

Earthy Spirituality

by Viv Thomas

Bogus spirituality is a self-centered and dull type of spirituality that focuses on oneself rather than on God, leading to a lack of connection with reality.

Duration: 41:42

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 18:9-14, Luke 20:45

Topics: "Spiritual"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker describes his experience at a secular management conference where he witnessed a confusing mix of spirituality and secularism. The attendees sang a religious song, indicating a desire for unity and spirituality, but the speaker questions the true meaning of spirituality in a world filled with confusion. He then relates this confusion to the story in Luke 18:9, where Jesus tells a parable about people who are confident in their own righteousness and look down on others. The speaker emphasizes the importance of recognizing our own spiritual arrogance and pretense, and warns against falling into the trap of religious confidence tricksters.

Transcript

Turn to Luke chapter 18, please. Luke chapter 18, and we're going to read from verses 9 to 14. Luke chapter 18, and we're going to read from verses 9 to 14.

Pretty familiar story to most of you. Luke chapter 18, verse 9. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray.

One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. God, I thank you that I'm not like all other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. It wasn't too long ago that I was in Singapore at a conference which Rodney was leading, which was one of our Southeast Asian leaders' conferences.

And while I was attending that conference, I was able to go and visit another conference, which was not a Christian conference, but was a collection of people who were involved in human resource development in the Asian tiger countries, really. It was quite a prestigious conference. The head of IBM Malaysia was at this conference, and a few other people.

400 people gathered in one of those glorious downtown Singapore hotels. As I arrived just a little bit late from the place where we were staying with OM, I got into this place, was aware that this was not an OM conference by virtue of the hotel, and by virtue of the way in which everything worked there. I got into this ballroom, and in this ballroom were 450 delegates who were all stood around the edge of the ballroom, with their desks in the middle facing in one direction.

I was a bit confused by why people were stood around the edge. I wasn't quite sure what was going on. But I joined this ring of people, and introduced myself to this man on my right, whose name was Henri.

He was a French management consultant. I said hello, and just as I was saying hello, a Chinese girl in the circle, but with a microphone, said, good morning everybody. We are now going to sing our first song.

And she then started to sing, Morning Has Broken, like the first morning. And everybody in this purely secular management conference started to sing Cat Stevens' song, Morning Has Broken. I thought I'd arrived at some devotional thing that was going on.

Maybe it was the wrong conference. Halfway through the song, she said, let's all sway together. And these management consultants started to sway together.

Well, some of them did anyway. And then she said, let's all hold hands. Now I can hold hands in an OM conference, no trouble.

But I looked at Henri on my right, and he looked at me, and we both knew we were not going to hold each other's hands. Then she sort of finished, and then she said, our next song is by Louis Armstrong, What a Wonderful World. And all these management consultants started to sing What a Wonderful World, but Louis Armstrong sang it a lot better than they did.

And then she said, our final song, before we get on with the business of the day, is that wonderful song by Michael Jackson, We Are the World. And they all sang together, We Are the World. This made an incredible contrast to the OM conference I was at the night before.

Well, we'd also been singing religious songs, where we'd also been relating to each other. But what was this in this hotel? What on earth was this? They were obviously trying to communicate some feeling of spirituality. They were trying to say that somehow we are united together in some warm feeling, that music is somewhere all the way around the world, and that we are able to join together and be as one before we go on in our business.

We live in a world of incredibly confusing spirituality. Not just a world of confusing spirituality, in a church of confusing spirituality. Because what is spirituality? What does it mean to be spiritual? We've got all sorts of varieties, even in our evangelical parachurch groups.

Are we talking about navigator spirituality? Are we talking about YWAM spirituality? Are we talking about Toronto-affected spirituality? Are we talking about Keswick spirituality? Are we talking about Pentecostal spirituality? Are we talking about evangelical intellectual-type Anglican spirituality? Never mind when we

get to the Roman Catholics, and we get to the Eastern Orthodox, and we get to the Russian Orthodox, and all their views of this area. What on earth are we really talking about? The story we've got in front of us, that we've just read together, is about authentic spirituality. Let me give you a bit of background.

