

The Secret to Spiritual Growth

What is the foundation for a life of discipleship and maturity in Christ? What prevents Christians from growing in their faith? And how can we cultivate the Christ-like humility required for authentic relationships in our witness? In this seminar, we will address these questions and more through the following three talks:

1. Honesty and the Love of God

Jesus said the most important thing we can do with our lives is to love God foremost of all. If we are told to love God first and foremost, then it stands to reason that God's love for us and our love for Him is the most transformative experience in life. How is life transformed by the love of God?

2. Growing in Christ

We define ourselves by means of the love of God. Having been recipients of his love, we are also ambassadors of his love and forgiveness to others. We will explore the areas of life that can possibly prevent maturity in Christ and how God can work through our weaknesses and recycle them into assets of empathy in order to reach others for Christ and His Kingdom.

3. Relationships Built on Authenticity and Humility

It is in light of God's love that an idea of what it means to be an authentic person begins to emerge. We will learn about growing in the authenticity that is cultivated in the love of God and displayed in humility and honesty.

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I. Honesty and the Love of God

a. The Great Commandment

- i. Love God
- ii. Love of Neighbor
- iii. Pascal, *The Pensees* : Christians have two laws better than all the laws of statecraft".

b. What Does the Love of God Mean for Christians Day after Day?

- i. C.S. Lewis and the Great Sin
- ii. Security: I John 3:1-3; 4:18

iii. Film: *The Notebook*

The Notebook a story of Cognoscente Love

*Not all that long ago I was on an airplane and happened to see the film: *The Notebook*. Often when I watch a movie I like to let the story wash over me; that is, I like to watch passively in order to fully and uncritically enter into the world developed by the film. Rather than thinking critically at first—there will be time for that later—I want to give the story-teller his due. I want to give him the opportunity to do his best artistically in order to create a coherent world that invites me in. It is after the film I like to revisit the story and ask the critical questions about it. One topic I like to explore centers around asking the question: Was there any moment in the film where I felt particularly moved emotionally; if so, what might have been going on in the film to stimulate this. There was a particular scene in *The Notebook* that moved me deeply and tears came to my eyes as I saw it.*

*I must put the scene in context. *The Notebook* begins when an older man—played by James Garner—enters the room of an elderly woman at a nursing home. She seems confused and a little standoffish. A nurse reassures by saying, “It’s OK, he comes every day to read to you.” In this moment one surmises that this woman has dementia of some sort and this kind man volunteers at the hospital by reading to the patients.*

The film progresses by going back and forth between this elderly man reading to this elderly woman and flashbacks to the story that is being read. The story is about a young man and a young woman who, against all odds seeming to work against them, fall in love. The young woman is from an upper class family; the young man is relatively poor. The woman comes from sophistication and refinement; the man is rough hewn and raw. The woman is educated; the man lacks the benefits of a rigorous education but he is very intelligent nonetheless. The woman has a controlling mother and father; the man’s mother has died and his father is present but somewhat distant. The young woman lives far away and only comes into proximity with the man when she happens to be summering in the town where the young man lives. There is so much distance between these two: socially; economically; geographically; educationally; and, to compound matters World War II breaks out and adds another degree of separation as the young man goes off to war and the young woman working as a nurse begins to fall for a patient more of her class and sophistication. With all the odds working against them, this man and this woman still fall in love and eventually marry.

About two-thirds of the way through the film the viewer puts it together that this old man reading the story is in fact the young man of the story. And, this old woman is the very same young woman he fell in love with so many years before. Near the end of the film as the day is drawing nigh and the story is nearly told; the older man and the older woman are eating a nice dinner by candle light. A single rose in a vase adorns the table and a

phonograph is playing the music that has contributed to so many of this couple's memories together. The entire atmosphere is shouting out to the woman trapped in the deep recesses of her dementia. As the story ends, the woman says, "That is the most beautiful story I have ever heard; and it sounds so very familiar." In that moment cognition washes across her face and her expression moves from the vacuousness that once characterized it to an expression flush with perception. She looks at her husband and says, "Its our story isn't it?"

He says, "Yes."

She asks, "How much time do we have?"

He answers, "Last time it was about five minutes."

She asks what any mother would ask, "How are the children?"

He says, "There fine. They were here to see you today."

She requests, "Tell them I love them," and he assures her that he will.

Then, as the music is still playing, she asks, "Can we dance?" He stands and takes her in his arms and they begin to move slowly to the music. Then just as surely as cognition came to her so her oblivion returns. She finds herself in the arms of a stranger and screams. The orderlies rush into the room and find it necessary to sedate the old woman in order for her to calm down. James Garner's character is standing, watching it all, biting his knuckle, and weeping. It was that scene that moved me so deeply. In fact it moves me now as I type this. Why? What was it that was so touching about that scene? Of course it has all the sentimentalism of a great love story between a man and woman; magnified by the triumph of their love to reach across the many things that sought to separate them even at the end of their lives. But, as I thought about it I realized there was much more in the story to move me so.

I believe the story is a kind of metaphor or analogy that explains, figuratively, something of the quality of every human story. For certainly, all of our lives consist in God telling each of us, perpetually, his love story with us. He tells us of His wooing and loving us. He has placed us in an environment that, one way or another, cries out to us His great love for us. Most of our lives we live without cognition. Then moments occur when we cognition of His love and grace towards us occurs and we respond. Then something happens and as easily as we fell into cognition we fall out. In James Garners' tears and the biting of the knuckles, I think I was moved because I saw something analogous to the love of God for us. He cannot love us any more than He does. Infinite love has no capacity to increase. The question is will we be cognizant of that love or not?

c. How Does the Love of God affect my life as I live it day after day?

- i. Jerry Sittser: “We are most like God when we are most unlike Him in our relationship with Him.”
 - ii. C.S. Lewis: “Man approaches God most nearly when he is in one sense least like God. For what can be more unlike than fullness and need, sovereignty and humility, righteousness and penitence, limitless power and a cry for help?
 - iii. I John 4:17 “As He is so also are we in this world.”
- d. Evaluation of Our Love for God: Four Diagnostic Questions
- e. Conclusion

II. Growing in Christ

- a. Introduction
 - i. An error in C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* and in St. Augustine’s *Commentary on Psalm 19*.
 - 1. Pride and pretense maybe symptoms of a deeper problem far more substantive.
 - 2. Fear and insecurity...
 - 3. A foundational problem: I John 4:18 “Perfect love casts out fear”
 - 4. A corollary:
 - 5. The Great Sin...
- b. Defining Who We are in Christ—Self-Identity
 - i. Revelation 2:17—The White Stone
 - ii. We gain our image of self based on how we perceive others see us.
 - iii. Donald Miller’s observation in *Searching for God Knows What...*
 - iv. We need to gain our sense of self based on how God sees us and, He loves us.
 - 1. Developmental Theory
 - 2. Scratched records....
 - 3. The process of mending
 - v. Jerry Sittser’s observation....
 - vi. The Three Rooms:
 - 1. The Good Will Hunting Room
 - 2. The Dark Room
 - 3. The Henri Nouwen Room
- c. Medieval Spirituality: The Scale of Perfection (i.e. Maturity) modeled in Isaiah 6

- i. The Purgative Way
- ii. The Illuminative Way
- iii. The Unitive Way

d. Conclusion

- i. Ephesians 4:12 *Katartismos*: equip the saints

III. Relationships Built on Authenticity and Humility

- a. We are made in the Image of a God who exists as Necessary Being/Community
- b. The Doctrine of the Trinity
- c. John Stott on authenticity
- d. Getting past our pride and pretense
- e. What are humility and honesty?