Spirituality (영성, 靈性 )

Ephesians 5:1 “Follow God’s example (Be imitators of God), therefore, as dearly loved children.”

The reason why I suddenly talk about spirituality is motivated by my experience after I studied with one student who converted to Buddhism from Christianity. I wanted to listen to him about his spiritual life. There are many diverse definitions of spirituality, but I want to focus on spirituality from a Christian viewpoint today. Through this passage I want you to understand the terminology of spirituality from the biblical viewpoint and use it to enrich your Bible study.

First, what is spirituality? When I asked students on campus for Bible study, some answered, “I am not religious, but spiritual.” They wanted to become separated and independent from the traditional religious institutions and practices. Some said that they practice transcendental meditation or private spiritual practices such as yoga and other things. In fact, from a Catholic viewpoint, spirituality is to practice faith by participating in mass, vigil, private prayer and even labor. In the era of the early Middle Ages in Europe, the monastery system was a good example for exercising and developing their spirituality. From an Islamic viewpoint, spirituality is to fulfill their religious duty based on the Koran. In Buddhism spirituality is mainly a self-purification for perfect freedom. However, the word, ‘spirituality’ originally came from the word ‘spirit’. The word ‘*spirit*’ is from ‘*spiritus’* in Latin the same as ‘*ruach*’ in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek, which means ‘breath’. Spirit, which is also used as “soul” in someone, is separate from physical substances. So, according to Eugene Peterson, who is known as a modern explorer of spirituality, spirituality is an interest for an inner being. In short spirituality is a concern and effort for the soul and spirit which exist in the flesh or body.

What is, then, spirituality from Christian viewpoint? Spirituality is restoring the image of God. In the beginning God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Ge 2:7) Here, a living being means a spiritual being who is able to have a relationship with God, the Creator. Man is the only spiritual creature who can communicate with God, worship him, and work with him. Have you ever seen monkeys gather and worship God? God also created man in his own image and his own likeness. (Ge 1:26-27) God is holy. So, men want to be holy. God is love. So, men love and are loved. Men desire more than physical love. Our God is gracious and compassionate. He is also righteous and just. There are many other divine natures of God. Men are endowed with God’s divine nature because we are created in his image and his likeness. Spirituality is to restore all these original images of God from corruption and destruction caused by sin. When Adam sinned against God, fear and shame came into his heart. In the past he was the object of God’s joy and blessing. But after he sinned, he became the object of God’s wrath and grief. God’s image in man was distorted and damaged by his sin. Sin not only destroyed the relationship with God, but also disfigured God’s image in man. Because of man’s sin this world was also cursed. This earth only produced thorns and thistles, and man must work for survival until they return to the ground and become dust. The life of men who lost the image of God was miserable. As history proves, human history was a repetition of hatred, revenge, wars, diseases, natural disaster, and so on. God sent Jesus to save this cursed world and to restore the lost image of God in human beings. Jesus died on the cross for our sins and opened the way for sinners to restore the broken relationship with God. In his lifetime Jesus showed how he saved people and restored the lost image of God. Jesus called the selfish tax collector Levi and healed his selfishness and made him Saint Matthew. He chose a despaired fisherman Simon and changed him to the great teacher St. Peter. Jesus forgave a paralytic and raised him up and gave him new life. He taught the ignorant Nicodemus and opened his spiritual eyes to see the kingdom of God. Jesus also provided the living water welling up to eternal life for the thirsty Samaritan woman. There are many stories of Jesus who healed and restored the image of God in the Bible.

Spirituality is the process of restoring the lost image of God. In the past Saul was a proud and self-righteous young Jewish man. Because of his pride God could not use him. Paul was only damaging and harming God’s work by persecuting Christians. Then, God changed him to Paul, which means ‘small’ through Jesus. Jesus loved him and forgave his sin and restored his original image of God, which is love, mercy, kindness, humility, forgiveness, and so on. Later, Paul confessed that it was only by God’s grace which made him who he was. Paul praised God’s grace and his forgiving love upon such a reckless sinner like him. Jesus blessed Paul to share his suffering and glory throughout his lifetime. To Paul, participating in the suffering of Christ was a great blessing and glory. He wrote to the believers in Ephesian church in this, “*Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children*.” (Ephesians 5:1) He meant, “Restore the image of God and live according to the truth of God.” This was not only Paul’s message for us, but Jesus. Jesus said in Matthew 5:48, “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.”