We've got here two men who go to prayer. And often the way in which you pray, reveals the true shape of your own spirituality. The temple was used for public and religious transactions.

People would bring sacrifices, they would go to the temple for teaching, they would go to the temple for private devotion. Now we don't know whether these men were able to be there at the normal public gatherings, or whether they were just there doing some private prayer, but they were there. A tax collector and a Pharisee.

Who were they? Who was this Pharisee? The Pharisees were a group of religious professionals who got a badly twisted view as to what made a spiritually healthy person, as to how someone was able to really walk with God. They were far away from God's original plan for them. They were not only up the sort of wrong religious ladder they'd lent their ladder against the wrong religious building.

And they were in a mess. Now there was a need for the Pharisaic movement. It was important.

Because they were initially a distinctive group of people who stood against the encroaching Greek culture. So they had a significant root, they meant something. But the whole thing had rotted and degraded and had become a system of self-righteous spirituality.

Jesus, you know, saves strong words for this group of people. Let me just quote to you, you'll know them quite well. Luke 20, verse 45.

Jesus says this. While they were listening to Jesus, he said to his disciples, Beware of the teachers of the law. They walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces, have the most important seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets.

They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely. The reference there to devouring widows' houses probably means that they somehow extorted money from vulnerable people.

Hence the idea of widows losing their houses. And in the Talmud, the Pharisees developed this into actual prayers. Remember, they were full-time religious workers.

Bit reflective of our own lives, maybe sometimes. But this is what they said about themselves or their own walk with God. In the Talmud.

I thank thee, Yahweh my God, that thou hast assigned my lot with those who sit in the house of learning and with those who do not sit on street corners. For I rise early and they rise early. I rise early to study the words of the Torah and they rise early to attend the things of no importance.

I weary myself and they weary themselves. I weary myself and gain thereby while they weary themselves without gaining anything. I run and they run.

I run towards the age of life and the age to come while they run towards the pit of destruction. I don't know how you respond to that, but those words sound suspiciously evangelical to me. They've got the ring of something going wrong.

They had a very high opinion of themselves. Bit like the Anglican clergyman who came to his retirement party and they asked him, what are you going to do when you've retired? And he said, I'm going to serve the Lord in an advisory capacity. And I'm sure God is very happy for any advice he can get.

But Jesus says about them here that they were people who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody. Pharisees. Tax collectors are a bit more complex.

The farmers of Israel were people who had to give their land over to Rome. But Rome sort of sublet it to them and had a system of tax collection. There would be chief publicans and there would be publicans.

And probably what we've got here in Luke 18 is a low down, along the scale, publican. Not a serious chief publican. But they were extortionists as well.

Money was a big thing for them. And the story we're told in verse 9 is about people who are confident in their own righteousness and look down on other people. It's about a spiritual arrogance that emerges from a fantasy and helps us understand how we're able to identify religious confidence tricksters.

And be able to identify not only other religious confidence tricksters but the little confidence trickster that works away in our own lives. Our own lives. Our own pretense.

Our own pharisaic spirit. Now before we get into this I want to say three things that are quite important and they're on the overhead. Thank you.

The first is, as we approach this passage that there is a real danger of getting caught up with symbolism that's culturally defined. Let me give you an example. If you saw in the streets of London a little old lady, eight years old walking along the street with a stick and you saw a band of hell's angels racing past them probably the English would define that as hell's angels dangerous and little old ladies safe.

But believe me, it is a culturally defined construct because in England we've got lots of wicked old ladies. Quite a few nice hell's angels people. These are culturally defined and you can tend to think here when you read this story that the spiritual one is this quiet tax collector.

This arrogant Pharisee has obviously got nothing to do with God. But it's a danger that we get caught up with that sort of symbolism and don't work that through. The second thing that's crucial is that this is a story about individuals and not about groups.

In world mission today we are spending a lot of time thinking about groups. Groups of people. Denominational groups.

