

Renewing the Spirit of Our Mind

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[0 : 0 0] on the theme of emotionally healthy spirituality. We think it's important for a number of reasons. It tends to be one of the most important, least talked about aspects of Christian discipleship.

So we're focusing on this during the season of Lent. And this is partly inspired by a book written by Pete Scazzaro. So if you want to read the book as we do the series, you might get more out of it. And last week we started by looking at the example of Saul in 1 Samuel 15, a man who has, by every outward appearance, he presents as a mature, capable, gifted man of God and leader of God's people.

And yet we learned that that was a persona and that there was a disconnect. And inside, under the surface, he was emotionally and spiritually stunted.

And there was a disconnect between the outer self and the inner self, right? This is the way that we think about the importance of emotionally healthy spirituality. A more modern example, a more current example, would be an example of someone like Ravi Zacharias, who, if you have not been following along, I don't know who that is, a world-famous Christian apologist, who up until this past year, I would have listed as among my greatest heroes.

[1 : 1 8] I, like many people, have been deeply shaken by the news that has come out about following his death, about a long history of sexual abuse and manipulation of a number of women, using power and influence in his ministry to cover those things up.

And that's been deeply heartbreaking for me. And as a Christian leader, I look at an example like that and I say, well, how in the world does something like that happen? There's such a disconnect between the outer persona and the inner reality.

One of the things that we're going to be focusing on during this series is the fact that this is not an exception that only applies to a few people, that in fact, while on the one hand, God willing, no one in here ever does anything like that, that potential for disconnect exists.

And it exists in every single one of us. Anyone who is a Christian, if you're a Christian long enough, you're going to experience a disconnect between your faith and your experience, your faith and your life in one way or another.

Now, a lot of these could be fairly minor. I've talked to people who say, you know, I consider myself a Christian. I go to church. I believe in Jesus. But I just don't feel it. That's a kind of disconnect.

[2 : 3 1] Some Christians are leaders in their churches. They're very involved in church. But then you see the things that they post online. And it seems like a completely different person.

And you say, well, who's the real person? The person that I see on Sunday or the person who's posting this thing? Even in my own life, not too long ago, I woke up before my family.

And I spent that time praying. And it was quiet and the house was peaceful. And I spent some time praying. And I just felt my heart fill up with love. You know, I fill up with love for God and fill up with love for my family.

And I can't wait for my kids to wake up. And I'm just so excited. And then my kids wake up, you know. And then the rush begins. And we have to get their teeth brushed.

And then we have to get them dressed. And we have to get them downstairs. And we have to get them all breakfast. And then we have to get them all on three separate Zoom calls for school. And by 9 a.m., I'm a completely different person.

[3 : 2 9] I'm filled with anger and frustration. And I'm blowing up. And I'm losing my temper at them. And so I find myself afterwards just sort of asking, who am I really?

Am I the man who was praying and loving God and loving his family? Or am I the ogre who just bit my kids' heads off for spilling cereal all over the floor?

You know, who am I really? So that's a disconnect. And so what we're going to do this morning is we're going to talk about overcoming that disconnection between faith and lived experience. We're going to look at Ephesians 4 to help us do that. We're going to break this into two parts. How do we become disconnected? And then what can we do about it? So let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you that it always knows what we need, even if we don't. That you send your word out and it never returns to you void and empty. It always accomplishes the purpose that you set out to accomplish. So we pray that you would send your word out into us and that it would accomplish your purposes in us.

[4 : 40] I pray that we would have a posture to sit under your word. To submit, to trust, to open ourselves to what you have to say. To listen, to receive, to recognize that sometimes it might be painful, sometimes it might be not what we would want to hear.

But that we need surgery. We need help, Lord. We pray this in your son's name and for your glory. Amen. So this first question, how do we become disconnected between our faith and our life, between our outer self and our inner self?

Paul is actually writing to people who have a kind of disconnect of their own. He's writing to Christians in Asia Minor, in Ephesus. He's known these people. He spent, you know, two and a half, three years with them, ministering to them.

So he knows them personally. He knows that they're genuine followers of Jesus. And yet there's this disconnect that he has become aware of between their faith and the way they're living their lives.

And so he starts listing some of these evidences of disconnect. He says these are not compatible with the Christian faith. And then he says this in verse 20, the passage we just read.

[5 : 45] But that is not the way you learned Christ. All these things that you're doing, that's not the way you learned Christ. Assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him as the truth is in Jesus.

He's assuming that they have. To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires. To be renewed in the spirit of your mind and then to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God.