Second, how can we develop our spirituality? Eugene Peterson said that spirituality is focusing our eyes on Jesus, listening to him, and imitating him. In developing our spirituality Jesus is the focal point. We remember how Paul struggled to learn from Jesus. He said in Philippians. “*I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him...I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead*.” (Php 3:8-11) Paul knew the secret of improving his relationship with God by knowing Jesus Christ and becoming like him.

How can we follow Jesus? How can we become like him? Jesus said in Mark 8:34, “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” As the first condition to follow him, Jesus asked us to deny ourselves. Denying ourselves means ‘repentance.’ In order to follow Jesus, we must confess our sins and receive forgiveness of our sin. We need sorrowful and painful feelings against what we did wrong. Confession is not just paying lip service, but heart-breaking spiritual circumcision. There are two meanings in Hebrew about the word ‘repentance’. First is *nacham*, which means ‘grief’ or' pain’ and the second is' *shub*’ which means ‘change’-- change mind or change direction. When Jesus said you must deny yourself, he means that you must change your mind and submit your thought and mind to Christ. This is the same meaning as restoring the image of God. In 1 Corinthians 15:31 Paul said, “I *die every day.*” He meant that not only did he face death every day, but he also struggled against his sinful desire and nature until he felt he was dying. He meant that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal 5:24)

Spirituality is the practice to submit to God’s will. In Buddhism they call, “liberation” which means freedom from all desires whether good or bad. They think that they feel perfect freedom when they don’t have such desires. But we Christians seek more than liberation, but submission to God. When we submit ourselves to God’s will and entrust ourselves to his rule, we become truly happy. We give the lordship of our lives to Christ. This is the meaning of denying ourselves in Christ.

The second condition in following Jesus is to take up our cross daily. No one wants to take up his or her own cross. As much as possible, we want to avoid the cross. Here the cross indicates ‘duty and responsibility’ as a human being who has the image of God. Buddha felt pain when he saw death and the suffering of people. So, in order to find a solution, he left his house and went into a deep mountain and started his spiritual journey. He was away from this world. In other words, he escaped from his cross. But Jesus didn’t teach his disciples to ignore their cross. Jesus asked them to take up their cross and follow him. True spirituality comes from reality. I mean that our spiritual growth or development comes when we struggle to deny ourselves in this world and win over our spiritual battle. Spirituality is not just an illusionary and philosophical term, but a real and experimental practice. We live in this stressful and competitive world. This does not mean that we cannot develop our spirituality. We develop and improve our spiritual integrity and its power in our daily life. Spirituality is not just sitting down and meditating in a remote place. But it is working, studying, contending, praying, serving, worshiping, and fulfilling our duty and responsibilities, and taking up our crosses as parents, workers, teachers, students, and so on. Amen!

Third, the way of cross The story of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew and Luke starts with the birth of Christ. Matthew described him as Immanuel God who came to be with us. (Mt 1:23) How could God become a man to be with us? John the Apostle explained this in John 1:14, “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” This is amazing news; that God, the First Cause of this world, appeared as a man like one of us. Paul described this in his letter in Philippians, “*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness...*” (Php 2:6-7) The incarnation of Christ shows his humility, submission, and selflessness.

The life and teaching of Jesus is concluded with the cross of Jesus. All four gospels end their stories with the cross of Jesus and his resurrection. Paul also makes a conclusion of Jesus’ story in, “*And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.*” (Php 2:8) The cross of Jesus is the culmination of his ministry and the completion of God’s will. Jesus said on the cross, “*It is finished*.” (Jn 19:30) He meant that he finished his mission, he completed the will of God, he paid off all the sins of the world, and he fulfilled all the promises and prophecies in the Scripture.

