

# Up And Out, Not In

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by Tullian Tchividjian

When a lot of Christians think about "spirituality" they tend to think of it monastically, individualistically. In fact, in his book on sanctification, Harold Senkbeil writes, "What has developed under the guise of the practice of the Christian faith borders on a new monasticism." Many of us, in other words, think about spirituality exclusively in terms of personal piety, internal devotion, and spiritual formation. We focus almost entirely on ourselves and our private disciplines: praying, reading the Bible, and so on. That, we conclude, is what spirituality is first and foremost. And while personal disciplines are indispensable aspects of staying tethered to the truth of gospel (you'll shrink without them), it's interesting that when James makes his strong point in 2:14-26 about faith without works being dead, what he describes are not works of private spirituality but public service:

*If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (James 2:15)*

As one of my friends wrote recently, "True Christianity may be personal, but it's not private. It is wildly, unashamedly, thoroughly public."

Similarly, in James 1:27 he writes (the only place in the Bible where the word "religion" is used positively):

*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

Even in that last phrase "keep oneself unstained from the world", he's not talking about monastic retreat, private meditation, or even personal piety. The contextual implication there involves the need to "wash our hands of worldliness" which, throughout the book of James, is defined as self-absorption—a "my life for me" approach to life in contrast from a "my life for you" approach to life. Worldliness then, according to James, is me thinking always about me (see James 4:1-3).

Therefore, in both James 1:27 and 2:15, he's making it clear that true spirituality actually takes us away from ourselves and into the messy lives of other people. It is, in other words, not introverted, but extroverted - it doesn't take me deeper into me; it sends me away from me. Real spirituality is forgetting about yourself, washing your hands of you.

That's quite different from the current way our individualistic and subjectivistic culture thinks about spirituality. Almost everything that is considered "spirituality" today is private and focuses on the inner life and personal betterment of the individual. This subjectivistic spirit of our age has seeped into the Evangelical church. "The evangelical orientation", writes Sinclair Ferguson, "is inward and subjective. We are far better at looking inward than we are at looking outward." One serious consequence of engaging in this type of morbid introspection, this propensity to "spiritualized navel-gazing", is that when we do we fail to see the needs of our neighbor and serve them—which is James' definition of "good works." After all, as Martin Luther said, "God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor does."

The biggest difference between the practical effect of sin and the practical effect of the gospel is that sin turns us inward and the gospel turns us upward and outward. Martin Luther picked up this imagery in the Reformation, arguing that sin actually bends or curves us upon ourselves (*homo incurvatus in se*). We were designed to embrace God and others, but instead we are now consumed with ourselves. The gospel causes us to look up to Christ and what he did, out to our neighbor and what they need, not in to ourselves and how we're doing. There's nothing about the gospel that fixes my eyes on me. Any version of Christianity, therefore, that encourages you to think mostly about you is detrimental to your faith—whether it's your failures or your successes; your good works or your bad works; your strengths or your weaknesses; your obedience or your disobedience.

The irony, of course, is that you and I are renewed inwardly to the degree that we focus not on inward renewal but upward worship and outward service. The more you see that the gospel isn't about you, the more spiritual you will become.