Motivating masses. Responding to peoples around the world. What's fascinating as you go through the synoptic gospels as you read through Luke as I've done a couple of times in the last few days you get Jesus encountering not groups you get him encountering individuals.

You get him meeting people not perceptions of people. You get him engaging people who are in need. You get him engaging people who have got all sorts of problems in their lives.

Zacchaeus, the rich young ruler. The healed leper. Mary.

Martha. The good Samaritan. And it's a little dangerous for us to just believe that the big vision is to do with massive groups.

Here Jesus focuses his clear light on individuals. Maybe one of the greatest tragedies tragic story I've heard in O.M. for quite a long time is asking someone after they come back from a year on a field how did it go? And they said, the program was great. Loved it.

But he said, the only problem was I really feel that the leadership didn't love me. Superb program. Superb group.

But kind of falling down on the issue of individuals. I'm sure Joseph will help us with that in a few days time. The third crucial thing before we get into this is that we do have here a model by which we're going to measure what is authentic spirituality.

It's one model. There are many others as you will know in the New Testament. But it's a model that is extremely helpful.

And we will have to be as clear as we can be in the days that are ahead about spirituality and what it means. So, let's go on. First of all, number one, the Pharisee.

He's a model of what I want to call bogus spirituality. A spirituality that's gone wrong. And the first thing about him we read in verse 11.

Look at verse 11 of Luke chapter 18. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. God, I thank you that I'm not like other men.

Robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like this tax collector. And the first mark of bogus spirituality is that you are the one who in the end is empowered and you are the one who is in control. And this man's body language introduces his eloquence about himself.

He walks into the temple. He stands at the center of the temple probably as close as he could to the Holy of Holies. He is starstruck by being close to the things of God.

But he's starstruck not for God's sake. He is starstruck for himself. His religious experience is bringing not significance to God.

It is bringing significance to him. As he encounters his religious life rather than being on the search for God, he's on the search for himself. And he's somehow hoping that as he spends time here in the so-called house of God that these things of God will make him something special.

And he will be the one through this encounter who is empowered. He will be the one through this encounter who is in control. He stands and he prays.

And what really comes across very strongly in the RSV translation is that it says that he prayed these things to himself. He gets into a place of prayer and the focus of his prayer is not God but himself. The text really is saying that he's praying about himself to himself.

He's not really praying to God at all. He's praying and talking and reflecting through himself. Now what are the marks of this sort of spirituality? And I put it to you that it's quite widespread in a lot of evangelical churches today is that it is exceptionally dull.

It is exceptionally tedious and boring. That if we go to church or if we do our ministry and the real focus of this ministry is our own search for significance, essentially not God at all, but some significance to make

me important, to make me stand with some authority, to give me some stardust, then I am bound to live a tedious spiritual life. And it may have on the surface sort of a Hollywood glitz type excitement.

It may look incredibly motivated but it is at its essence incredibly dull because it's all about me not about him. And all the potential white water of the spiritual life, the ups and downs, the tumblings, the exhilaration, the times of flatness are all gone because the issue is that I am in control which means God is under control. And that's what this man had.

So he had in effect castrated God. He'd got God who was the designer labelled God, the God of the new age, labelled, packaged, manufactured, ready for TV, God easily packaged, not troubling your reality, your own position at the centre. And there is all sorts of stuff that's swirling around Operation Mobilization today, that's swirling around the evangelical church that is saying to us in essence, you make sure you are the centre, be in this for you.

It's bogus and will both be tedious and in the end it will fail. The second thing that marks out this bogus spirituality is that this man starts to distance himself from the human experience. Look what he says, look at verse 11 again.

The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. God I thank you that I'm not like all other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. And what he does is he starts to distance himself from other human realities.

When you're moving towards a kind of a bogus spirituality, you start to develop this sort of behaviour. You start to distance yourself from the reality of the human experience. You really start to believe that there is something intrinsically special about you.

You're not a robber, you're not an evildoer, you're not an adulterer. And this Pharisee specifically focused this on an individual in his sight and said God I thank you I am not like him. But the reality was that as he was distancing himself from this person who he perceived as being rather bad, the deception was that he was beginning to distance himself from his own reality, from who he was.

