

“Relinquishing the False Self”
Ephesians 4:17-25; Colossians 3:8-11;
Mark 7:14-23; John 15:15-17

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James was a fellow who had grown up with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was never in want. He had always had everything. He went to the best schools, and when he graduated, his father put him in charge of a group of investments and he was able to pretty much do whatever he wanted. Yet, as he reflected on his life he found that as much excitement as he had found, those momentary rushes, he felt unfulfilled. He wondered if it was just one more experience. If there was only something that would begin to give him meaning and purpose. He began to feel trapped in his wealth and not sure who he was.

Jane was a medical professional. She was doing pretty well, but she felt like she lived in a pile of debt—debt from school, debt for the house, debt for the car. Even the dog seemed to be a pile of debt sometimes. She began to wonder what life was about. Was it just working so she could pay off her debts? If only she had a bit more. If only she could take the vacation she was looking for, maybe. But she tried to put up a good front. She tried to soldier on and look the happy, competent professional she was supposed to be.

Bob was thankful that he was a strong guy and that he could use that strength in the carpentry he did. Yet he struggled. He had been out of work during the recession for a year and a half before he could find more carpentry work. He wondered sometimes why doing things with his hands, being a laborer, wasn't more respected. He was beginning to come out of the debt he had gotten into during the recession. He wondered if only he had more respect, maybe he would feel better about his life. If only he could maybe buy the next thing—a new car, maybe. Yet he, too, put on his game face and went out and faced the world, trying to do his best to fit in and to be the person he thought he should be.

It feels like we all have those places in our lives, those ways of developing a set of expectations about who we're supposed to be to make our lives something. How easy it is to set a goal and maybe even achieve it, and find that it hasn't succeeded in fulfilling our lives.

The passage out of Ephesians which talks about some of the ways we develop what we might call a false self, or an expected way of being, suggests that without any connection to God, this is what happens. We live in “the futility of our minds, in a life darkened in its limited understanding, alienated from the life of God because of ignorance and hardness of heart.” And one loses all compassion and too easily abandons oneself to “licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” I think that's a little rough. Most of us, I think, try to do what's good. And yet, there is that sense of emptiness that we can find. A sense of alienation from other people. The struggle to fill our lives in a way that makes them feel good.

There is a temptation to follow society's lead. I saw a comic the other day that said, "What if I don't want to go to heaven where everybody is good? I want to be bad." There's this sense in our society that we will only find fulfillment if we can grab everything, including some of that stuff that people might call decadent, or bad.

As we are going through these spiritual disciplines, we are following the acronym W-O-R-S-H-I-P. The first one, W, was Worship. The second one, O, was Opening ourselves, and the next one is R – Relinquishing the false self. We hear today's scriptures talk about our selves and how we need to recognize how we can be led into a place by our world and be tricked into making something other than the will of God, the grace of God, ours. We can develop ourselves in a way that we think we are in control, or need to be. We can develop ourselves so that we have goals that have nothing to do with God. In that, we can find disappointment. I think it's through that disappointment that we will end up trying things like the scripture talks about. We will be deluded. It says, "Put away the former life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts."

We are used to a life that we shape. We expect to live being in control, thinking who we should be. That "if only." If only I could have X. If only I could be Y. If only I could do this. If only..., then I will arrive. And yet, in our faith we recognize that there is an emptiness, a need inside us that can only be filled in one way. That is through the love of God, having God in our lives. Some people talk about it as if we have this God-shaped void within us. We need to be in relationship to God to have that experience of God in some way to fully engage us in the life that we've been given.

This idea of relinquishing the self is not an easy thing to think about. I've spent a lot of time developing who I am. I want to think that I've accomplished certain things and that I've done it myself, so I can be proud of who I am. That's what I want. There are those other times when I recognize and worry about the things that I haven't done, the struggles I have developed, the ways I realize I have failed, the uncertainties in my life, the anxiety I face. Sometimes it feels like I ping pong between the two of those depending on the day. Sometimes I can wake up and feel like I'm on top of the world, and other times I wonder if anything is right.

If I only go with my own feelings, I can put on a happy face. I can put on a way of being. I can soldier on and make it look like I'm that great professional. I wonder if we all don't know that a little bit, where we run roughshod over our feelings or experiences in order to play a part or make ourselves look a particular way.

It is in trying to play that part, in trying to make my expectations happen, I can lose track of the means I use in my attempt to accomplish my goals. I can lose track of the idea that the means matter, and only make it about the ends. In making it about the ends, I can do a number of things. I can blame other people. I can do things I wouldn't do, that I know aren't right, because in the end it will be all right. It has the right end.

Scripture suggests when we do that, it might lead to anger, slander, abusive language. I wonder if wanting things to be right and blaming others for things being wrong isn't part of our refugee and migrant crisis. They are the problem to my life being okay. So we can end up treating people inhumanely, putting them in cages, deciding a few folks are not human.

The banner on the wall towards the back represents the Barmen declaration, a document declaring opposition to the Nazi's twisting of Christian values to promote their racist ideology. It shows a swastika burning in the flames of war. It reminds me of a time when our Germany became a people who were trying to say, "We're the best and we're going to force everybody else to believe that. We're going to blame a few (basically the Jews at that time) for being the problem." Human beings seem capable of doing this corporately as well as individually. We can cause the problems of the world because we have an end in sight that we want and the means begin to not matter.

There is one thing that I would like to note about ends and means. I think we forget that there is an end. That end suggests that the means matter. That is, scripture suggests that we will meet our maker and when we meet we can be commended or not. We kind of forget that the way God suggests that the end matters is in how we live now. Our living matters. What we do matters. The means are the end.

So in today's thought about relinquishing our false self, it's an invitation to find our true identity in the love of God in Jesus Christ and to allow the Spirit to be at work in our lives, enabling us to see the goodness that God would show us. In Ephesians it talks about being renewed in the spirit of our minds. I'm going to retranslate that: The Spirit enables the faculty of perceiving and understanding through our ability to feel, judge, and determine and thus or recognizing good and evil. The point is, in connection with God as God's Spirit is at work in our lives, it enables us to see, to think, to perceive, goodness and evil. In doing so, it leads us to be those who accept the goodness, the grace of God in Jesus Christ, so we might be fruitful in our lives in a way of showing that grace and guiding us to be the ones to reflect the very love of God.

So this particular spiritual discipline is looking at how I see the struggles I have with my own self. Where do I look for my identity, and is that identity in God. Can I allow God to help shape that identity so that I am a child of God through the grace he's given us and the love he's shown us in Jesus Christ, and through the work of the Spirit among us?

It's a process. Last week we read about the potter and the clay. Sometimes, I think that's what the spiritual disciplines are like, is allowing God to shape us and continue to move us and help us move into a life that has purpose and meaning as it shows the very love and grace of God that we have experienced. So it's a process.

There's a book that we are using, *The Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Calhoun, which has a list of exercises and spiritual disciplines that you can do for each section. These disciplines help us think about this particular subject—who we are,

where our identity is, and what ways we have shaped a false self and how we continually need the grace and love of God to encourage and shape us in new ways.

In some ways, coming to the table is one way we do that. It's a recognition of the ground of our being, that which really shapes and sustains us. We do it in a physical way so that in the process we are taking in the recognition that we are being transformed into the people of God, the very children of God, and a family of faith. Ephesians says that we are members one of another. In the liturgy it says that because we all partake of one bread, we are one body. So we begin to find our identity in the community of faith and the love of God in Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit. Amen.