So what we realize is that Paul's actually talking about their conversion. He's talking about Christian conversion. And this shows us something very important about Christian conversion.

That conversion is both a completed action and it's an ongoing process. It's a completed action, once and for all, thing that happens. And it's an ongoing process that lasts the rest of your life.

On the one hand, when you become a Christian, that's a one-time event. Some of you can think back to the moment that you gave your life to Christ. It's a one-time event.

[6 : 46] As Paul said in our passage, we learn the truth of Christ. We hear the gospel. The spirit opens our hearts to the truth of the gospel. Then we put off the old self, which means we confess our sin to God.

We repent of all of the ways that we've tried to live apart from God. The bad that we've done, but also the good that we've done, apart from God. Then we put on the new self.

We put on the righteousness of Jesus by faith. We're baptized. We're filled with the Holy Spirit. We gain a new identity as God's adopted children.

All of this happens once and for all. Some of us can point to the date where all of this took place.

But there's another aspect of Christian conversion that is ongoing.

It's a process that lasts the rest of our lives. Right between putting off the old self and putting on the new self, we see this phrase, to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.

[7 : 47] And the verb tense there, unlike the other verbs, implies an ongoing daily process. This is going to happen for the rest of our lives, being renewed in the spirit of our minds.

What is the spirit of your mind? That's a very important question for understanding what Paul is getting at. The best way to think of it is this way.

Obviously, it's not just your mind. It's something more than that. It's the spirit of your mind. And the best way to understand this is that it is the intersection between the rational part and the emotional part of you.

It's where your thinking self and your feeling self come together. Psychologists actually say that the brain has two independent systems that work together.

They're independent, but they cooperate. There's the rational analytical system and the emotional intuitive system. The conscious thinking self and then the subconscious, unconscious, preconscious feeling self.

[8 : 53] Now, in the West, we have tended to think that the rational system is dominant. Up until recently, not so much today, but up until recently, we have tended to be fairly certain that we are primarily rational beings.

Right? I think, therefore I am. This is the core definition of human existence. Right? But it's more complicated than that. It turns out it's a little more complicated.

A psychologist named Jonathan Haidt has a good illustration of this. He says, imagine a rider sitting on top of an elephant. A rider sitting on top of an elephant.

The rider is the rational system. It's the rational part of you. The elephant is our emotional system. Now, the rider is holding the reins.

And it looks as though the rider is the one in control. But the elephant is, in fact, far stronger.

Elephants weigh something like six tons.

[9 : 58] So the rider's control is very precarious. And the rider's job is to try to coax the elephant to go where he wants the elephant to go. But any time the rider and the elephant disagree, the elephant's going to win every single time.

He says, this is how we need to think about the rational system and the emotional system. And this is a modern way of describing it, drawing on modern psychological concepts. But these psychologists are simply tapping in to something that Christians have known for centuries.

They're tapping into something that Christians have known for centuries. And this is a tradition that goes from St. Paul to St. Augustine to Philip Melanchthon, the 16th century reformer.

All of them basically agree, in the words of Melanchthon, what the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. What the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

In other words, we like to think that our rational self is calling the shots. But it's in fact the opposite. Our emotions and desires are far more powerful.

[11 : 14] Far more powerful. So now let's come back to our first question. How does our faith become disconnected? How do we develop a disconnect between what we believe and then our lived experience?

Well, most often it is because the rider and the elephant are going in two different directions. That's the disconnect. The rider is committed to following Jesus.

But the elephant has taken off and it's chasing something else entirely. Feels like you're being pulled apart. So think of the person, think of the example of a person who is a faithful, committed Christian.

They're single. They've been involved in church for years. They volunteer. They have lots of friends. Years and years and years in the church. Really want to be married, hoping that happens one day. And then a halfway decent prospect comes along. And seemingly overnight they move in together despite concerns and objections voiced by their friends and their family.

[12 : 12] And the next thing you know, this person who has been faithfully a part of the church for years is deconstructing their entire faith. And you say, well, how in the world does this kind of thing happen?

Well, the rider is very committed to Jesus. The rational self is very committed to Jesus. But the elephant is chasing this relationship. And there's a disconnect.

And the rider in such a situation has almost no power to stop the elephant. Not strong enough. All the rider can do, to go back to Philip Melanchthon's word, right, what the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies, all the rider can do at that point is to try to justify this new life direction.

So the easiest way to do that is to find whatever beliefs are standing in the way of this direction and to begin to deconstruct them. So we see examples like this all the time in the life of the church. This helps us understand how the church could be complicit in things like slavery or Jim Crow. You look at that and you say, well, how could those, how could Christians have done that? Well, it's because the rider, the rational self, was committed to the Christian faith.

