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JESUS: THE CHAMPION OF AUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY

JOHN SKRZYPASZEK MV FALL 2022

This topic explores the spiritual quality of discipleship in Christ's well-known Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–12) and Ellen White's description of the spiritual journey. The subject of spirituality unveils a plethora of perspectives, definitions, and practices. Reflecting on the amassing of existing landscapes, Richard Wolman maintained that “Spirituality in the contemporary culture is a designer spirituality, tailored to the needs of individual tastes and preferences.”[1] Yet, for many, spirituality provides an escape from the traditional form of religious practices bound by rules, traditions, demands for conformity, and a lack of authentic Christ-like attitudes.

Juliette Lee described her experience as follows: “The church was a highly hypocritical institution that preached about things like loving and accepting everyone, giving to those in need, and trusting God—because this is what Jesus did.”[2] Then, she touched on the core of the crucial problem. “Yet I saw and heard groups of women congregating in the back pews gossiping about each other; I saw those with the most to give cling to their wallets and look away; I saw people leave the church angry at God for the plans he was ruining. At the end of the day, the church succeeded in telling me who Jesus was and who I should be but failed to follow its own practice.”[3] The story is one of many I had heard from students in my classes and people in my pastoral ministry.

Such a scenario is not very different from the world Jesus embraced to engrave on the pathway of life the authentic nature of spiritual discipleship. Matthew's gospel outlines the beginning of Christ's Messianic ministry in the context of religious abuses devoid of spiritual authenticity. The broader context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount addressed the superficial understanding of God's principles. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago [...] but I tell you [...]” (Matthew 5:21–22; 27:28; 33–32; 38–39; 43–44). He spoke against the superficial practice of religiosity, showmanship, and hypocrisy (Matthew 6:1–3; 16–18). He warned about the danger of judgmental attitudes (7:1–6). Instead, as He spoke to His disciples, the central theme of His teaching aimed to build a foundation for spiritual authenticity in God's mission in the world (Matthew 4:18–21); namely, the spiritually transformational nature of discipleship.

Matthew's narrative juxtaposes the spiritual hypocrisy with Christ's call to discipleship: “Come follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19), between two purpose-oriented descriptions of His all-inclusive missional activity (Matthew 4:12–16;23–25). The impact of His sensitive attitude to human needs engendered a movement of attraction (Matthew 4:25). What followed is fascinating, inspirational, and thought-provoking. The descriptive narrative of Jesus' ministry swayed attention from His successful activity to a reflective stopover that determined what truly matters in God's mission in the world. He then began to teach the disciples (Matthew 5:1).

David Bosh argued that in Matthew, Jesus' teaching is “by no means an intellectual enterprise,”[4] outlining specific details of successful methodology. He continued to suggest that Jesus' teaching is not an “appeal primarily to the intellect; it is a call for a concrete decision to his listeners to follow him and to submit to God's will ... as revealed in Jesus's ministry and teaching.”[5] For this purpose, the Beatitudes contrast with the aforementioned religious practices and highlight the spiritual and transformational nature of discipleship.

The Beatitudes and the Spiritual Nature of Discipleship

The structure of the Beatitudes draws attention to a specific objective. First, Jesus positioned the qualities of discipleship, the poor in spirit, the meek, the pure in heart, and the persecuted (Matthew 5:3,5,8,10) in the secure space of the kingdom of heaven—“theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3,10). Millard Erickson argued that Matthew used “heaven” as a synonym for the Kingdom of God in writing to a Jewish audience.[6] The four Beatitudes expressed in the present active voice placed discipleship in the space of God's life-transforming activity and secure assurance of the gift—the Kingdom of God.

George Eldon Ladd described the presence of God's kingdom as follows: “Instead of making changes in the external and political order of things, it is making changes in the spiritual order, and in the lives of men and women.”[7] Furthermore, the specific focus on the kingdom of God uplifted the disciples' minds to the future hope of inheriting the earth (Matthew 5:5) and the anticipated joy of seeing God (Matthew 5:8). The listed qualities of discipleship entrenched in a relational connection to Jesus (Matthew 5:10,11) stood in direct conflict with the distorted values and practices espoused by human traditions and religiosity and with the distorted view of God outlined in Matthew chapters 5–7.

In this context, Christ's reference to the *poor in spirit* denoted a life empty of self; *meekness*, the attitude of complete trust in God's providence; and the *pure in heart*, the quality of spiritual authenticity. The enumerated characteristics of discipleship collided with the superficial nature of religious practices, devoid of a sensitive response to human needs. No wonder Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:11). Nevertheless, Christ's Beatitudes highlight another aspect of spiritual discipleship.

