture Series, [www.regent-bookstore.com](http://www.regent-bookstore.com)
- <sup>21</sup> See note 25 below.
- <sup>22</sup> 1Jn.4:9.
- <sup>23</sup> Jn.1:14.
- <sup>24</sup> Jn.10:10b.

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<sup>25</sup> 2Cor.5:14.

<sup>26</sup> 1 John 4:19; Galatians 3:26-27; Matthew 3:17; Matthew 17:5; Mark 1:11; Mark 9:7; Luke 3:22; Luke 9:35; 2 Peter 1:17.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine wrote *Dilige, et quod vis fac* meaning “Love, and do what you will”, though it is also seen quoted as *Ama Deum et fac quod vis* (Love God, and do what you want). See, for instance, Russell, Rev. James S.J., Ed. “The Irish Monthly: A Magazine of General Literature.” *Pigeonhole Paragraphs*. Vol 25, pp. 186. 1897. Available Online [Books.google.com](http://Books.google.com)<sup>[6]</sup>

<sup>28</sup> This is the problem with an approach to spirituality that focuses upon what I think and I feel, upon what I do and don't do etc., rather than upon what God has created us to be and to do. The assumption that I have the truth within me waiting for me to discover it (as opposed to it being revealed to me in God's Word through the Spirit – 1Jn.4:13.). Whilst it has much to recommend it, Rogerian counselling (and much contemporary human development thinking), suffers from the same assumption.

<sup>29</sup> Jer.17:9.

<sup>30</sup> Gen.6:5.

<sup>31</sup> Rom.1:18, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Jn.14:15. *c.f.* also 1Jn.4.

<sup>33</sup> The *torah*, quintessentially expressed in Ex.20:1-17 and summarised by Jesus in Mt.22:37-40 “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”. Again this summary is found within the *Torah* itself (Dt.6:5 & Lv.19:18 – before and after).

<sup>34</sup> “...having in the law the embodiment of truth...” (Rom.2:20b).

<sup>35</sup> Again, see NT Wright's Treatment of Rom.7 in, ‘*Romans In A Week*’, Regent College Taped Lecture Series, [www.regent-bookstore.com](http://www.regent-bookstore.com) for a very useful summary of the various interpretations which have been offered by exegetes of this passage. This includes Wright's own thesis that Paul is recounting in personal terms the experience / history of Israel. This is a more compelling explanation than it may first appear. In any case, since we are the covenant people of God the same applies of us as to Israel – basically the same point Paul was making to the mixed church in Rome.

<sup>36</sup> Rom.7:14-15 but also 18b-19; 8:7-8.

<sup>37</sup> That is, our “carnal” or “fleshy” nature in Paul's thinking: Rom.7:5 *c.f.* Rom.6:6; 8:3 etc. Paul's meaning here is our “natural” selves alienated and autonomous from our creator.

<sup>38</sup> Rom.7:5.

<sup>39</sup> Rom.7:16 and also before Rom.7:7-12.

<sup>40</sup> Rom.7:10-11.

<sup>41</sup> See Rom.8 where he devotes a large part of his letter to this.

<sup>42</sup> Rom.8:5