As he judged this person, he was losing perspective on himself. He was losing perspective on who he really was. And I put it to you that it's that sort of deception that has been behind a lot of the separation movements that have been throughout the evangelical church.

Essentially it's often come to that. We don't like the world. We avoid the world.

We thank God we're not like them. Robbers, evildoers, adulterers. We avoid them.

But as we avoid them, we move into a cloud of unreality about who we are. And he distances himself from himself and can no longer get perspective on himself. He's gone into a dreamland of inaccurate self-analysis as to who he is and what he does.

And if you hang around churches for too long without impacting the real world around you, if you hang along around Christian movements for too long without sort of engaging the world properly, it's incredibly easy to do. And you, in the end, become a kind of functional perfectionist. You're so glad to be here.

It's so safe to be here. It's so wonderful to have these nice intimate Christian relationships. And all of it, with all this wonderful truth in it, actually has got this tremendous danger within it that we start to believe

that this is the real world.

And we start to avoid people whom we're supposed to be reaching. And this man was very proud of his separation. But really, he was just living in fantasy.

Our undoing will probably not be a lack of desire for God. Our undoing will probably be an inability to connect with the reality around us. That is what will rob us.

That is what will take our bite. That is what will make us people with glorious theories about spirituality, glorious ideas about how to do this, but maybe not have the reality of the bite of that in our own lives. The third thing about bogus spirituality is that you get incredibly impressed by your own spiritual contribution.

And this man was impressed by himself. Look what he says in verse 12. He says, I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

Now, he is to be commended. His religion was disciplined. It was systematic.

But he is doing a little bit more than is required. And as is the case with a lot of religious people who get serious about their spirituality and about their religion, they look at what is required and then they think, I can do more than this. I can really put the pressure on.

People pray an hour, I will pray five. If I am told to fast for one day, I will fast for 40. And he had that sort of spirit about him.

He is doing much more than is required. Leviticus 16 indicates he needed to fast once a year, but he is doing it twice a week. When it comes to giving, he goes way beyond what is required in Deuteronomy.

Gives a tenth of his herbs, dividing his herbs. And Jesus, of course, has got words to say about the Pharisees giving a tenth of their mint and rue and all kinds of garden herbs to God, but neglecting the love of God. But he is enthusiastic about his own contribution to this.

And he is enjoying it. But his enthusiastic deeds, his very enthusiastic deeds, are the sources of his own fantasy. His very drive in his religious life is the very thing that is starting to untie him.

His belief in his commitment to his religious life is the very thing that is causing him to be drawn back to himself. In fact, he is just making himself even more the center of his own war with God, so-called war with God. All of this sets him up for this huge religious fantasy world he is in.

A man who doesn't perceive God, does not perceive himself, and is starting to distance himself from this person around him who is actually getting on very well with God, if he didn't but know it. Bogus spirituality. But then we've got this model of glorious, genuine spirituality, authentic Christian spirituality.

Look at verse 13. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And there is contained in that verse a crisp, simple prayer which focuses on the reality of authentic Christian spirituality. The first thing he says is this. Basically he says, God is at the center.

That's what he's saying. His first word, his first prayer word is God. Now the Pharisee used God, but the difference is that the tax collector is fully anticipating that God will not just be the first word, but God will

also be the last word.

He won't just be the external word. He will also be the internal word. He will also be God on the inside and on the outside.

An authentic Christian spirituality centers itself around God. Not around ourselves or our contribution or our dedication or our commitment, but it's centered around God. Spiritual life emerges from God.

It is not offered to God initially. It is brought in response to His initiative in our own lives. And this man's first word is God.

One of the most staggering things about the life of the Apostle Paul for me is Romans chapter 8. In Paul we've got this incredible religious zealot, religious terrorist, keeper of the rules of God, a genius, knows how to live this. He encounters God on the Damascus Road and is transformed. And what does he say in Romans 8, this super religious life? What he says is we do not know how to pray.

