

A Beautiful Life

On Sunday, we continued our sermon series about the Holy Spirit by exploring how the Spirit empowers us to do good.

1. Warm up question: Jeff began Sunday's sermon by listing a lot of things he wants – things he wants God to get for him – things like a million dollars for a comfortable retirement. If life was all about you, and your wish was God's command, what's something on you'd wish for yourself?
2. In the ancient world, most primitive religions were what sociologists call “non-ethical,” meaning they had nothing to do with good behavior. The gods themselves were deemed to be impetuous, jealous, angry, and selfish. So there was no imperative to be good. The point of these non-ethical religions was simply to curry favor with your favorite god – through worship, honor, and offerings – as a way of gaining favors. This is Stage 1 of human spiritual development – the infantile stage – religion as a way of getting stuff. “It's all about me.”
 - a. What percentage of people you know would you guess are living in this first stage of spiritual development? Looking back over your life, did you ever go through this stage? If so, what changed you?
 - b. Compare Psalm 1:1-6 and Matthew 5:1-12. What do you draw from these passages? Is it wrong to expect good things from God? If not, how do we keep from going too far with this way of thinking?
 - c. What are the dangers of “religion as a way of getting stuff”?
3. The faith of the Israelites was different. Their faith was one of world's first “ethical religions.” At the burning bush, Moses was reminded that his ancestors understood God to be passionate about goodness and justice. So under Moses guidance, the Israelites developed “religion as rule keeping” – Stage 2 in human spiritual development. This represented great progress at the time. Suddenly spiritual people were reminded that they were supposed to care about how their lives impacted others – and live within certain ethical boundaries.
 - a. Many of us were raised in “Stage 2 Churches” that taught “religion as rule keeping.” What were some ways that helped you? What were some ways that adversely affected you?
 - b. Eugene Peterson tells a story about a friend raised in Germany during the time of the Nazis. Most German Christians looked the other way when 6 million of their Jewish neighbors were hauled away. These were Christians who were attending church, paying their tithes, and following the Ten Commandments. Yet they were indifferent to state-sponsored ethnic cleansing. How is that possible? And what should we learn from their example?

- c. Eugene Peterson's friend believed that institutional church – with all its rules, judgments, and tribalism – squeezed the spirit out of people and reduced them to function in a way where labels took the place of faces and rules took precedence over relationships. Is that a fair critique? Why or why not?
4. In the fullness of time, when we humans were finally ready to take the next great step in our understanding of God, Jesus came. John 1:12 tells us that, "All who received Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." In other words, through Jesus people were reaching a whole new stage of spiritual development. It was as if they were being reborn, not as mortals, but as sons and daughters of God, finding in themselves the same light and life and goodness they saw in Jesus. It's like they were being "born again." Read John 3:1-8.
 - a. As best you understand, what does this passage mean when it refers to "being born of water"?
 - b. And what does it mean to be "born of the Spirit"? How does that happen?
5. Stage 3 of human spiritual development is Spiritual Actualization – Life in the Spirit. Read Galatians 5:16-25.
 - a. Based on what's said in this passage, how would you describe "Life in the Spirit," and how does it differ from "religion as rule keeping"?
 - b. Have you ever known someone who seemed to be "living in the Spirit"? What was different about them that made them so special?
 - c. The lives of those who are "living in the Spirit" are supposed to bristle with the values listed in verses 22-23. Jeff illustrated with several stories – the Deacon who developed a plan to help a dying man's family restructure their finances, the time Kevin Miller's Dad patiently cleaned up Kevin's vomit, and the scene in the movie "The Mission" where the native Brazilians forgave their oppressor and welcomed him into their community. Tell us about a time when you saw someone do something beautiful that typifies the "fruit of the Spirit."
 - d. What's the most important thing you do to keep your life centered in the Spirit?
6. Where would you place yourself on the following scale of spiritual development? Tell us why you picked the number you did, and tell us what next step might help boost you further in your Spiritual Actualization.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
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Religion as a way of getting stuff			Religion as rule keeping				Religion as life in the Spirit			