

Full Stature

A Concise Study for Spiritual Growth

A Study of the Fourth Chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians



The great mystic, St. Ignatius Loyola, defined the goal of spirituality as the experience of the fullness of life and to realize my personal identity in God, in the divine, in the Essence of all life, and to experience the interconnectedness of all life. St. Ignatius' teachings echo those of St. Paul, as perhaps no one else has ever done.

I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received...

According to the text of this Letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul writes from prison.

Paul was probably in prison in Rome, about A.D. 61-63. The letter provides an outline for the Ephesus Community, but also addresses the polarity of church and individual.

Christian spirituality is best understood in the tension between these two poles: the realm of community life and worship, and the realm of personal life and prayer.

We often think of spirituality simply as personal development, but Paul challenges this notion of spirituality, suggesting that growth comes from movement along the continuum of community and individual.



(Saint Paul in Prison, Rembrandt, 1627)

...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace:



Saint Paul gives three qualities for his readers: humility, gentleness and patience. The goal of these three qualities is unity – achieved through “bearing with one another,” and a conscious effort to create “the bond of peace.”

Peace is the quality that unifies. It is wholeness of the human heart and wholeness of the community as well – a bond of strength.

We can examine these three qualities and learn how to develop them in our lives.

- **Humility** is openness to other views –readiness to learn, and without a rigid attachment to a particular viewpoint. This moves us beyond dualistic thinking of simple right and wrong.
- **Gentleness** is a posture toward others of active engagement – listening, and not simply promoting a point of view. It is conversation. [For the Christian, this is a reflection of the Trinity.] Mindful attention is the key, moment by moment.
- **Patience** is the ability to develop relationships and efforts through many steps – evaluating along the way to understand what is needed and what we can discard. The virtue is patience with self, as well as others.
- The opposite of humility is pride or **arrogance**, and is shown through a defensive manner of interaction, which betrays a sense of fear – hidden anxiety that one might be proven inadequate.
- The opposite of gentleness is **aggression**, and is often shown by remaining in “speaker mode” when interacting with others. Gentleness is not passivity, but instead requires awareness, attention and participation.
- The opposite of patience is **impatience**, and is often shown by insisting that other efforts and structures be completed before trust is established. Trust is the key to the development of the community and its members. It can only be developed while living and working together.

To develop the sense of gentleness, humility and patience, we still the mind and meditate on the example of Christ in the gospels.

- We can still the mind through quiet prayer, practices that include contemplative prayer, meditation, *lexio divina* the rosary or the “Jesus Prayer” that move us into silence.
- We carry “mindfulness” into our day by a sense of “presence” – the Spirit within, a guide for every moment. We listen to these promptings. This “mindfulness” is from our personal viewpoint, but is “the Spirit” from the viewpoint of how we are made in the likeness of God.
- We recall scenes and verses from the scriptures to help us take on the mind and heart of Jesus.



Stilling the mind also allows us to watch our interaction with others. We watch our thoughts during prayer, and contemplation. We are then able to carry this observation into everyday life, discovering how we interact with others. Contemplation thus becomes a mirror of the heart.

...one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all...

- Saint Paul speaks of “the One” again and again. This reinforces us against arrogance, aggression and impatience because it reminds each of us that we are part of a larger system – the earth, the world, the Christian community, the local community, and the world community
- We cannot de-construct our connection to the larger existence – of which we are always a part. We are not “self-contained atoms” of existence. Instead, we are one with each other and this oneness is the lesson for our oneness with God.
- We are imbued with God, who is “over all...through all...in all...”



...But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

At the same time, we are gifted with unique qualities because unity is not uniformity. Instead we resemble the unity of an orchestra in which diverse instruments join together to create beautiful music.



Saint Paul urges us to appreciate each element – each gift – as an exercise of humility, gentleness and patience. He calls us to see each gift as a unique contribution, not a contradiction. This is “non-duality,” or what we call “communion,” which means unity despite diversity.

Therefore, it says: "He ascended on high and took prisoners captive; he gave gifts to the people." What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended into the lower (regions) of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.



(Icon of the Ascension)

Saint Paul quotes from Psalm 68 to explain the oneness of all things – the interconnection of heaven and earth, and the spark of the divine in all creation. The essence of the interconnection is that whatever happens affects all else, and thus affects “me.” Thus Christ fills all things and makes all into “the One.” Christ is the new creation.

Spirituality is the ability to see this oneness (interconnection) in everyday life. It is a skill that allows me to trace each action and its consequence. Thus, I understand that goodness is the seed for more goodness, just as greed, anger and carelessness can plant the seeds for more pain and sorrow.

So, the answer for temptation to greed, anger or carelessness is the discovery of service - the path for the gifts that each of us has. Saint Paul explains the various gifts and their contribution to the Community. The discovery of one's gifts is a joy because the path becomes clear.

How we contribute with our gifts can develop and change, but our attention to our gifts and the path to which each of us is called is a key to the spiritual life. We find our service coming from our gifts. Service is a guide to peace.