I do not know how to pray. That's what he says. We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us.

Now Paul, please, you're exaggerating. Even children can pray. Even when we get hold of ships and build them, we smash champagne bottles against them and say, may God bless all who sail in her.

We can pray. But Paul, the great apostle, says I don't know how to do this. I do not know how to pray.

It's going to be by the initiative of the Spirit of God whereby I am going to be able to pray. Paul's saying, I can't. God is the center.

And our religious rituals, whatever they may be, fit in with God being the first word and the last word and the internal word and not just the external word. The second thing about authentic Christian spirituality is that it is dependent upon God's mercy. Look at the second thing he says there at the end of verse 13.

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And he places himself at the disposal and the attention of God's grace towards him. He's basically saying to God, God, I am here.

Do what you want. I throw myself on your mercy. He uses the word there which is to do with expiation or propitiation, the getting away of my sin.

I depend, God, on you. I put myself at your feet. And the idea is he's asking God to cover him, to cover his embarrassment, to cover his shame, to enable him to be able to be the recipient of all of what God wants to give to him.

He's saying, God, God, mercy. I need your mercy. And authentic Christian spirituality has got that mark about it.

It is forever desiring mercy because it is, at its essence, God-dependent. In our western culture, dependency is something certainly our glorious white males are taught to avoid. Dependency is seen as weakness.

Dependency is seen somehow as failure. And when the English individualism gets together with the North American cowboy culture, you have a wild concoction of independent people. Don't know whether any of

you ever used to go and watch Clint Eastwood twenty years ago, but I did.

I still remember the good, the bad, the ugly. And before Clint had said a word, he'd killed about twenty people, if I remember rightly. But the idea was that he was this lone male who came into town dependent on no one, didn't need anyone, no need for mercy.

He was going to be the judge. He was going to be the destroyer. He was going to be the one who would bring down his power on others.

Then, last year, I went to see Clint Eastwood again. Bridges Over Madison County. How many of you have been to see Bridges Over Madison County? Okay.

The rest of you can keep your hands down if you want. It's a great film. Basically a film about how you can get involved in adultery if you want to.

But what's shocking about the film is not sort of the adultery story. The shocking thing is that twenty years after playing the good, the bad, the ugly, Clint is playing exactly the same part. The backdrop has changed.

No longer the firing guns, but now the sexual predator. Now the man arrives and he's got a bit more sort of politically correct tenderness about him, but he's basically still alone. He's basically still isolated and he's changed his horse for a pickup truck and he's going to be there, do his thing and he is going to leave.

One of the great icons of western males, Clint Eastwood, and you could go on with many others. But authentic Christian spirituality says my very independence is my weakness. My very aspiration for doing it alone, my desire to be the strong man is not a strength, but a weakness.

Authentic Christian spirituality says God have mercy. God I am dependent. I am in need.

Have you ever worked out how to pray without ceasing? Kind of got a revelation on this two weeks ago. If you're going to pray all the time, it's dead easy. Be in trouble all the time and you will pray all the time.

And maybe our greatest problem is we really don't understand the trouble we're in. We really don't grasp the distance we have with the things we say and the way we live. We really don't grasp that when we're praying spiritual prayers that God would do things and then acting politically in another direction to ensure it's done in the way in which we want it to do that we don't find that funny or sad.

And we don't understand our own trouble. We don't understand our own pain. So we don't pray without ceasing because we see no need of mercy.

But this man in the corner says God mercy. God have mercy on me. And that is pivotal to being able to live your Christian life authentically.

The third thing about authentic Christian spirituality is that I'm able to understand the reality of my own condition. And he uses one word here that gives us a perception about himself. And that's the word sinner.

He says God have mercy on me a sinner. There's the Pharisee on one hand living in his religious fantasy as to how good he is and what he does and how he lives his life and his contribution. Here the tax collector has one word that describes his life.

And the word he selects is sinner. I guess by now many of you have filled in many forms that will give you some analysis about yourself. I fill in these forms all the time and love reading the results.

