

“We Wish to See Jesus”

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John 12:20-25, Acts 17:16-34

In case you haven't noticed, spirituality is in. We live in an age where it is cool to be “spiritual.” Not “religious” mind you –but “spiritual.” “Spirituality” is a popular cultural buzzword and spiritual seeking is all the rage.

There has been a growing realization that there is more to life than what one can observe with the senses and there is a general understanding that human reason and science cannot possibly explain everything nor solve all our problems.

Oprah Winfrey, one of the most powerful and influential women in our culture today, is always taking up spiritual subjects on her TV show and in her magazine. On her website oprah.com she has a whole section under “Spirituality 101” where she features her favorite spiritual teachers. This is what her website says about Oprah's own understanding of spirituality – its right in tune with the times:

Oprah's definition of spirituality revolves around the understanding that we are more than what we can physically see. [She says] “When you begin to realize that you are more than your body, that your purpose is greater than your profession or your career—that every life, because you were born you have a right to be here and there is a calling on your life—it means you live your life without fear and you know that no matter what happens...you are going to be all right... That's what spirituality is for me.”

There is more to life than what we can physically observe, and analyze and measure and put under a microscope. There is an awakening to a higher dimension of life.

There is no shortage of spiritual teachers these days to help people on their personal journeys. Oprah has been directing her viewers to people like Eckhart Tolle – author of the bestseller A New Earth and The Power of Now. Of course, if you get a recommendation from Oprah, your book is likely to be a bestseller. More than 700,000 people signed up on oprah.com for a recent ten week web seminar with Winfrey and Tolle. Tolle teaches the importance of self-empowerment, and of being fully present in the moment (among other things). Oprah was also pushing a book and dvd called “The Secret” – which is really about the power of positive thinking – how thoughts create reality....drawing from various religions and popular philosophies.

Another popular teacher these days is Deepak Chopra, who has written a number of books on spiritual enlightenment and is a familiar presence on tv. He emphasizes meditation and self-

awareness as primary factors in both illness and healing. He has recently written a book entitled Jesus: A Story of Enlightenment (which I cannot recommend).

If spirituality is in, religion is out. To say someone is “spiritual” is to offer a compliment; to say someone is “religious” is something of an insult. “Religious” smacks of smug piety and rigid rule-keeping. “Religion” is equated with dead institutionalism and mindless authoritarianism. Many of today’s spiritual seekers are not devoted to any one particular historical faith or denomination. In fact, they may be hostile to traditional or organized religion per se. “Dogma” is to be avoided at all costs. Instead, spiritual seekers feel free to explore a variety of faiths and spiritualities they then they ‘mix and match’ to tailor make a faith that works for them and meets their needs. They may draw a little bit from Christianity, a little bit from Buddhism, a little bit from Islam, and little bit from Deepak and Tolle and Oprah.

This “mix and match” trend found strange expression, if you remember, in that Episcopal priest in Seattle who claimed also to be a Muslim. For her, there was apparently no contradiction. You could be both a Christian and Muslim at the same time – you just kind of pick and choose the best out of each tradition. Never mind that the two religions have very different conceptions of God. In our postmodern era, people feel comfortable holding to a variety of “truths” even if they are contradictory. Since truth does not correspond to an objective reality, truth is what you make it.

God becomes whatever you want God to be – so long as that works for you and you find it meaningful.

Oprah says she is a Christian – but according to her that is just one gate to heaven among many. She said quite explicitly: “There can’t possibly be only one way to God.” Oprah’s website under the category “Spirituality 101” says:

While Oprah calls the source of her spirituality God, others call it “the source” or “universal energy.” “I think God doesn’t get hung up on the titles,” Oprah says. “It’s the people that get hung up on the titles.”

Again, God becomes a projection of what God needs to be for you... whatever works.

What about that? Is “God” a concept that we can fill with our own content depending on what we need and how we feel? Is it enough just to be “spiritual?” Does “spirituality” save us? Or is something more needed – namely a saving relationship with a God who stands outside this world of ours and who has made himself known uniquely and definitively in the person of Jesus?

If the Apostle Paul were to come back today and address spiritual seekers, he would say something like what he said to the Athenians long ago: *“I look around and I can tell that you*

are very spiritual. The signs of that spirituality are everywhere– in your movies, your music, your public memorial gatherings for “sacred” celebrities, your literature, your art. You know that there is more to life than what you can see. You long to live more deeply, more truly, more authentically. That is all very well and good. We are, after all, spiritual beings. You are looking for meaning and purpose and yet you are not quite sure where to find it. You seem to have a vague notion of god, and are not quite sure where to find him. I can’t imagine that this vague notion of god, this fuzzy spirituality of yours is all the comforting, inspiring or fulfilling.

