

The First Steps in the Spiritual Life

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The purpose of this spiritual topic is to offer a guide to help you and those whom you will evangelize come closer to God, thus experiencing the utmost of His love in life. Experiencing His love changes life dramatically. So, the invitation here is to get a taste of the LORD, and once a person has done this, he/ she will be able to experience heaven while still living in the flesh.

Now, let us read from the Gospel according to our teacher Saint Luke:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed this with himself, 'God I thank You that I am not like other men-extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I gave tithes of all that I possess. And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heavens, but beat his breast, saying 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:10-14).

What is the first step in Spiritual Life?

Conviction:

The first step in starting a spiritual life is conviction. You will reach this conviction when you realize that your eternal life and salvation are more important than anything else. At a certain time in your life, you will come to a conclusion that worldly happiness – no matter how much pleasure happiness it promises - is short-lived and leaves your heart void of inner peace. You will discover that what the world offers doesn't fill your heart and your life. As a result, you will continue to search for a more fulfilling life until eventually you reach this conviction.

Human beings tend to accept the idea of the earthly paradise. The society offers materialistic standards for success. Nevertheless, society never offers the wisdom of the ages that was reached by millions upon millions of human beings who discovered the emptiness of the materialistic success.

Moreover, the devil offers the sensual pleasures on a silver plate to people, especially the young ones, encouraging them to plunge into more lusts. Society and the devil succeeded in giving beautiful acceptable names to all sinful deeds. Sadly, sinful life became a life style that attracted millions. Those people who live this sort of life need to be awoken by putting before their eyes the words,

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God” (Romans 8:5-7).

“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:12, 13).

The list of things that distracts the person away from his/her salvation is too long and hard to cover in one topic. So, just consider: how richness without the love of God, control of others without loving them, success void of modesty, friendship with the ungodly, following and adapting atheistic philosophy and thoughts, achieving independence without spiritual guidance, or pride can lead people away from their salvation and eternal life. St. John says,

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1John 2:15, 16).

Church Goers:

You may have been one of those who go to church regularly, attending meetings, and perhaps offering services in the church, but so far you have not reached the kind of spiritual life you hear the preachers talk about. You start to realize that going to church alone does not lead you to what you are longing for Spiritually. You may say to yourself, "there should be a way to reach the peace and happiness that I heard about." To answer your heart request, I tell you, yes there is, just read the following verses to discover it yourself:

“That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:16-20).

Many church goers are far away from the true path to God. Sometimes attending the church gives the person a false satisfaction although his/her heart is astray from God, and his/her behaviors do not match those who became a new creature. This is why St. Paul warns us,

“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified” (2 Corinthians 13: 5)

But the question is how to examine ourselves. St. Paul clearly answers:

“Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12: 9-18).

Therefore, the person needs to have this conviction of the importance of his/her salvation and eternal life. Then once the person reaches this conviction, he or she needs to take a decision and a leap step. St. Paul preaches those who reached this conviction saying:

“And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Romans 13: 11-14)

How Conviction Happens?

The person finds himself searching for God for certain reasons. He/she needs Him to forgive his/her sins or needs Him to help straighten up his/her life. The person discovers that the world is in no position to give him/her life. Moreover, the person finds out that merely going to church and participating in its activities does not fill the heart. Without a conviction similar to those mentioned here, there will be no real movement towards God.

Usually, a mental conviction is accompanied by emotions and feelings, that push the person towards God. When reaching that point, the person starts looking for God everywhere until finding Him. The person ceases to become merely a church goer or a participant in its activities. He or she becomes a person who searches diligently for meeting God.

Practically, a person needs a conviction of his need to Him (God) to grant him a fulfilling life and to give him His grace to change the life. Above all, there is a need for His Holy Spirit to dwell continually inside the heart. If the conviction of the person's need for Him is great, then the search for God's grace will bring dramatic changes in the life that will last for a long time, and in most cases could remain for a lifetime.

The Pharisee & the Tax Collector:

The Pharisee was a person who does not feel that he needs God. On the other hand, we meet the tax collector who was in great need for God. He felt that he is a sinner and needs God's forgiveness. The Pharisee used to pray many times a day, as many of us pray today, and he used to go to the temple and be a part of its activities, similar to what many of us do nowadays. He was an authoritative figure in religion, but unfortunately, he did not feel he needed God. Consequently, he did not welcome the work of God in his life, which meant he was left without justification, grace, spiritual life, or any closeness to God. Therefore, while he was in the center of the religion, he was far away from a real spiritual life.

