

Being Spiritual

Richard Dawson

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Matt 12⁴³⁻⁴⁵ / 1 Peter 2¹⁻¹⁰

One of the myriad of experiences I had in India recently involved purchasing some yoghurt at a small grocery store in Kolkata. Yoghurt is a native dish consumed in great quantities because it acts to neutralise the acids contained in many spices and especially in curry. So if you have a problem with a hot curry remember this little clue – eat yoghurt afterwards because this is what the Indians do! Anyway I bowled up to this little shop which had just opened and asked for several packets of yoghurt. These were duly handed over and I handed over my cash in the form of a 50 Rup note. The shopkeeper – a diminutive man, in his late 30's I would guess, took the note and immediately clasped his hands together in the universal Indian sign of thanksgiving and veneration and touched the note to his face and to the shelf behind which he was standing. So I nodded my head in acknowledgement thinking he was thanking me only to have him do this again... and again... and again... and again... Now by the 3rd time I had stopped trying to acknowledge his thanksgiving because I was beginning to realise that he wasn't thanking me at all and, what's more, I was looking ridiculous trying to keep up with all this hand waving. So I stopped and he did this at least twice more – touching the ledge in front of him and then bringing the note up to his forehead and touching that as well.

As he turned to find change I whispered to Tim and asked him what he thought that was all about. Tim shrugged but guessed that since I was the first customer of the day he would be seeking a blessing on the day by going through a little ritual to ensure either that nothing untoward happened during the day or that business was good. And India is full of this kind of activity – some of which might be simply politeness towards guests and visitors but by far the bulk of which has a spiritual logic attached to it. And in this respect India is a deeply spiritual place. Everything can have significance and one needs to be constantly aware of how one's activity is influencing the spirit realm. A huge amount of activity is inspired by such motivations from the way one receives the first sale of the day to how the dead are dealt with.

What becomes clear after a while is that the spirit world is something that is not only real but which is dangerous and must be mollified and tamed by certain actions and certain approaches to life. Indeed, all of life requires spiritual guidance and care if one is to avoid disaster or failure – at least this is how people think. Now no matter what one thinks of this approach it begs the question, doesn't it, of what we think 'being spiritual' means. Frankly, we like the word 'spiritual' in this age – it is an acceptable word – it is a word that the culture enjoys but for Christians what does this word mean?

One thing is clear, God's call and God's Word to us today is that we should be a 'spiritual' people. Indeed, not just a people but a house; not just spiritual individuals but together we are to be spiritual. So where does Christian Spirituality begin because what is clear this morning is that we are a spiritual

people and we are called to be a spiritual people and therefore we must have an idea of what it means to be spiritual.

But there's another reason why we need to be very clear about what we mean by being 'spiritual' today and this, of course, is simply because the word has such power within our culture today. So many people use it and so many people appear interested in it that it has become a catch cry for integrity and, indeed, for humanity. It is, these days, a matter of real importance to many to both **have spiritual values and to be spiritual people**. And so on the web now we have literally thousands of sites like this one called Allaboutspirituality.Com. On this site we read the following...

Spirituality: Reincarnation. Yoga. Karma. Staying in touch with the spirit world. How do you define spirituality? Is spirituality a mystical experience or a way of life? Discover the facts on various aspects of spirituality and learn how these thought systems operate. Are you in touch with your true spirituality?

And then we have a list of 22 topics under which one can find information on what is 'true spirituality' which include the following...

Astrology Readings, Church of Oprah, Dowsing, Elan Vital, Feng Shui, Guardian Angels, History of Yoga, Paganism, Shamanism, Silva Mind Control, Angels, Gods And Goddesses, Meditation, New Age, Reincarnation.

So there's no shortage of information on what it means to be spiritual and these guys are trying to help us in our confusion. But for Christians also there seems to be some confusion about this word despite it being such an important word for us. Why there is confusion is a mute point but that there is confusion there can be no doubt.

At one time our culture was very guarded about the word spiritual. But since probably the 60's there's been a huge revival in interest in exotic spirituality and in the experience of the spiritual dimension. Many have gone searching for genuine spirituality and eastern religions have benefited enormously from this search. And all this in the middle of a culture with a faith that take spirituality extremely seriously and which, in many ways founded on a rock solid theory of what spirituality is. The Bible is very clear about both how important it is to connect with that which is truly spiritual and to understand it.

In our reading today from Matt 12 the reality not only of a spirit world but of the fallenness of that world is made plain. There are evil spirits. They do not have our best interests in mind. They are destructive and they are very influential. Now you can try and demythologise this passage all you like but the fact is that there are 16 other references in the NT to Jesus casting out evil spirits and this alone is enough to convince me that we should take this element of the NT seriously and not try and dismiss it as thinly disguised superstition of the time. So the NT is very much aware of a dimension on life we call the Spiritual dimension and of the fact that we should acquaint ourselves with the dynamics of this dimension of life.

Indeed, we are, according to Peter, a '**spiritual** house' made up of living **spiritual** stones whose single aim in life is to offer **spiritual** sacrifices to a God who is to be worshipped only in **Spirit** and in Truth by worshippers who are filled with God's **Spirit**!

