

## His Spiritual Acuity

One of the qualities of Jesus that I think made him particularly influential was his spiritual acuity. The word acuity means a sharpness or keenness of thought, vision or hearing. Jesus had what I would call a spiritual acuity, an ability to perceive the presence or lack of presence of genuine spirituality in people.

Spiritual acuity is the ability to perceive when faith, hope and love was present in someone and when it wasn't. We are perhaps more familiar with Jesus' ability to see the lack of spirituality in people as Jesus so often challenged the religious leaders of his day. Though they were seen by the people as spiritual, Jesus' keen perception of them was quite different. He had various names for them, blind guides, white caskets, serpents and vipers, fools and hypocrites. But just as Jesus saw the lack of spirituality in the so-called spiritual leaders of his day, he also had the spiritual acuity to see the presence of a genuine spirituality in people who his fellow Jew rarely picked up on. One of the interesting qualities of Jesus to me was how often he noticed faith and spirituality in people who were not Israel.

Israel was a very privileged people. They had received special revelation from God, the Law and the Propheets, the holy word spoken and written. In a conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well Jesus makes this very point. He says to her, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know, we Jews worship what we do know" (Jn 4). And yet, the blessing of having such a precious gift as

God's Holy Word, for many Jews actually became a curse because it made them think of themselves as a holier than thou kind of people. The law had actually been given to them to make them more aware of their sin and their need to repent. But instead of the law motivating them to repentance for their unrighteousness, it too often produced in them a self righteousness. They interpreted the law in ways that justified themselves and they added to the Law a great number of their own traditions and interpretations that they considered as authoritative and inspired as the Law itself. Jesus once told the religious leaders of his day, *You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!* (Mark 7:9). The Jewish teachers seemed more interested in making God's Law Jewish rather than letting God's Law make them godly. So Jesus corrected them and among his methods was to call their attention to examples of great faith, genuine spirituality in people who were not Jews at all.

For example in Matthew 8:5-13 we read, *When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. 'Lord,' he said, 'my servant lies at home paralysed, suffering terribly.'* Jesus said to him, *'Shall I come and heal him?'* The centurion replied, *'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, "Go," and he goes; and that one, "Come," and he comes. I say to my servant, "Do this," and he does*

*it.’ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, ‘Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ Then Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.’ And his servant was healed at that moment.*

“I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” “Many from the east and the west will take their places with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” What remarkable statements for Jesus to make. This Roman centurion was a pagan. He had very little if any light at all about who Jesus really was. Yet this pagan’s faith had a quality about it that moved Jesus to praise it. I wonder if we can even begin to feel how scandalous this must have sounded in those Jewish ears standing there.

There is another example of Jesus finding faith in all the wrong places recorded in Luke 4:24-27. Jesus was actually preaching in his home synagogue in Capernaum to fellow Jesus who were having trouble believing in him when he made a decide to use a most unfortuante illustration for his sermon. *‘Truly I tell you,’ he continued, ‘no prophet is accepted in his home town. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three*

*and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.*’ A Canaanite widow and a Syrian soldier had greater faith than all of the Jews in Israel. Once again Jesus finds exemplary faith in the example of two pagans. Perhaps its not surprising that when Jesus offered the invitation at the end of that sermon, the whole congregation came forward to try and grab him and throw him off a nearby cliff. Mark tells us Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. The only other time Jesus uses that word “amazed” was in describing how he felt about that Roman centurion we just mentioned: twice amazed, at the faith of pagans and the lack of faith of Israel.