And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

“The splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not rob the little violet of its scent nor the daisy of its simple charm. If every tiny flower wanted to be a rose, spring would lose its loveliness.” - Saint Therese of Lisieux



...until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity to the extent of the full stature of Christ,



We can cultivate this attitude by reviewing our own lives – how we have grown in mind and heart. We often do this by journaling or sharing the story of our growth with others.

This is when the quality of patience is exercised: in the understanding that all things are developing – inside each of us and with all of us together. Patience is Saint Paul's third element of virtue. When we cultivate a developmental attitude, we come to accept the truth of growth, and develop patience with ourselves and others.



*Therese Martin, age 13
(Therese of Lisieux)*

...so that we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming.

Stability is another element of spiritual growth. It requires commitment to a community. It is only in the context of the community that we can effectively encounter all the elements of personality – my own and that of others. The ability to work through anger, joy, frustration, hope (and all the seasons of our minds and emotions) is the path to peace – for we exercise balance in the face of any challenge.

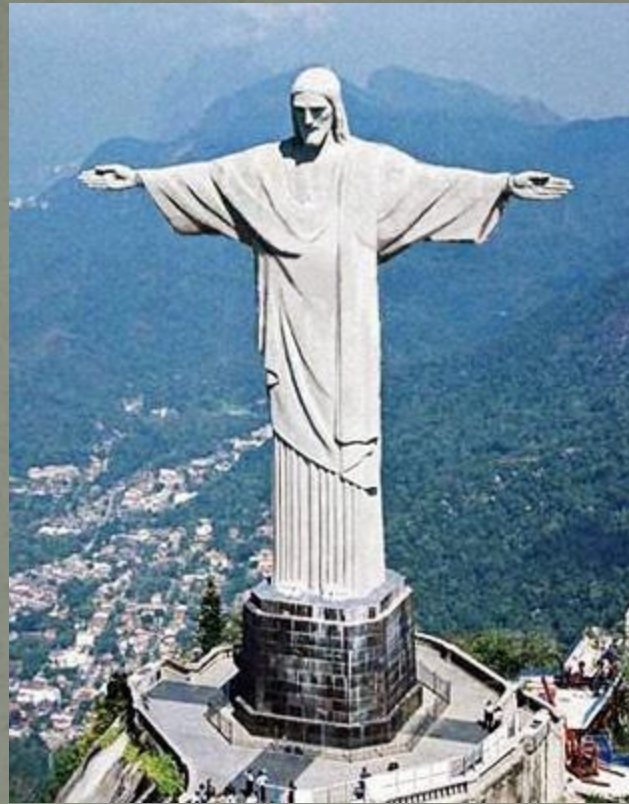
This is the opposite of abandoning a spiritual practice or community for an easier path once difficulties arise or another teaching seems more attractive.



When we are faithful to the path, even in the face of trouble, we are like great trees that are strengthened by exposure to all the seasons of the year and of life.

We come to understand that “the one” is Christ (filling all things) – Christ, who shines through us when as we consciously practice this Good News in our words and our behavior.

Christian prayer and community life is meant shine forth the life of Christ in our lives– Christ who is already there, if we but wipe clean the window of our lives to allow the Light.



Christ the Redeemer, Rio de Janeiro

...It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me

- Galatians 2:20

Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love.

So I declare and testify in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; darkened in understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance, because of their hardness of heart, they have become callous and have handed themselves over to licentiousness for the practice of every kind of impurity to excess.

- Now Saint Paul presents a critique of merely intellectual approaches to faith – simply the mental assent to truths and commandments.
- The life of faith cannot flourish outside the life of the community. Christianity is not simply a philosophy or ethical practice. It is a matter of transformation of the mind through the opening of the heart.
- How do we open the heart? Through the life of prayer, we reflect on our own attempts to still the mind or change behavior– often ending in frustration.
- We can then allow compassion to arise toward ourselves, and eventually transfer that compassion to others.



One person put it this way, 'When I stub my toe, I can say: "Damn toe!" or "Poor toe!"'

