

Practical godliness

There has always been a problem amongst a minority of believers to be superspiritual, but today this problem has been magnified. It is common amongst Charismatics but is increasingly being seen in more conservative churches. Superspirituality is when one becomes detached from the practical issues of life, claiming to be in a higher, mystical state. Usually this is not by actually being in a mystical state of consciousness but by asserting a certain choice, claiming to be spiritual in that choice.

I will give an example. I once heard of a pastor's wife who was clearly lazy. In church social gatherings, when it came to do the washing up or cleaning she excused herself saying that she had to pray and that was more important. Compare that to a minister's wife whom I knew well. Her husband was a famous Bible commentator and Baptist leader. At one point he was called to establish the first Baptist theological seminary in Prague. Being the wife of the first college chancellor, she was held in high esteem, but despite the protestations of the staff and students, she insisted on getting involved in the kitchen, washing up and cleaning with the others. Now I ask you, which one was the most godly? The answer is obvious.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that there are no boundaries to spiritual life. Being spiritual is being normal, but doing all to the glory of God. Thus one can serve God equally well by cooking and cleaning for someone, as by worshipping with the saints and praying fervently. Thus we find that Scripture frequently affirms that ordinary, everyday, practical tasks are often described as being godly.

Being a responsible child

But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. 1 Tim 5:4

This is the only place in the NKJV that the word 'piety' appears. The Greek word *eusebeo* was often used as a personal name (e.g the church historian Eusebius or the footballer Eusebio) and means to act reverently towards God, to whom dutiful regard or reverence is due. In Greek it was also stretched to include duty to one's country, magistrates, relations etc. It is a synonym for godliness.

Now note what Paul teaches. Children show piety at home when they support and honour their parents. In other words, it is an act of reverence and duty to God; it is an acceptable action before God to support ageing parents. A Christian is acting in a spiritual manner when they do practical things to look after their parents.

The Lord himself commented upon this situation,

For God commanded, saying, 'Honour your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me *is a gift to God*" -- then he need not honour his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honour Me with *their* lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching *as* doctrines the commandments of men.' Matt 15:4-9

Children who pretend to honour God by defrauding their parents of what is right are hypocrites. This is the essence of superspirituality; saying you honour God outwardly but

in your heart you are far from God and only pleasing yourself. All superspirituality is self-satisfaction in one way or another.

Charitable giving

Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things *sent* from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. Phil 4:18

Paul here explains that the gifts of the Philippian church to meet his needs as an itinerant apostle, were a sweet-smelling sacrifice that pleased God. Usually the phrase, 'sweet-smelling sacrifice' refers to the worship of the saints (1 Pt 2:5; Heb 13:15) or the sacrifice of Christ in atonement (Eph 5:2). But here it is used to lift up the giving of the saints from an earthly act to a spiritual one done for the glory of God. The book of Hebrews also refers to this:

But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Heb 13:16

God is pleased and honoured when saints express godly love in practical ways to alleviate the suffering of others. This is an act of worship that has great spiritual value. Jesus also refers to the value God sets by simple giving to help people:

For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. Mk 9:41

Not only is God pleased when his children do good to others, but he rewards this action. God only rewards spiritual actions, not fleshly ones. Just the simple matter of giving a thirsty person a drink is a spiritual action, if done in the name of Christ.

Thus doing good to others in God's name is a spiritual activity. Godliness is seen in acts of practical charity.

Renewing your mind leads to spiritual service

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Rm 12:1-2

These two verses have to be taken together. Paul is first saying that we do spiritual service to God by using our bodies – that is to do good works. It is possible to translate 'reasonable service' as 'rational worship'.¹ So worship is not something airy-fairy and mystical, it is using our bodies to the glory of God in submission to his sovereignty and in recognition of his majesty. Doing good with your body in the service of God is a holy thing.

Now this immediately leads to the question: 'Just what is it that we should do in this service?'. Paul answers that question for us: we learn what is right behaviour by having our earthly mind renewed in the Spirit. A renewed mind knows what is the acceptable and perfect will of God.

So the next question is, 'What does it mean to have the mind renewed?'. Paul also explains that the basis of this is not being conformed to worldly thinking. But how do we do this?

Of course, Paul's practical teaching on walking by faith, throughout his letters, explains this thoroughly. It includes putting on the new man and putting off the old man, walking in the Spirit, putting on Christ and abiding in him. The more we learn to deny ourselves, to

¹ 'Logikos' means: pertaining to speech or speaking; pertaining to the reason or logic, agreeable to reason, following reason, reasonable, logical. 'Latreia' means: service rendered; the service of God; the service and worship of God according to the requirements of the Levitical law; to perform sacred services.

die to our self-life, and the more we put on Christ and become totally dependent upon God by his Spirit, the more we will be renewed.

