

# Spiritual Pathways

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## **Mark 12:28-34**

*One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' -this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

Years ago I went to several prayer retreats and workshops. I found them to be very helpful. These retreats were led by someone schooled in what are called the classic "spiritual disciplines" - prayer, meditation, lectio divina and fasting. She taught us how to meditate - using our bodies, our breathing, using scripture. She taught us how to prayerfully read a scripture passage in a group setting. These were very powerful times for me. At the time I also had a group of young pastors I met with monthly. We all began ministry around the same time. I mentioned to my friends that I really found these workshops helpful and they really helped me feel close to God. Most nodded in agreement and understanding.

But one young pastor said, "I could never do that. I can't sit still for more than a minute. When I want to feel close to God I go serve in a soup kitchen or take part in a march for peace or for world hunger. That's how I get close to God."

I embarrassed to tell you my reaction - I thought it was the strangest thing I'd ever heard. If you want to get close to God, you should pray, worship and read the Bible. It's that simple! Those other things are good to do, certainly. But they're not the best things to do for spiritual growth, are they? How do you get close to God walking in a march or serving someone a meal?

Years later as I reflect upon my reaction I see it lacking in at least three ways.

1 - I was judgmental. I was believing that I knew the best way to connect with God and this person wasn't very spiritual.

2 - I was prideful. I felt that my path to God was superior. And in my twisted, sinful mind, didn't that make me a little superior, too?

3 - I was uninformed about today's topic: Spiritual Pathways.

(The idea of Spiritual Pathways comes from John Ortberg's God is Closer Than You Think and Gary Thomas' Sacred Pathways. Sentences in italics are quotes from Ortberg. The definitions, "cautions" and "ways to stretch" in this message are largely quotes from John Ortberg)

According to John Ortberg, *a Spiritual Pathway is the way we most naturally connect with God and grow spiritually*. We tend to favor one or two main pathways. There's usually at least one pathway that is very unnatural for us.

This is a very similar concept to Gary Chapman's The Five Languages of Love. People experience and express love in different ways. We each usually have a favorite "love language" - words, acts of service, gifts, quality time and touch.

Well, John Ortberg and Gary Thomas believe we each have a favorite Spiritual Pathway, perhaps two favorites pathways. And often we have one that is really hard for us. Let's take a look at them - The Seven Spiritual Pathways.

**1. Intellectual.** You draw close to God as you're able to learn more about God. The study of scripture and theology come naturally. You have little patience for emotional approaches to faith. You are a thinker. When you face problems or spiritual challenges, you go into problem-solving mode. These folks read great books that challenge them. They expose themselves to lots of teaching. They find like-minded people with whom they can learn. These are the teachers, professors, theologians, writers. They love theology, creeds, catechisms, doctrines, theories. Ideas are alive to them.

**Biblical Example:** The Apostle Paul - think about his teachings on faith, grace, law, etc. Paul breaks into praise in the midst of his teaching. He moves from thinking to praise: *"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine . . . to him be glory and praise!"*

**Other Example:** C. S. Lewis - Mere Christianity

**Intellectual Cautions:** Don't confuse being smart with being spiritually mature. Guard against becoming all head and no heart.

Illustration. St. Augustine was once dining with the Emperor when he shouted out in the middle of dinner: "That's it! I'll refute those Palagians!!!"

Illustration. A Professor who was extremely abrasive toward his students in class, while teaching a class on love!

**Ways to Stretch:** Devote yourself to corporate worship and to private adoration and prayer. Engage in self-examination to assess whether or not you are being loving. (sometimes it's hard to be right and loving at the same time!)

**2. Relational.** Spiritual growth comes most naturally when you're involved in significant relationships. Small groups and other community life experiences are key. Your life is an open book. Being alone can drive you crazy. In key times of growth, God will often speak to you through people. You learn best in a group setting. You love to ask questions and learn from others. Your favorite verse is, "Where two or three are gathered in my name I am there in the midst of them." You find God best in community.

**Biblical Example:** The Apostle Peter. (Peter, James & John)

**Other Examples:** John Wesley, small group movement, and Martin Luther -  
*"When I'm alone my faith often dries up within me, but when I am worshipping God in the company of other believers my faith is reborn!"*

**Relational Cautions:** You can grow dependent on others and become a spiritual chameleon, changing to fit into each group and therefore having an underdeveloped center. Guard against superficiality.

**Ways to Stretch:** Develop a capacity for silence. Study Scripture for yourself. See what God is saying to YOU

**3. Serving.** God's presence seems most tangible when you're involved in helping others. You're often uncomfortable in a setting where you don't have a role. You constantly look for acts of service you can engage in.

**Biblical Example:** Dorcas - Book of Acts. "always doing good"

Other Example: Mother Teresa - long periods of spiritual darkness, but she felt closest to God while serving the poor. I hope those of you who participated in "BE the Church Sunday" experienced this. God draws near when we serve.