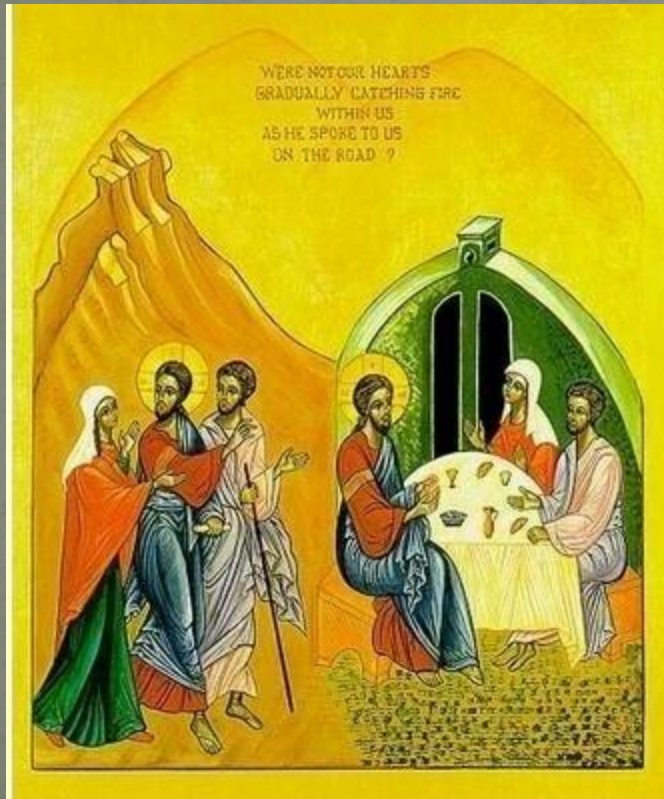
Put on the mind of Christ

- When Jesus says; “Follow me” in the ancient meaning of the word, he means literally “walk in my feet.” He calls us to be him at the deepest levels of our being, beyond mere intellectual beliefs about him. Paul wants us to put on the mind of Christ.



That is not how you learned Christ,

“Learning Christ” is an interesting phrase. It is not simply “learning about Christ,” or “learning the teachings of Christ.” It is more like learning the role of a play: one becomes the character.



Saint Paul urges us to be like an actor dressed as the character of a play – to “...Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and to make no provision for selfish inclinations.” (Romans 13:14) In other words, relax the grip on personal perception of life, and look through the perspective of Christ Jesus. We can only do this if we study the life and words of Jesus in the gospels , in addition to the teachings of the greatest theologian, and teacher of Christ and the Spirit in 2000 years - St. Paul.

...assuming that you have heard of him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, that you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.

Thus, Christian ethics does not consist in simply keeping rules and laws, but conforming our lives to that of Christ – a thinking and acting like Jesus. Everything is to be measured by this standard. And as we mature in this “new self” we can face situations by reflecting on the stories of the scriptures as archetypes or examples for our own lives, using the mind of Christ to act in every circumstance.



*(Jesus Washing Feet of Disciples
Duccio di Buoninsegna, 14th century)*

Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not leave room for the devil.

- Now, Saint Paul becomes very practical, applying his teachings to specific instances of life, such as telling the truth and avoiding anger. How can we be realistic, yet idealistic in our pursuit of the Gospel?
- How does one avoid lying or stop an angry reaction? By remembering that we are all connected – we are all one body, and whatever happens to one will affect all – including myself.
- This remembering comes from the “back and forth” of prayer, contemplation, and mindfulness – carrying that awareness into daily life.



The thief must no longer steal, but rather labor, doing honest work with his (own) hands, so that he may have something to share with one in need. No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear.

Saint Paul remains practical, advising that the thief not be punished by restored to a place of contributing to society. Christian ethics are practical, and aimed at renewal, not retribution – all efforts for the sake of the whole. [Early Christians followed this understanding through such practices of not just fasting, but giving the food that they did not eat to the poor - those without food. Spiritual practice was thus connected with the works of compassion.]



Likewise, one's speech is not simply to stop harsh and foul language. Instead, uplifting words are to be learned that others might benefit, and that the speaker might make a contribution to the good of the whole.

Saint Damien of Molokai exemplifies this

- Father Damien clearly walked in the feet of Jesus. As he left his family and his world, knowing he would never see them again, he was given the following advice as he traveled to Hawaii:



Advice to be read on shipboard

- “To find the good in a thing at once is a sign of good taste. Some seek the good in life, others the ill. There is nothing that has no good in it. But many have such a scent, that amidst a thousand excellences, they fix upon a single defect, as if they were scavengers of men’s minds and hearts. So they draw up a balance sheet of defects, which does more credit to their bad taste than their intelligence. They lead a sad life, nourishing themselves on bitters and garbage. They have the luckier taste, who, amongst a thousand defects, seize upon a single beauty that they may have hit upon by chance.”

And do not grieve the holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption.

- Earlier we mentioned the promptings of the Holy Spirit – often called “mindfulness” by our Buddhist friends. For Christians, this a term to explain the lead of the Holy Spirit.
- Mindfulness (for Christians and Buddhists) is not something personal (something “I” do), but a state I enter. It is always present, but I must awaken to it. For Christians, the Spirit is always present, but I must open the heart to become part of that presence.
- To grieve the Holy Spirit is to ignore that presence – to remain unaware of the promptings of the Spirit.



(Mexican Pentecost icon)

- The community of faith reminds us of the Spirit’s presence through liturgy, study, communal life and service – communion with all.

All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. (And) be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

This is the great teaching for the spiritual life – an extension of patience. We are not discouraged by failure to live up to the ideals of faith, but continue to move toward them through successive attempts – reconciling with self and others for the sake of the growth that is to come.



(Woman at the Well, Frank Wesley, India)



We practice the life we seek, forgiving ourselves and others, as we – each of us and all of us – move forward.



"Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive."

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama



We remember that Christian faith is not about becoming perfect , but perfecting our love.

Fear (and anger because it is sparked by fear) are overcome by love. One sign of the perfection of love is the absence of fear .

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear ..."

1 John 4:18