However, Paul emphasises here the actual renewing of the mind. This refers to the process whereby we empty our minds of error and fill our minds with truth. As the mind appreciates the truth of God, we then learn what is right and what is wrong behaviour. Then we can do what is right and be righteous, glorifying God. This then begs the question as to what is it that forms the repository of this truth? Of course it is the word of God and that alone. God's word enables us to see what it is that God wants us to do and why.

So, a key foundation in walking right, using our bodies for spiritual service, is understanding and relying upon the word of God. It is by God's light that we see light (Ps 36:9) and only by understanding his word can we hope to know how to behave. Thus studying Scripture is absolutely vital and necessary in order to walk right. Without Scripture there is no guidance on righteousness. The fountain of life depends upon having God's light through his word. Worship is a spiritual matter, in that it is empowered by the Holy Spirit through the human spirit; but this is processed through the soul by truth (and then into bodily action): 'God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth' (Jn 4:24). To be a true worshipper, you must know what the truth is.

So, instead of the esoteric, mystical mutterings and soppy behaviour of superspirituality, God's word shows us that it is ordinary, humdrum Bible study, trust and self-discipline that leads to righteous spiritual service. Knowledge leads to godliness.

The words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness. 1 Tim 6:3

The acknowledgement of the truth which accords with godliness. Titus 1:1

His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue. 2 Pt 1:3

Godliness requires self discipline and exercise

Exercise yourself toward godliness. 1 Tim 4:7

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk *is* unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Heb 5:12-14

The Christian life is meant to be one of continual repentance. That is, one of constantly turning from one's self life to follow Christ; in short, putting on the new man. Note this – the new man must be put on as an act of will. Our natural disposition is to fall back into walking in the old life, in the old nature; plus we are bombarded with daily temptations to actively put on the old man and sin. To live in repentance, one must put the old nature off and put on Christ.

The means of doing this successfully is by self-denial. We must deny ourselves, or carry the cross which kills our old man, and follow Christ.

He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. Matt 10:38

Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.' Matt 16:24-25

He said to them, 'Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.' Mk 8:34-35

Then He said to *them* all, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.' Lk 9:23-24

Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. Lk 14:27

This message was emphasised by Jesus in the Gospel over and over again and yet is still ignored by most people. Believers must consider themselves dead to the old life, the way that other people live (even the good bits), and they do this by self-denial. They are then able to follow Jesus by walking in the new man. In Paul's words,

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. Rm 6:11-13

These texts prove that godliness is a matter of self-discipline. It is not superspiritual, mystical, soppy and emotional; it involves hard choices and tough decisions. Those people who live self-indulgent lives in the daytime but act with such sentimental superspiritual mysticism in meetings will find it shocking and difficult on the Last Day.

Living a peaceful, normal life

That we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. 1 Tim 2:2

Notice that Paul instructs believers to live a normal, quiet life and to do this with godliness and reverence. He repeats this sort of instruction in several places. There is nothing superspiritual about this; it is normal life. All those people who advocate some sort of world-flight have got it completely wrong. The Christian testimony is not gained by running away from the world in material terms but in living in the world with grace.

Although we rarely see the sort of world flight of early Christianity, where monks would live in seclusion in a cave for thirty years (or on top of a pillar), there have been various groups that have effectively done something similar. Many early Pentecostals set up communities, and even new towns, that shunned the world (or tried to). All that happened was that the world found them and most of them collapsed in various scandals. Early Charismatics formed many cultic groups that advocated some sort of independent community, such as The Bugbrooke Community (now Jesus Army²) or the Children of God (Family of God) sect founded by David (Moses) Berg³.

Others are less literal, but in effect the people in their church or group shut themselves in to little outside influences other than their leaders. Many Charismatic churches are in this situation and have become sects. Their people only read in-house books, only listen to in-house sermons or those recommended by their leader. They only socialise within their own social groups based on church; some even rarely see family members outside the church.

² Or Jesus Fellowship Church. In 1982 the secular press ran reports of the commune brainwashing and kidnapping young people; much like the Children of God in the 70s.

³ Born David Brandt Berg but adopted the cultic name of Moses David. At the beginning he led his seventy disciples into the wilderness and then to Tucson Arizona.

Some have managed to avoid such extremes and yet still follow a sort of religious discipline, which they think is holy. Some are conservatively legalistic and set up an extra-Biblical list of things to avoid, such as newspapers, dancing, eating meat, smoking, movies, TV, non-Christian friends, etc. Others only listen to 'Christian' worship music, only watch the God Channel, only socialise with church members and so on. All these have missed the point.