One more story is found in Matthew 15:21-28. *Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.’ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’ The woman came and knelt before him. ‘Lord, help me!’ she said. He replied, ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.’ ‘Yes it is, Lord,’ she said. ‘Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.’ Then Jesus said to her,*

*‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed at that moment.*

“Woman, you have great faith” Jesus praises this Canaanite mother in front of the disciples. These were words they were not used to hearing from Jesus. They were more used to hearing Jesus gentle scolding, “Oh ye of little faith.” It almost seems that Jesus enjoyed pointing out the faith of those outside of Israel. In Luke 17 Jesus tells of healing a group of 10 lepers living on the border of Samaria and Galilee. Apparently all were Jewish except one, the one leper who came back to thank him. He was a Samaritan. *Jesus asked, ‘Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?’ Then he said to him, ‘Rise and go; your faith has made you well.’ (Luke 17:17-18).* Earlier in Luke 10 it was also a Samaritan who Jesus chooses to make the hero of his well known story which is often called “The Good Samaritan” a title which presumes most Samaritans were not!

So, what’s the point of all this? Simply this. Like the Jews of Jesus day, we Christians worship what we know because of the light given to us through Jesus. But, that very privilege may lead us into a spirit of arrogance and superiority. We may begin to think of ourselves as the true expression of Christianity and be blind to how we have distorted it with our own ideas and traditions. We need the Spirit to develop in us that same spiritual acuity so evident in Jesus.

Don't we American Christians face a similar temptation as did the Jews of Jesus' day? Aren't we tempted to make Christianity more like America rather than making America more like Christ? I wonder if Jesus were to speak to us today as he did in his day, if he might look to some of different faiths around us and say about them, "I have not found such great faith even in American Christians." We must take care to balance our boldness as we proclaim our faith that our Lord Jesus is the Way with the humility that quickly acknowledges that we are not perfect reflections of our Lord and we still have much to learn about his Way. Do you suppose Jesus might point us to the faith of those outside of Christianity to help us better understand what he is desiring from us?

Let me share three examples of how perhaps we Christians may distort the Faith and what a little spiritual acuity might help us to see and learn from those whose faith is outside of Israel. When I was in the university I had friends who followed the wisdom of Eastern religions, especially Buddhists. Visiting with them I think at times helped me see my own faith better. One of the teaching among them I came to appreciate was their teaching of nothingness, or rather of "nothingness." It is called "Sunya." Its far too complicated a teaching to do justice here, but basically it is the idea that reality, especially ultimate reality (God) is beyond our ability to describe. We of course try to describe it with words and

concepts but my Buddhist friends would warn me that my descriptions of reality of God, say as much or more about me than the reality I'm trying to describe.

I think there is a spiritual truth implied in the teaching of Sunya that we might be wise to learn, one that is taught to us in Scripture. It is the principle I think behind the prohibition to Israel to not make an idol or an image of God. *You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape (Dt 4:15-18).*

But of course its not just stone or wood images that can be an idol. When we try to conceptualize and understand God we are making an image of God and inevitably our image is inadequate. To get God to fit into our understanding we must reduce him somewhat. We are all guilty of creating God in our own image. When we think we have God figured out we inevitably lose some if not all of the mystery of God and the wonder and awe we should feel in his presence.

Haven't Christians done that? Often I hear people refer to the holy and awesome King of the universe as the "man upstairs." Almost cavalierly we refer to God as "my co-pilot." "Jesus is my homeboy." I understand the sentiment and the importance to emphasize a personal relationships, but if we lose our sense of the holy, the sacred, the mysterious, haven't we gone too far? While it is true that Christ has ushered us into an intimacy with God never before known by man; is it

not also very possible that in that very familiarity we have lost some of our ability to truly worship the majesty and wonder of God. I wonder if Jesus just might call his disciples' attention today to the reverence and awe for the sacredness and mystery of God seen in a sincere Buddhist?

We Americans are in love with success and winning and achieving. Whether football, business or politics, we're competitive, our most common cheer, "We're Number One!" Often we hear the appeal to people that being a Christian will lead to success in business, good health and even more sports victories. All your prayers will be answered. And we tend to pray for "things" in this world. God becomes what Donald Miller called a "cosmic bellboy" who jumps to meet all our needs and desires. We are attracted not so much to the great heavenly gift of God in Christ, but to all the earthly gifts that preachers promise to throw into the faith package.