The tax collector was a man who had conviction of his wrong doings. He realized that only God could forgive his sins and help him out of his sinful life. His mental conviction was accompanied by a great sense of humbleness, sorrow for his sins, and feelings of unworthiness that were deep and genuine enough to make him raise his face towards God. As you can conclude from this story, a good conviction of the need to God is always accompanied by great feelings, emotions, zeal, and humbleness. Our Lord said that the Tax Collector went down to his house justified, which means he was touched by the grace of God, rewarded the forgiveness of his sins, and was given a new life that put him in the right spiritual path.

The same God Who *“loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3: 16), He sends the Holy Spirit to lead people to salvation. The Holy Spirit works in different ways to get a person to the point of conviction. Servants of God work with God to get people to conviction. The Holy Spirit gives our own weak words power to work in the hearts and minds of others. He even uses our own life style to awaken others. His work in some people takes long years, as in the case of St. Augustine, or a shorter time, depending on the person. The rule to remember is that God never imposes Himself on people, rather, He leads them to inner conviction, a conviction that is not only in the mind but also deep in the heart.

A person, who loves to serve God in any kind of service, needs to experience the conviction that leads to a dramatic life change.

From living for the self to living for Christ,
From living according to the flesh to living according to the Spirit

Moving from death to life, and from darkness to light

The pleasure of the person is no longer in the world but in Christ

From void life to a life of fullness in Christ

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In summary, the conviction of needing Him is the beginning of a spiritual life. It is wonderful that the conviction is so great that it changes a person’s life once and for all. Think about Augustine’s conviction to change his lifestyle that took him from a sinful life to a monastic life, and then to become one of the teachers of the Western churches. Also, I like the conviction of St. Mary the Egyptian, who changed her life from an adulteress to a person who chose to venture directly into the desert to live in repentance for the rest of her life. She felt the sinfulness of her life, and her great need to spend the rest of her life in repentance to make up for the lost years she spent in sin.

After the spiritual awakening, the person lives a life of repentance that allows the grace of God to pour richly into his/her life. Then the person starts to feel the greatness of the new life he/she lives. Peace and joy fill the heart and the person feels like a new person. Behaviors change, old thoughts depart and new spiritual thoughts replace them, and new perspectives fill the life. St. Paul summarizes the changes in the following verse:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15).

Another Kind of Conviction:

There are Christians who fight against sins, temptations, and evil with all their powers. However, eventually, they reach another kind of conviction that tells them that their power is inadequate against the adversary. Their hearts cry inside for help to face a power, which is larger than they are. They feel hopeless, powerless, and defeated. When they reach that depth of helplessness, they realize their need for Him. As our Lord Christ says,

“Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5)

Therefore, whatever your spiritual situation is, the spiritual life must always start with a deep conviction. **You need to reach a conclusion that you have a great need for Him in your life and that you cannot make it without Him. With Him, however, you can do everything**, as St. Paul joyfully says,

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4: 13).

Therefore, you do not only need the conviction that you need Him in the beginning of your spiritual life alone, but this new conviction should accompany you for the rest of your life. It becomes the norm of your spiritual life. It leads you to the humbleness that puts you continually on the spiritual path and helps you to open the heavenly treasures of spirituality. Then you need to be watchful, because if you lose this conviction in the future, you may lose your spiritual life again.

Why A lesson About Conviction in an Evangelism Class?

- 1- It is very essential for you to be aware of as you start the evangelism class. You will not be able to contribute to evangelism unless you reach this conviction point yourself, experience it, and live it as a continuous life.
- 2- To be led by the grace of God in helping others to reach this conviction in their lives.
- 3- To have compassion on others when you see them away from this conviction as God has compassion on them. To learn not to judge but to love and as God gives people time to reach conviction, you do the same, believing in His power that is capable of leading and saving others.
- 4- If God respects the free will of people, we need to show the same respect, so we never look down at people because they still live according to the flesh or in sin. Nevertheless, we show respect, love, open heart, open mind, and do the work of God diligently and wisely without forcing or imposing.
- 5- To live with the attitude of the Tax Collector and not with the perspective of the Pharisees as we have seen in Christ's instructions. We need to live with humility and humbleness, no matter how much we know better than others do or how advanced in our spiritual lives.

Question:

- 1- Based on the above, what are your spiritual needs? Talk about them to God, & make them a part of your next confession.
- 2- Explain how conviction starts spiritual life and sustains it?