[13 : 24] But the elephant self was chasing the culture and the values and the norms of the day. And at that point in history, these were all culturally condoned and supported.

This helps us understand how some Christians on the left could just freely redefine how we think about sexuality and gender. or Christians on the right could storm the U.S. Capitol and wave a Christian flag on the Senate floor.

In both cases, the elephant may be going in opposite directions, but the elephant is chasing politics and cultural norms instead of Christ.

Right? So we could go on and on and on and list examples of the elephant and the rider heading in two different directions. And the elephant's going to win.

So the point here for us is this. If we think that our Christian faith is merely a one-time event, a conversion experience that happened sometime in the past, and we neglect the daily life of discipleship and renewal, then it's only a matter of time before there's a disconnect.

[14 : 31] It's only a matter of time. And what often happens, unfortunately, is that when that disconnect begins to happen, instead of trying to pull the elephant back and get the elephant moving in the right direction, the person just begins to develop a persona.

They learn how to act like a Christian, talk like a Christian, present as a Christian. But the elephant is over here completely disconnected. And sometimes people can go for years and years and years and years and years, and the elephant and rider are in two completely separate places.

So what can we do about it? Well, our postmodern culture says ignore the rider. Ignore the rider.

Let the elephant decide. The elephant is the true you. So let the elephant be in charge. Follow your heart. You are your feelings. Christians, in an attempt to challenge this, I think sometimes it's right to challenge this.

No, virtually no society in history around the world has ever thought that until us. So Christians are right to challenge this, but I think sometimes Christians can overcorrect in the other direction and then downplay the importance of emotions.

[15 : 46] So people will often quote Jeremiah 17.9, the heart is deceitful above all things. And they say, therefore, don't even listen to your emotions. So what we can say as Christians is, yes, feelings are not a source of authoritative truth.

Feelings can very often be deceptive and lead you astray, but that doesn't mean that we should ignore them all together, which is a mistake that a lot of us make. What we really need is a way to bring the rider and the elephant together.

We need renewal not just for our mind, but for the spirit of our mind, for our thoughts and our desires and affections. So let me give you three ways of doing that with the time that we have left.

Three ways that we can begin to take steps toward alignment and overcome the disconnect. The first thing is this. We need to be able to identify what the elephant inside us is chasing.

What is your elephant chasing? As the hymn says, we're going to sing it in a little while, our hearts are prone to wander, right? Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.

[16 : 57] The elephant in you is prone to wander. It's always being coaxed in one direction or another. To use Paul's phrase, there are deceitful desires in us that are drawing us away from Christ.

So ask yourself, what is that in me? Is it a desire to prove your worth? Is it a desire to gain affirmation? Is it a desire to be respected? Is it a desire for comfort or status or escape?

What are the influences shaping your heart? You know, social media companies exist to capture as many elephants as possible. I mean, to use Height's image of the rider and the elephant, social media companies make money off their ability to be elephant poachers.

They want to illegally come into your territory and capture your elephant. And I know that might be a funny-sounding way to talk about it, but that's exactly what they're doing. And guess what?

Elephants love dopamine. Right? Regular diet of dopamine hits is the best way to lure your elephant away. As it turns out, the spirit of your mind is the most valuable real estate on the planet.

[18 : 11] Everybody wants to live there. Everybody wants to claim that territory. There are legions of servers and programmers and algorithms that exist exclusively to claim the spirit of your mind.

It's the most valuable resource on the planet. Why? Because it's meant to be God's zip code. He's meant to live there. Everybody else wants to usurp it.

Right? So the first thing we have to do is to figure out what is the elephant in me chasing? It's chasing something. I guarantee you. If it's not, Jesus is something else. Number two, this is where some of us might get a little nervous.

We need to be willing to listen to both God and our emotions. In the opening of his Institutes, John Calvin says, nearly all wisdom which we possess consists of two parts. The knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. And I think part of our faith means listening to God through prayer, through his word. But it's also very important that we listen to our own emotional world.

[19 : 16] As we said, it's not a source of authoritative truth, but we need to have a knowledge of ourselves so that we can bring that into the knowledge of God. We need to bring the two together. Now some of you might hear this and you say, well, you know, I just, what am I listening for?

I'm just not that emotional. And some people just say, well, I'm just not a very emotional person. Some people are really emotional. I'm not emotional. The fact is that God made you to have as many emotions as anybody else.

