



SESSION
ONE

WHAT IS
TRUE SPIRITUALITY?



What Is True Spirituality?

Reading by John Ortberg

Let's call him Hank. He had attended church since he was a boy, and now he was in his sixties. He was known by everyone—but no one really knew him. He had difficulty loving his wife. His children could not speak freely with him and felt no affection from him. He was not concerned for the poor, had little tolerance for those outside the church, and tended to judge harshly those who were inside.

One day an elder in the church asked him, "Hank, are you happy?"

Without smiling, he responded, "Yes."

"Well, then," replied the elder, "tell your face."

Hank's outside demeanor mirrored a deeper and much more tragic reality: *Hank was not changing*. He was not being transformed. But here's what is most remarkable: Nobody in the church was surprised by this. No one called an emergency meeting of the board of elders to consider this strange case of a person who wasn't changing. No one really expected Hank to change, so no one was surprised when it didn't happen.

There were *other* expectations in the church. People expected that Hank would attend services, would read the Bible, would affirm the right beliefs, would give money and do church work.

But people did not expect that day by day, month by month, decade by decade, Hank would be more transformed into the likeness of Jesus. People did not expect

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he would become a progressively more loving, joyful, winsome person. So they were not shocked when it did not happen.

How Is Spirituality Wrongly Understood?

How many people are radically and permanently repelled from The Way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boringly lifeless, obsessive, and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing from a balanced vitality within the freedom of God's loving rule. . . . "Spirituality" wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of human misery and rebellion against God.

—Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

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Think of the irony: spiritual life leading to lifelessness. Spiritual growth producing misery. A life supposedly yielded to God rebelling against him! Obviously it's not supposed to be this way, yet for many, it's the sad truth.

When people are not being authentically transformed—when they are not becoming more loving, joyful, Christlike persons—they often settle for what might be called “pseudo-transformation.”

We know that somehow we are supposed to be different than those outside the church. But if our heart isn't changing, we will look for more superficial and visible ways of demonstrating that we are “spiritual.” We might:

- think spiritual maturity is simply about how much biblical or theological information we have acquired;
- think we should rigidly immerse ourselves in a host of spiritual practices or disciplines that will prove how spiritual we are;
- find ourselves looking down on people who are not working at their spiritual lives as hard as we are—so all of our efforts end up making us more judgmental and competitive rather than more loving; or

- focus solely on outward behaviors, making them the litmus test of godliness, while ignoring deeper—and more destructive—sins of the heart.

We need only to hear Jesus' words to the religious leaders of his day to know that pseudo-spirituality is a deadly disease—and a common and contagious one at that.

What Is a Right Understanding of Spiritual Life?

When someone asks you, “How is your spiritual life going?” what comes to mind? How do you define spirituality? How do you assess spiritual progress?

Amidst all the confusing and distorted notions, Scripture speaks with brilliant clarity. “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). To pursue spiritual life means simply this: *To know Jesus more intimately and to live as if he were in your place.* It is to order your life in such a way that you stay connected to Christ, thinking as he thought, speaking as he spoke, and walking as he walked.

Certainly, this imitation of Christ will look different for each person, expressing itself through that person's unique temperament, abilities, and circumstances. But there is a common denominator. At the core of Jesus' teaching is the command to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love other people as you love yourself (Mark 12:30–31).

When someone asks you how your spiritual life is going, the real question is, “Are you becoming more loving toward God and people?” Regardless of anything else you measure, how you stand up against that statement will reveal your true spiritual stature. This measurement is the supreme spiritual diagnostic for Christ-followers who want to please him.

Doing Life in Jesus' Name

What would this kind of life look like if you actually lived it out? Let's face it—you could chalk up this concept as another idea that sounds good but isn't really

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practical. Yet God is inviting you to make each moment of every day a chance to learn from him how to master the art of life.

The apostle Paul put it like this: “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col.3:17). In the Bible, names often reflect a person’s character. So to do something in Jesus’ name means to do it in a way consistent with his character—to do it the way Jesus himself would.