Here again we might look to our Buddhist friends who speak so often about the danger of desire and the need to become unattached to the things of this world. Instead we are advised to empty ourselves and a consuming desire for this world's stuff. While we are correct I think to point out that depriving oneself of pleasures and following the rules of don't taste, don't touch, do not handle will not save us; would anyone argue that we are not guilty of tasting and touching and handling entirely too much in this world? Before we are too quick to criticize these people

who are not of Israel, shouldn't we step back and ask ourselves if Jesus might not find in the Buddhist's desire to deny himself and not seek his own will something not too different from his own commands to us, commands like, *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross...for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.* (Matt 16: 24-26).

Well just one more before anyone gets tempted to throw the preacher off the cliff, though it may be a bit hard to find one in West Texas. We Americans are very busy people and are slaves to our schedule. We are constantly rushing from one activity to another. We live under the tyranny of the urgent and rarely find time for the important. Our lives pass us by in a blur and before we know it we look up and notice, our children have grown up and we missed it; its been years since we had a good conversation with a good friend; we've looked forward so much to retiring and now that its here we realized we never really took time to enjoy our work.

Perhaps most tragic, we spend our days and hours and minutes seeking the things of this world rather than seeking a relationship with our God. I wonder if Jesus might point us to our Islamic friends and say, "Look at them. Five times a day they set aside time to pray. They do not just fit God into their schedule, their schedule is fitted around God." Don't you just know Jesus would love to make the hero of one of his parables a follower of Islam? Oh, I know, we could point out

that such external acts of piety do not always indicate a heart of love and devotion and we could even quote Jesus' own words to make our point. But dare we be too critical if our own faith has not disciplined us to commit to our own regular and prioritized appointments with God?

As we live in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic world, where our neighbor is as likely to be a Buddhist as a Baptist, I wonder if we might be wise to develop our spiritual acuity, to be willing to see genuine spirituality in people who do not share our faith, to learn how to balance spiritual boldness with spiritual humility. Boldness is important, especially in a world that is losing faith in Jesus. To those who would accuse us of intolerance and arrogance when we proclaim to the world that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the father except by him, we must, as Peter instructs us, *Always be prepared to give an **answer** to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.* But we must not forget Peter's very next words, *But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).* The same respect Jesus showed people of different faiths.

As Christians we believe in Jesus as the Way, the Truth, the Life. There is no other name under heaven by which we are saved. But believing other religions are not true does not mean believing other religions have no truth. We need to develop that spiritual acuity to see people as Jesus saw people, appreciating faith and genuine spirituality even when it shows up in those who are outside of Israel.

For at least two reasons. First a selfish one. We may find in others' faith greater insight into our own, indeed even a corrective to various ways we may have distorted the truth God has given us. But even more than that, appreciating and respecting the faith of others is the very best way to bring others to Christ.

While we may grieve to see our nation becoming less Christian, we should at the same time, if we believe we are commissioned to take the gospel into all the world, shouldn't we be excited that God is bringing that world to us. Not since the beginning of the Church has the Church been given so many neighbors who don't know Christ. As some of you know I was honored recently by being inducted into the hall of fame of my elementary school, Roscoe Wilson. I can't tell you how cool it is to be in the same hall of fame as Buddy Holly! In the process I learned that my old elementary has students of 16 different nationalities. I can't help but think Paul and Barnabas, Timothy and Titus, Priscilla and Aquilla and all the first century gang would see a great opportunity for sharing the good news of our Lord. So, let us not hesitate to introduce Jesus to our neighbors and let us also ask Jesus to nurture in us his spiritual acuity so we can appreciate in our neighbors, just as Jesus did in his, whatever faith we might find there. And with his spiritual acuity we will experience more and more of that same influence we see in the Influential Christ.