Spirituality and godliness is not by doing a certain set of things or avoiding a certain set of things (apart from sin of course); it is by living a normal life, doing normal things but doing them to the glory of God. Thus it is raising a family, bringing children up to fear God, running a decent house, paying bills on time, being hospitable, loving neighbours etc. The difference between a secular family and a godly family is Christ. The Christian family seeks to honour God in all that it does and thus ordinary tasks become glorifying to God. Thus the godly Christian lives a normal life but does it with reverence to God. Every act is done in worship, whether it is improving the house by DIY, teaching children how to be godly, or by loving their wives sacrificially. Every chore that is performed, if done to the glory of God with thanksgiving, will honour God.

It is this normal but reverent life that is godly and it is a world apart from the sort of superspiritual nonsense of superficially mystical airy-fairy 'Christians'.

Living a caring life

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world. Jm 1:27

Following on from living a normal life in reverence, the godly person is also a caring person. James talks here about pure and undefiled religion; that is genuine spiritual living, actions that glorify God; in other words, godliness. In fact the word really means worship; it is where practical worship is expressed by godly believers, caring for the suffering, on behalf of God. It is God reaching out to the needy through worshipping believers.

Notice this; true worship, true godliness, true religion, real spirituality, involves visiting orphans and widows in their trouble and keeping oneself free from sin and worldliness. Sadly far too many modern Christians spend so much time satisfying their own selfish lust for emotional hits (e.g. in rock band driven praise meetings) but rarely do anything for the suffering, weak and vulnerable, even in their own congregation. I have witnessed, with my own eyes, how the sick, old, vulnerable and needy in a very large Charismatic church were completely ignored. At the same time the leaders (and congregation) boasted of their privileged status as champions of God in society, yet their own poor and sick were ignored. This sort of hypocrisy will be judged.

If we are not reaching out to the poor and needy in our sphere of influence, then we are not godly; not spiritual; not worshipping. True faith is always expressed in action; it always bears good fruit and shows itself by works. The trappings of external religion amount to nothing if faith is not expressed in works. The works of faith are always works of love.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love. Gal 5:6

Indeed, so serious is this matter to God that if a brother or church fails to show practical love to those in need in their fellowship, then he judges that there is no love and no life there at all. It is fake Christianity.

But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 1 Jn 3:17

It is simple. Genuine godliness, amongst other things, is manifested in doing good to those who are needy in one's sphere of influence. It is loving one's neighbour.

Martyrdom

Yes, and if I am being poured out *as a drink offering* on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Phil 2:17

Paul wrote these words from prison when his future was uncertain. In fact he was later released for a time before he was again imprisoned and then beheaded by Nero as part of a severe persecution of the church by Rome, which also killed Peter. Paul was considering that he might be martyred for his faith at this point, a fate that he gladly accepts.

But note what he says; the pouring out of his life for God is compared to a drink offering poured out to God. A drink offering was one of the key types of offering that formed part of the worship ritual of the Israelites under the Old Covenant. When David poured out the water from Bethlehem it was an act of worship that God accepted (2 Sam 23:16). Paul's life given up in ministry is considered by God to be an act of worship.

Now being taken by force and killed does not seem to be a particularly spiritual activity, but we are told here that God considers it so. When we read about the martyrs of the church we think of what they did at the point of execution. Many preached the Gospel from the flames at the stake; others sang hymns; yet others prayed. These acts seem spiritual to us but, in fact, just the act of being taken away and killed for God is also spiritual, even if the martyr says nothing. Indeed, Paul probably said nothing, being taken by soldiers to a place of execution and then beheaded rather quickly.

The target: Christ seen in us

Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh. 1 Tim 3:16

The mystery of godliness is evidenced when God is manifested in human life. God, who is invisible and spirit is an immaterial being; only when he is incarnated in a human life can God be seen. Jesus Christ is the only example of this and will always be the only example. When people saw Jesus they saw God in action, incarnated in this world.

But is not God seen in us when we walk in righteousness? Yes he is, but that is only possible because we are walking in Christ's Spirit; we are abiding in Christ and putting on the new man. We do not manifest the character of God as a mere result of being saved and trying hard; we only reflect God when we are in Christ, walking in his Spirit. Christ is the only man who ever manifested God; we only reflect God when we are in Christ, in the new man. What we express is Christ, not ourselves, that no man should boast.

So, the objective of being godly, is what the word itself says – manifesting God. There is nothing superspiritual in this; godliness is being as God (in Christ) in the ordinariness of the world, not retreating from it in some mystical foolishness.

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