And if you're not an emotional person, what it means is that you're not listening. You're not used to listening. I'm that kind of person. I can go days and just have no idea what I'm actually feeling. I'd just be completely out of touch with what's going on inside.

Right? So it turns out that tuning into your feelings and then being able to put language to those feelings to be able to actually name them, that that's extraordinarily difficult for most of us.

And it actually is something that you have to practice. When I used to be a therapist, one of the things that I have to do with people pretty regularly is show them a feeling wheel. It's a tool. We'll talk about it at our Soul Care Sunday, which is coming up at Advent.

[20 : 22] We're going to talk about some of the tools, practical tools that are helpful in this regard. But it was a wheel that lists all kinds of emotions and feelings. And I would literally have to give this to people, people in their 40s, 50s, 60s.

And they would have to identify, okay, that's what I'm feeling. Right? It's really helpful. But it takes practice. But we have to be willing to listen to God and our feelings. And then the third thing flows right out of the second.

You have to preach the gospel to the elephant. You have to preach the... The elephant requires constant evangelism. Right? Martin Luther famously said, the reformer Martin Luther famously said, that we need to preach the gospel to ourselves every single day.

Now, Luther was a smart guy. He was a smart theologian. He had a rational understanding of the gospel. That's not what he meant. He didn't mean every night he goes to bed and he wakes up and he's forgotten intellectually what the gospel is. What he's talking about is the fact he says, there's a part of me that gets it intellectually.

I can write books about it. But there's this other part of me that needs to hear it every single day. I think he was talking about the elephant. I think that's what he was getting at. So let's go back to the example that I shared from my own life of waking up, feeling great, praying, loving my kids, and then 30 minutes later blowing up at them and buying their heads off.

[21 : 40] Right? So normally I would be tempted to minimize that and to say, ugh, you know, kids, and move on with my day. Maybe I would offer some cursory prayer, God help me with my anger.

God help take away my anger. And I think God can do that kind of thing. But normally that's how I'd respond. But you know, my wife kind of said to me, hey, what's going on with you? And I decided, out of character, to take some time to spend time thinking and praying about what happened.

And I wanted to try to listen to God. I wanted to try to listen to my emotions. I wanted to try to figure out what was going on. And by the way, whenever you do things that are out of character, whenever you kind of do something, you kind of blow up or react in a way that's unexpected, and you're like, why did I just do that?

Why did I just say that? It's normally because the elephant is in charge. And you've got to take time to figure out what's the elephant doing. So I realized in that time that I took, I realized that some of that anger that I directed at my kids actually had nothing to do with my kids.

This is anger that had been churning inside me for almost two weeks. So I traced that back and said, well, why has this been in me for two weeks? And then I remember I had a particularly challenging interaction with someone and it had bothered me more than usual.

[22 : 53] It just kind of stuck with me in the back of my mind. And so then I asked, what's going on with that? And I remember back when that happened, I did what I normally do. I just kind of brushed it off, ignored the feelings.

I didn't just brush the feelings off. You can't do that with feelings. I stuffed the feelings down. The only thing you can do with feelings is stuff them down. But the problem with feelings is they don't go away. So you stuff them and then they're just there.

Right? It's like the closet in your house where you put all your junk and you stuff more and you stuff more and you stuff more and finally the day comes where the door, all you do is touch the door knob and it just blasts open and everything falls out. Right? Feelings will come back one way or another.

They don't go away. Mine came out two weeks later aimed at my kids. Right? So once I realized this, then I spent time asking God to help me understand why did this particular interaction affect me so much the way it did?

And then I realized that it had actually triggered insecurities around my competence. I had left that conversation feeling incompetent. And I realized that that was triggering something deep inside me, a fear that I've carried since childhood, a fear that if I don't appear to be competent and have it together, I'm going to be rejected.

[24 : 07] And then I hit bedrock. Right? That's bedrock. In other words, that's a core belief. And I kind of realized in reflection and prayer, I have this core belief in me. If I'm not competent, then I'm worthless.

If I'm not competent, people are not going to like me. If I'm not competent, I'm going to be rejected. That is the opportunity to preach the gospel to the elephant. A cursory reminder, oh, it's okay, you know, cursory prayer, that's not going to do it.

The elephant's not paying attention. You have to get the elephant's attention. And at that point, after that time and reflection, the elephant part of me was paying attention. This is what I really care about.

I want to be competent so that I won't be worthless. And so that was an opportunity to preach. And I was able to remind myself that God's love and delight in me has nothing to do with my competence. That because I have God's love and acceptance, it's okay for me to fail. It's okay for me to be incompetent. And more than that, because I have God's love and acceptance, it's okay for me to disappoint people.