I am here today to tell you the most incredible good news! The mystery of the ages has been revealed. There is a God and he is to be found in the person of Jesus. He is the key to life’s meaning and purpose. He is the One you have been looking for all along. He is the way, the truth and the life. God of this universe can be known! He is not a figment of our imagination, or a projection of our fondest hopes. God is not something we create or manufacture. God is real. He comes to us from outside ourselves and this world. He has revealed himself to us in the man from Galilee. You can read about him in the Bible. To know him is to know God.

This God wants to enjoy our fellowship. He is calling us and pursuing us in love. Know that God has been seeking us out in love long before we ever began to seek him. What you are looking for – meaning, purpose, satisfaction, true peace - can be found.

I must tell you that it is not enough to be spiritual. Spirituality doesn’t save us, any more than “good feelings” can save us. It is not enough to hold hands and sing “We are the world” and hope for peace and think good thoughts. We don’t have what it takes to save ourselves. The world isn’t going to bring in a better day. God is. The fact, is, we need a Savior. Thanks be to God that God has saved us through Jesus Christ who died for us on the cross and who is alive forevermore. Nothing more than a radical transformation of the human heart is needed to solve the world’s problems. The answer is Jesus. Consider his claims, study his life, follow his wisdom, put your trust and confidence in him and let him change your heart.” He is the world-changer. Why continue to grope around in the darkness. The Light has come! The Light of the Word is Jesus. Let him enlighten you!

I wonder if Paul is speaking to some of you this day, who are seeking but never seem to find. Perhaps the concept of God has very little content for you – God is no more than “The Man Upstairs” or “The Supreme Being” or the “One-Beyond-All-Knowing.” Consider Jesus. He reveals a God who loves us more than we can know – a God who wants nothing more than to bless us and to give us joy. If you want to know God as God really is, get to know Jesus. Read about him in the four gospels. Read with an open mind – give it a fair hearing. You just might find what you have been looking for all your life.

For those of us who know and love Jesus, and know him to be way and the truth and the life, we have an important task. Our job is to share him – to make him known.

And this is an absolutely amazing time to do so! People are more open to spiritual things than ever before. Spiritual discussions are in vogue. People actually love to talk about Jesus and spiritual topics. Seekers abound.

We read in the gospel how some Greeks were among those who were worshipping at the time of the Passover festival in Jerusalem. The Greeks were known for their spirituality and their love of philosophy, and their search for meaning led them to the disciple Philip with a request: *“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”*

I can’t help but think that that is what all people are wanting, whether they consciously know it or not. *“We wish to see Jesus.”*

In one way or another everyone is looking for Jesus. One author put it like this:

The high achievers who run out of rungs,
the low achievers who run out of hope,
the elderly who are running out of time and
the young who are running out of alternatives:
Sooner or later almost everyone looks for God.
Sooner or later almost everyone reaches the point where they would like to see Jesus.
[quoted by Doug Ferguson, Menlo Park Presbyterian].

Our job is to help others find him.

Clearly there is a right way and a wrong way to do that. The wrong way is to reinforce negative stereotypes of Christians and pounce on people, judging them harshly for their heretical ideas. The last thing we want to do is to condemn them out of hand for their strange notions of God and spirituality. It’s not going to help to denounce Oprah and Deepak and other New Age philosophies. You can go on the internet and find many anti-Oprah Christian websites that are so full of hate and judgment – it only feeds the common perceptions about Christians.

The fact is, we Christians have a serious image problem. David Kinnaman and his associates have done a study of what the younger generation really thinks about Christianity and Christians. In his summary book entitled unchristian, he points out how the younger generation in general finds Christians too hypocritical, too judgmental, too sheltered, too political, too insincere and too pushy. There is a general disdain for Christians and the church - but oddly enough, they love Jesus. He’s cool.

We could get a helpful cue from the Apostle Paul in sharing Jesus. You’ll notice that the Apostle Paul did not publically condemn the Athenians for their idol worship. Instead he treated them

with profound respect, acknowledged their spiritual sensitivity, and appropriately and confidently asked them to consider Jesus. Some believed, most didn't and others waited to hear more. People invariably respond in different ways to the message about Jesus. All we can do is tell the story. It's up to others what they do with it. It certainly doesn't help to hit people over the head with it, as some over-zealous Christians seem to do.

Let's look for opportunities to have spiritual conversations with people. We need not fear that. Everyone is trying to figure out what life is all about. Perhaps we can challenge our friends to consider the claims and teaching of Jesus and ask them to read a gospel. Although virtually everyone has a Bible, many have never actually read it. Perhaps you can share at an appropriate moment the difference Jesus has made in our own life. Perhaps we could simply invite our friends and neighbors to church – a novel idea! Maybe we need to just to show them extraordinary love and profound respect so that they see something of Jesus in us.

There are people all around us, where we live, and work and play who would love to see Jesus. These are folks who at times are desperately searching for answers to that gnawing feeling that something is missing in their life. They may not even know what they are searching for.

Everyone, deep down, is looking for Jesus. Can you and I help them find him?