

# What Is True Spirituality?

Tullian Tchividjian - Dec. 21, 2011

"The evangelical orientation is inward and subjective.  
We are far better at looking inward than we are at looking outward."

*Sinclair Ferguson*

The word *spirituality* conjures up all sorts of images and ideas. For non-Religious-or secular-people, spirituality is nothing more than "an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his/her being ... aspects of life and human experience which go beyond a purely materialist view of the world without necessarily accepting belief in a supernatural reality or divine being." Of course, Christians reject this idea of spirituality. Whatever we Christians believe about spirituality, we assume that it has something to do with inward and individual intimacy with a personal creator God who exists outside of us and has revealed himself to us.

There is, however, one area in which-it seems-both Christian and secular people agree when it comes to spirituality. Spirituality for both is subjective and private.

Whether it's a secular or Christian version, a spiritual person (in the minds of most modern people) is a person who focuses on "the inside of life." Most Christians I talk to think about spirituality exclusively in terms of personal piety, internal devotion, and spiritual formation. The focus is almost entirely on individual, inward renewal and private disciplines: praying, reading the Bible, meditation, spiritual retreat, contemplation, and so on. True spirituality, we conclude, is predominately quiet-focusing on the interior of life.

To be sure, personal disciplines are indispensable aspects of staying tethered to the truth of gospel (you'll shrink without them). But 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 subjective "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 Mike Horton wrote recently, "True spirituality 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, 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 take us away from ourselves and into the messy lives of other people-it's "down to earth", focusing primarily on the outside of life rather than on the inside of life. It is not simply 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.

One serious consequence of concluding that true spirituality is exclusively introspective-that it's all about internal betterment-is that 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."

As I mentioned in a post last week, the biggest difference between the practical effect of sin and the practical effect of the gospel is that sin turns us inward (*homo incurvatus in se*) and the gospel turns us upward and outward. 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.

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.

*Excerpt from Jesus + Nothing = Everything*