[25 : 11] And in fact, if I want to be faithful to God in my life, there's going to be many times where I actually have to disappoint people. It's going to happen all the time. And I realize I know that because Jesus himself disappointed people all the time.

Because he lived in the security of his father's approval rather than chasing the approval of the crowds. And you know, I get done with this little sermonette aimed at my elephant and I actually felt better.

I actually felt better. I felt like the gospel had done something in me. Because the elephant and the rider at that moment were aligned toward the gospel.

They were both aiming at Jesus. And I thought, I just took a step. Right? So the point is, if I had simply minimized those feelings and moved on, which I normally would have done, I would have missed an opportunity for the gospel to actually bring renewal to the spirit of my mind.

Not just the rational self, but to the emotional side of me. It took several days for me to get there, to excavate down to the core belief.

[26 : 20] It took several days, a little time here, a little time there, for me to really figure out what was going on. It requires you to set aside time to do this.

So the last thing I want to do before we close is to share with you the tool that I most often use, that I used in this particular example, to do what we're talking about doing.

It's called the Daily Exam, and it was used by St. Ignatius. I would recommend, if you've never done anything like this, if you're looking for a Lenten discipline, this is your go-to.

I would recommend doing it once a day, right before you go to bed, and if you can do it with a journal, that's even better. But it's really five steps. You can do this in 20 minutes.

It doesn't have to take that long. The first thing that you would do is just to take a moment to acknowledge God's presence as a Christian to recognize that God is there with you to open yourself to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

[27 : 19] So take a moment to do that. And then after you do that, just mentally review your day.

From the time you woke up to the moment that you sit there praying, just think through the events of your day.

Think through the feelings of your day. Think through the significant events of the day. and do it with a posture of gratitude, recognizing this day is a gift. The fact that I woke up with air in my lungs is a gift.

Then the third step is where we get into what we've been talking about this morning. You take time to listen to your emotions. And there's sort of two things you're listening for.

Wherever you feel as you look over the course of your day, wherever you feel the growth of things like love or faith or mercy or hope or patience or kindness, the fruits of the Spirit, these are areas of consolation to use the Ignatian term.

In other words, these are areas where you are moving toward Christ, where the elephant is moving toward Christ. Wherever in yourself you sense ingratitude, self-absorption, resentment, fear, anger, anxiety, anger, these are areas of what Ignatius would call desolation.

[28 : 37] These are ways that you're either resisting the Lord or your elephant is being led away in some other direction. Now the key to doing this, and this is hard for many of us, is not to judge yourself for feeling those negative feelings.

Now that's a really hard thing to do. To realize I have all this resentment, I have all this fear, typically we think I'm being such a bad Christian. I should have more faith. That's not what we're asking you to do.

I'm asking you to be curious. Wow, I have a lot of anger here. Wow, I have a lot of anxiety about this thing that's coming up. Be curious. Identify those things.

And then ask God to help you understand where they're coming from. I guarantee you if you follow that thread down you will find a part of you that needs to hear the gospel. And then after you spend some time identifying those areas of consolation and desolation, moving toward the Lord or moving away from the Lord, then bring all of that to God in prayer.

Bring your areas of desolation before the Lord. Surrender to God's will. Ask for God to give you the strength to be faithful. And then the last thing is often my most favorite step and that is to look toward tomorrow with hope.

[29 : 57] Don't skip this step. What that means is essentially envisioning the coming day and holding on to the promise that you're not going to face it alone. Christ is going to be there with you.

He's going to be there in you. And he's going to go before you because he loves you. I want to encourage you to do this for a couple of weeks.

Do it in the evening before you go to bed when it's quiet. Don't turn on Netflix. Don't fall asleep on your phone. Do this and then just see what the Spirit does.

See, if you make yourself available, the Holy Spirit can bring renewal to all parts of you including the spirit of your mind, the rider and the elephant. Because Jesus doesn't just want our rational ascent.

He wants your heart. He wants to make you whole once more. Let's pray. Lord, we can list all of these things out and they are good and valuable but ultimately our greatest need is you to be God and to be in us working in us, bringing to life those things that are dead, calling into the light those areas of sin, eradicating those areas of deception and deceit.

[31 : 27] Lord, calling us to you, all of us, to all of you. I pray that we would not only intellectually understand and believe the doctrine that we have about you but that in our hearts that our deepest selves would yearn to be closer to you.

And that during this Lent as we explore these things that you would inculcate in us a deep yearning, a yearning to feel the love of the one to whom we belong.

We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.