Paul’s teaching is very comprehensive on this matter. He says, “*Whatever* you do. . . .” And in case anyone misses his point, he adds, “. . . whether in *word* or *deed*. . . .” And in case anyone misses *that* he says, “. . . do it *all* in the name of the Lord Jesus” (italics added for emphasis).

Your spiritual life is simply your whole life—every minute and detail of it—from God’s perspective. In other words, God isn’t interested in your spiritual life. God is simply interested in your *life*. And every moment is an opportunity to do life in Jesus’ name.

One fully devoted follower, Brother Lawrence, put it this way:

. . . *(W)hat makes you think that God is absent from the maintenance shop but present in the chapel? . . . Holiness doesn’t depend on changing our jobs, but in doing for God’s sake what we have been used to doing for our own.*

Seriously—repair the equipment for God, answer the abusive phone calls for God, concentrate fully on the job you’re doing for God. He isn’t obsessed with religion—he’s the God of the whole of life. But we need to give it to him, consciously turning it over into his hands. Then whatever we’re doing—provided it is not against his will—becomes an act of Christian service.

—David Winter, *Closer Than a Brother*
(on the life of Brother Lawrence)

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All of the everyday stuff of life can be filled with his presence—if you are. You *can* do what you're doing right now as Jesus would do it in your place. And if you do, you too will know the joy of true spiritual life.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Here is an experiment for putting Colossians 3:17 into practice. This week:

Memorize Paul's words in Colossians 3:17: "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Think about what it would mean for you to live the ordinary moments of your life as if Jesus were in your place. How would you do each of the following activities in Jesus' name?

- Waking up
- Greeting those you see first in the morning
- Eating
- Driving
- Working outside the home or caring for children while at home
- Shopping
- Watching TV
- Doing household tasks
- Reading the paper
- Going to sleep

Try it out. Focus on Jesus' presence with you as you go through the seemingly inconsequential moments of your day. Keep it simple; continually direct your thoughts back to him: ask for his help or his guidance, or simply share your heart with him.

Keep track of how the experiment goes. (If you don't already have a journal, we strongly recommend you start one so that you can keep a running list of observations throughout the duration of this study.) You will share your insights and experiences with the group when you meet.

BIBLE STUDY

1. Describe the picture Jesus paints in John 10:10 of what should happen in the life of all who follow him.

What has prevented you or other Christians you know from having that quality of life?

2. Read Matthew 23:1–28. In this passage, Jesus has some harsh words for the religious leaders of his day. These scribes and Pharisees were well versed in Scripture and considered to be spiritually “in the know.” If anyone understood what it meant to be spiritually mature, it was them—or so they (and those around them) thought. Yet Jesus was extremely frustrated by their spiritual shallowness and obsession with externals.

What specific behaviors does Jesus confront?

v. 3

v. 4

v. 5

NOTE: Phylacteries were little boxes with Scripture verses in them tied around the forehead—an obvious display of spiritual knowledge. The tassels on their garments were supposed to remind them to obey God (Num. 15:37–41), yet the Pharisees enlarged theirs to appear a bit superior.

vv. 6–7

v. 13

v. 15

vv. 23–24

NOTE: In those days, most everyone had little herb gardens. In an effort to be scrupulous, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees even gave a tenth of what those gardens produced. It would be like someone in our own day tithing on the dime they found on the street—not a bad thing, but petty in light of an utter failure to focus on more important aspects of justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

vv. 25–28

3. What heart attitude(s) do you think all these behaviors have in common?

4. As you read through this passage, was there any point at which you said, “Ouch—I have a tendency in that direction”? How do you think such distorted views of spirituality have crept into your life?

5. In your opinion, why is it easy for people to think that acquiring knowledge, following formulas, and obeying rules will automatically lead to true spiritual maturity?

6. According to the following words of Jesus, what must be at the heart of any concept of spirituality?

Matthew 23:11–12

Mark 12:28–34

John 15:4–17 (hint: look for repeated words or phrases)

7. Being as candid as possible, how would you assess the state of your spiritual life right now?

What work would you invite God to do?

How can the members of your small group help?

TAKE-AWAY

My summary of the main point of this session, and how it impacts me personally:

NOTE: You will fill in this information after your group discussion. Leave it blank until the conclusion of your meeting.