**Serving Cautions:** Be careful not to resent other people who don't serve as much as you do. Remember that God loves you not because you are so faithful in serving, but because you are God's child. Don't confuse serving with earning God's love.

**Ways to Stretch:** Balance your service with small group and community life. Learn to receive love even when you're not being productive. Practice expressing love through words as well as actions.

**4. Worship.** You have a deep love of corporate praise and a natural inclination toward celebration. In difficult periods of life, worship is one of the most healing activities you engage in. In worship, your heart opens up and you come alive and enthusiastically participate.

**Biblical Example:** King David

**Other Examples:** Chris Tomlin, Michael W. Smith, Gaithers. This is one of Dot Barker's pathways. Whenever you step inside their house there's always Christian music playing. Most Worship Leaders have this pathway - that's why they always say, "Let's sing that through again." If this isn't your pathway you're tempted to say, "No, I'm good." It's important for folks with this spiritual pathway to experience great worship on a regular basis.

**Worship Cautions:** Guard against an experience-based spirituality that always has you looking for the next worship "high." Be careful not to judge those who aren't as expressive in worship.

**Ways to Stretch:** Engage in the discipline of study. Serve God in concrete ways as an extension of your worship. Remain committed to your community of faith.

**5. Activist.** You have a single-minded zeal and a very strong sense of vision. You have a passion to build the church; a passion to work for justice. Challenges don't discourage you. You do everything you can to bring out the potential God has placed in other people. You love a high-paced, problem-filled, complex, strenuous way of life. Activists love a challenge. They need a challenge! "Somebody's gotta do something about this, and it might as well be me. Who's with me?"

**Biblical Example:** Nehemiah, Prophets

**Other Example:** Martin Luther King, Jr.

Illustration. I had a parishioner at my first church named, Sue. Sue loved to solve problems. She loved to start new programs to address needs in the church or outside the church. Then she'd move on to the next challenge, always needing a challenge, a project.

**Activist Cautions:** You may run over people or use them. Guard against going too long without pausing to reflect on what you're doing. You can end up not even knowing your own motives, spiritual condition, or emotional state.

**Ways to Stretch:** Spend time in solitude and silence. Cultivate a

reflective discipline like journaling. Develop close spiritual friendships with one or two other people.

**6. Contemplative.** You love uninterrupted time alone. Reflection comes naturally to you. You have a large capacity for prayer. If you get busy or spend a lot of time with people, you feel drained and yearn for times of solitude.

**Biblical Example:** Mary, Martha's sister.

**Other Examples:** Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, Larry Peacock, Rolling Ridge Retreat Center

Illustration. I have a dear friend who gets a magazine called, "*Silence*." She once said to me, "Would you like me to send you some copies?" I thought to myself, what's on the pages? Probably nothing. My friend refreshes her spirit through total silence. She gains insights for her life from these times. She has what Gordon MacDonald calls, a "large interior world."

**Contemplative Cautions:** You may have a tendency to avoid the demands of the real world. Be careful not to retreat to your inner world when friends, family, or society disappoint you. Resist the temptation to consider your times of private prayer and solitude as less important than the more public acts of ministry performed by others.

**Ways to Stretch:** Choose a regular place of active service. Stay relationally connected, even when those relationships become difficult or challenging. Connect with those who have an activist pathway.

**7. Creation.** You respond deeply to God through your experience of nature. Being outdoors replenishes you. You're highly aware of your physical senses, and often art, symbols or ritual will help you grow. You tend to be creative. These folks need to spend a lot of times outside. They reconnect with God when they're outdoors. And they appreciate beauty in a very deep way - not just sunsets and rainbows, but tiny flowers many of us would walk right by, or the small details on birds, or watching a single leaf fall to the ground.

**Biblical Example:** Jesus, Psalm writers - "I look to the hills"

**Other Examples:** Matthew Fox - Creation Spirituality, Celtic Spirituality

**Creation Cautions:** You may be tempted to use beauty or nature to escape. You will find that people are sometimes disappointing. Guard against the temptation to avoid church.

**Ways to Stretch:** Stay involved in a worshipping community. Be willing to help out in less-than-beautiful settings. Take Scripture with you into nature and meditate on God's Word.

## Summary

1. Be careful not to envy or judge someone else's pathway.
2. Give yourself permission to be who you are in God.  
One size does not fit all.  
Find the pathways that work best for you.
3. Each of us has one or two preferred spiritual pathways.
4. It's important to explore all the spiritual pathways.
5. You will grow the most "staying in your lane" much of the time, however . . .
6. You will also greatly benefit from exploring the one that is hardest for you.

Going back to my opening story where I was judging a pastor friend of mine for not liking prayer retreats and favoring peace marches and soup kitchens. What was her spiritual pathway? - activist, serving. What's mine? relational, worship, trying solitude. Let me leave you with this quote from CS Lewis:

*"If all experienced God in the same way and returned to him an identical worship, the song of the church triumphant would have no symphony. It would be like an orchestra in which all the instruments played the same note."*

Amen.