The Beatitudes and the Transformational Nature of Discipleship

A careful reading of the Beatitudes demonstrates that the character of the four other Beatitudes seems somewhat different: (a) Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted (Matthew 5:4); (b) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled (Matthew 5:6); (c) Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy (Matthew 5:7); and (d) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God (Matthew 5:9).

The last part of each Beatitude, expressed in a passive voice, suggests that those who mourn, thirst, and hunger due to spiritual emptiness, become the recipients of the blessings proceeding from the object of their adoration, God. Consequently, the qualities mentioned earlier—poverty in spirit, meekness, and purity of heart—defined as self-emptying and openness to be filled with the sensitivity of spiritual authenticity, are shaped by the overflowing abundance of God's grace and love (Romans 5:1–5).

The spirit of meekness enables disciples to comprehend and have a share in the full measure of God's protective care (Matthew 6:25–26). The transformational dynamism of God's love endows them with the spirit of mercy and a secure identity as God's adopted sons and daughters (Matthew 5:7,9). The described transformational process prepares Christ's followers to step into the world of human brokenness as peacemakers and healers transformed by God's grace (2 Corinthians 5:16–21).

Referring to the spiritually transformed nature of discipleship, Johannes Verkuyl asserted, “To become a disciple of Jesus involves sharing with him his death and joining him on the march to the final disclosure of his messianic reign.”[8] In Christ's teaching from the mountain, discipleship is not presented as a production line or methodology designed primarily to initiate an exponential growth of God's kingdom. Instead, His teachings unfold the view of what matters to God—an all-inclusive and sensitive response to human needs role-modelled by Jesus. Note the overwhelming attraction generated by Jesus' ministry—Jesus, the champion of authentic spirituality. “Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (Matthew 4:25).

The Inspirational Focus of Spiritual Discipleship

In 1894, Ellen White wrote in *Sign of the Times* an interesting reflection on “the progress to be made in the spiritual journey and many lessons to be learned from Christ, the Great Teacher.” Her description is fascinating and challenging. “Could our spiritual vision be opened, we should see that which would never be effaced from memory as long as last should last.”[9]

What follows challenged my view of life and ministry. It challenged me to ask: “Am I spiritually blind that I do not see what matters to God?” Her words touched on the very essence of spiritual discipleship. “We should see souls bowed under oppression, loaded with grief, and pressed down as a cart beneath the sheaves, and ready to die in discouragement. We should see angels flying swiftly to aid the tempted ones who stand as on the brink of a precipice.” More so, she delineates the challenging view of God's presence in action. “These souls are unable to help themselves and avoid the ruins that threaten them, but the angels of God are forcing the evil angels, and guiding the souls from the dangerous places, to plant their feet on a sure foundation.”

Is it conceivable that the frantic rush of producing discipling resources to devise ways of achieving success induces spiritual myopia that hinders us from seeing what God cares about?

Conclusive Reflection

Perhaps it is time to climb the mountain to catch a gestalt of human suffering, injustice, abuse, and enslavement—the real world. Perhaps it is time for the church to reflect on itself to recapture the passion of spiritually authentic discipleship that touches the brokenness of human life with the inspiring presence of God (Matthew 6: 25–34), and Jesus, the champion of spiritual authenticity and healing.

John Skrzypaszek, DMin, a retired director of the Ellen White/Seventh-day Adventist Research Centre, is an adjunct senior lecturer at Avondale University College, Coranboong, NSW, Australia. Polish by birth, John takes a keen interest in heritage, spirituality, and identity studies. He is married to Brenda and has two sons Raphael and Luke. Email him at: john.skrzypaszek@avondale.edu.au

[1] Richard N. Wolman, *Thinking with Your Soul: Spiritual Intelligence and Why it Matters* (New York: NYL Harmony Books, 2001), 21.
[2] Juliette Lee, “Why I am More Spiritual than Religious,” *Spectrum* (May 15, 2017).
[3] Ibid.
[4] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 66.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House), 1226.
[7] George Eldon Ladd, “The Gospel of the Kingdom.” In *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, A-69. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1922.
[8] Johannes Verkuyl, “The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate.” In *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, A-62. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1922.
[9] Ellen White, “To Abide in Christ the Will Must Be Surrendered,” *Signs of the Times* 20, no. 51 (October 29, 1894): 3.

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