So where do we start? As I read these first 2 chapters of 1 Peter my suggestion is that we start not with verse 1 of 1 Peter 2 but with verse 4 and I say this simply because as it reads the first 3 verses of chapter 2 are, in fact, a summary and completion of the previous section in chapter 1 where Peter calls his readers to live a Holy life. So he finishes that section with those three verses.

Now, at verse 4, we enter into a new discussion; one that focuses on this word 'spiritual.' And to begin this he says this ...

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight,

Come to Him... Our first act and, indeed, the major part of Christian spirituality, begins here – we are to '**come to Jesus.**' This one act of submission is the great defining moment in Christian spirituality and it must be allowed to define and redefine our approach to spirituality again and again.

Why is this? Why does Christian spirituality begin with the special act of confession and submission? Is it not clear that we can interact with the spiritual world in many different ways and certainly without Christ? Yes I think it is clear that there are many ways of interacting with the spiritual dimension. We are a spiritual people. We have a spirit. Of these things the Bible is sure. But what it is equally sure of is that we can neither trust our own unmediated experience of the spiritual or, indeed, can we trust spirits. The spirit world is also fallen. It cannot be trusted even if it is real. Our spirits are also damaged by the fall and so our own interpretations, without Christ, are not to be trusted. Only in Christ can we interact with the spiritual in a manner which is both trustworthy and safe.

We neither know nor do we interact with that which is spiritual **apart from Jesus.** Christ mediates all that is spiritual to us. If we are to be a part of this great spiritual house Peter talks about our first act must be to **Come to Jesus!** So Christ guarantees a right view of that which may be said to be spiritual but 2. Christ comes, even more so, **to redeem that which is spiritual.**

We have been and continue to be so naive about spiritual things in this culture. It seems that our refusal to take seriously spiritual things has led to a new generation who will believe almost anything that claims to be spiritual. Thus we've had a huge turning by younger generations in the West to the spirituality of East – to Hinduism, Buddhism, Shamanism, Astrology, you name it, we've turned to it in the last 30 years. And all because of the unashamed spirituality of these things. And they are spiritual. They deal in a spiritual currency which is easily recognisable and yet which results in a bondage to ritual and to sacrifice which is most definitely of no earthly use. The answer, of course, is obvious. We as Christians must reclaim our own spirituality and begin to live in it and to press into it in a manner that is both Christlike and relevant. We must allow Christ to build within us a redeemed and restored view of the spiritual – of what it means to be spiritual and of the fact that our whole task as Christians is to be taken up in the life of His Spirit or, as the NT puts it, to walk in and by **the Spirit.** That famous passage from Romans 8 summarises succinctly what I am saying...

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Roms 8)

What, then, does it mean to 'Come to Jesus?' Let me leave you with this starter. How shall we come to Jesus? Jesus opens the door to the answer to the this question He answers another question about the essence of the Law. In this answer He goes to the heart of the matter when He says this...

²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰**you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.**' (Mark 12)

How shall we come to God? We shall come to who first with our hearts. Our heart is the seat of our will and the place within us where our desires and motivations reside. Jesus begins here and says that if our heart isn't dealt with we can never really come to Jesus. We must hand over our hearts to God on a daily basis if we are to truly come to Him. Our hearts are like kitchens – they are busy places which always need the most cleaning in a house.

Then He says we must love God with our souls... Our souls represent our identity – who we are, who we consider ourselves to be. Are we prepared to be **identified** with Jesus? Are we prepared to have our identities inextricably connected with the Name of Christ. This is what it will mean to truly 'Come to Him.'

Then we are to love God with all our mind. The mind is more than just a computer. As a man thinks, so he is. Our thoughts greatly influence both our self understanding and our behaviour. To let our minds stray is tantamount to taking our hands off the wheel of the car while travelling through busy traffic – it is to guarantee a crash of some sort. When Jesus says 'Come to Me' He calls us to deliberately cause our minds to begin following His train of thought. This means we need to begin thinking faithfully, thinking rightly, thinking in holy ways. What does the Word say? Philippians 4...

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, **think about these things.**

Finally Jesus calls us to come to Jesus with all our strength. I am always fascinated by this particular part of this command because it's almost as if God foresees how I operate and has stuck this in to prevent me taking my usual shortcuts. You see my instinct in all things was and still is to a certain extent to do just that – to take a short cut – to make it easy for myself. But God makes it clear that when we choose to 'Come to Him' it won't be just a matter of turning up for duty. This will demand of us real work. This will require of us real struggle. This will compel us to call upon every resource we have. This is not just a turn up on Monday deal. This is a work till Sunday call. So, are we prepared to **work while it is yet light? Coming to Jesus will mean work. Work on ourselves. Work with others. Work against evil. Work to create good. Are we ready friends? Are we ready to hear God's call to 'Come to Jesus?' This is the true call to true spirituality. This is where it begins for we who call ourselves Christian. Please stand up and pray with me.**