Some which make me funny make me laugh. Some which are so totally untrue they make you weep. And here is this man filling in his form who is, who am I? And the basic defining characteristic he comes up with is sinner.

And this isn't too popular these days in modern evangelicalism as we're sort of meant to describe ourselves as something more positive than that. Say something nice. But that's how he describes himself.

He says I'm a sinner. And it's as though he's been able to strip himself down from all the religious concepts all the religious words. He's been able to unpick it like taking apart an engine.

Like taking apart a car and saying well this doesn't matter and that doesn't matter. But this is in essence what I am. I'm in this situation of being a sinner.

I am at bedrock with myself. And he lives in this triangle of God of God's mercy and him being a sinner. This is where Stephen Covey is not going to help.

We can learn our seven principles as much as we like. We can learn how to be effective leaders as much as we want. But it's not going to help here.

It's not going to help me with the real definition as to who I am. Abraham Maslow who tells you basically your job in your life and he has influenced our society in a huge way says the big issue about you is self-actualization. You live your life and come and discover who you are and you then live that to the full.

It's not what our tax collector is saying about himself. He's saying I am a sinner. It's like having a bad flight.

You're coming down to the ground. You're going all over the place and suddenly you hit the ground with a bump. You're in reality.

You've reached earth and all the fantasy is gone. I went to see another film last year. It's great on sabbaticals.

You can go to the films as much as you like. Apollo 13. Great film in some sense.

It's a bit of a documentary rather than a drama and they focus on NASA's greatest moments. But as I was watching that film I couldn't help but reflect on NASA's worst moments. On times when it all went wrong.

The tragedy of the space shuttle challenge with all those astronauts dying. The seals failed. People have studied what happened at that time.

And what happened was within the organization of NASA they started to develop illusions about who they were and their relationships with each other. The engineers stopped talking to the scientists. The managers stopped talking to both.

They failed to communicate adequately and even when they knew great danger was coming they all pretended this really wasn't a danger. Some of them did better than others. One guy who did a study of this in 1988 said this, the senior managers and engineers at NASA created a delusional system that introduced thoughtlessness on a grand scale in order to deny the uncertainty they faced.

In other words, what happened to this group was for a time they went into total fantasy as to who they were. The cost of that was the lives of their own astronauts. They had become bogus.

My brothers and sisters, whatever we become, whatever is your theological shape, whatever you want to pursue in terms of your theological bent, it is absolutely central that right at the core of our own lives and our relationship with God is God, mercy, sinner. Any theology that does not adequately address our own failure, our own hypocrisy, our own self-centeredness, our own sense of self-protection, our own manipulation, our own cowardice, is not adequate for the world in which we live. God, mercy, sinner.

Is this bleak? Is this all defeatist stuff? Look at verse 14. I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

You see, all the people who were listening to Jesus telling this story would have anticipated that the ones who were doing well here were the Pharisees. Tax collectors were bad. Pharisees were perceived as being good.

And Jesus twists the story around as he does in many of the parables. He leads them along a certain line and then he moves it radically at the end. And this passage closes on this incredible paradox and says that authentic exaltation with God doesn't come from a bogus confidence but comes from actually being broken before God.

So when you realize your place in relationship to Him, it is then when you are able to take hold of his justification and appropriate that to yourself. And I just love the way in which he says he went home justified before God. It does not say anything about his morality.

It does not say anything about his behavior. Although there's other passages in the Scripture that maybe you could turn to with regard to that. He is just right before God.

And he's got hold of the earthy, basic, right before God. No spiritual gymnastics, no great agonies about which direction or which denomination or how he's going to work this out. God, mercy, sinner.

Let's pray. Lord God, we need your help. We need your grace.

Lord, I know often in my own heart I see the spirit of the Pharisee and I just pray that your grace through the death and resurrection of your Son may be appropriated for all of us. That we will know, Lord, who we are. That we won't be full of fantasy.

We won't be full of pretend. We won't be struggling in those areas. But we'll know you, be recipients of your mercy and have a gloriously clear perspective on ourselves.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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