The way of the cross is not a matter which easily becomes comprehensive and acceptable. Paul said that it is the mystery of God. It is the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Co 1:24). How could God let Jesus, his one and only Son, suffer and die on the cross? It is against his nature of righteousness and justice. But God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Co 5:21) Jesus made himself nothing to become a sacrifice of atonement. (Ro 3:25) He did not save himself to save us. (Mk 15:31) Selflessness! The selflessness of Jesus made God’s will possible. The selflessness of Christ enabled us to restore our lost image of God. Paul wanted to learn and follow the way of the cross of Jesus. So, he confessed in his letter to the saints in Galatian Church, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*” (Gal 2:20) Paul emptied himself to fill himself up with Jesus. He boldly said that it is Jesus who lives in him, not himself. He completely handed over the ownership of his life to Jesus who loved him and gave his life for him. He also said the same in Philippians 1:20-21, “*I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain*.”

Glorifying God and exalting the name of Jesus is our ultimate goal of our spiritual life. Paul wanted to exalt Christ in his body. Indeed, Paul suffered much to exalt and glorify the name of Jesus. Buddha taught his disciples to empty themselves for their own happiness. But Jesus taught us to empty ourselves to glorify God. Just before he took up the cross, Jesus prayed. “*Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.*” (Jn 17:1) Jesus prayed to glorify the Father. In the beginning Adam defiled the glory of God through his disobedience. Now Jesus wants to glorify the Father through his obedience. Paul wanted to glorify God by exalting the name of Jesus. Paul knew that exalting the name of the Son is glorifying the Father. He said that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Cor 10:31)

Eugene Peterson said that spirituality is a meditation on God's glory. We can glorify God through our worship. Through worship we praise him, listen to him, pray to him, offer to him, and have fellowship with his people. God wants us to worship him. Through worship, the name of Jesus can be exalted and glorified. Worshiping God does not belong to only in church or temple or a certain place. In modern terms we can worship God anywhere, anytime and with anyone. Our home can be our worship place. Our working place and even in a car while we are driving can be a worship place if it is available.

Fourth, live (walk) by the Spirit. Christians cannot talk about spirituality without the fellowship with the Holy Spirit. It is like talking about an egg without the yolk. The Holy Spirit is not an energy or other spiritual figure like a ghost which people often say. The Holy Spirit is God himself, one of the Holy Trinity along with God the Father and God the Son Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit appears in the first book of the Bible. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the Holy Spirit was hovering over the water. (Ge 1:1-2) The Holy Spirit participated in the creation of the world including man. Right after Adam was created as a spiritual being, he could communicate with the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament Jesus promised his disciples to send the Holy Spirit as an Another Counselor or Comforter. Jesus said that God the Father would send the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ place after Jesus went back to the Father. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who would lead them into the truth. (Jn 16:13) The Holy Spirit will condemn the world and sin. (Jn 16:8-11) The Holy Spirit convicts our conscience so that we may repent of our sins. The Holy Spirit also makes us born again. (Jn 3:5) The Holy Spirit speaks to our spirit that we are children of God. (Ro 8:16) The Holy Spirit saves, transforms, renews, and restores us to become a new creation in Christ Jesus. (Ro 8:1-2, Titus 3:5)

Jesus gave his disciples the Holy Spirit after he rose again from the dead by saying, “*Receive the Holy Spirit*!” (Jn 20:22) His disciples received the Holy Spirit when they gathered together and prayed for the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down like a fire and all his disciples began to speak in different languages. (Ac 2:1-4) When his disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they received power and wisdom and began to become witnesses of Jesus Christ. (Ac 1:8) The book of Acts is the book of the Apostles who were filled and guided by the Holy Spirit. The Apostles followed the Holy Spirit and worked with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit replaced the role of Jesus for his disciples.

Paul said to the saints in the Galatian Church, “*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*” (Gal 5:16) What does ‘walk by the Spirit’ mean? Walk by the Spirit is also interpreted as live by the Spirit. Walk by the Spirit means to be filled with the Holy Spirit and governed by the Holy Spirit. Paul said in Romans 8:6, “*The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.*” Those who are controlled by the fleshly desire will taste death. But those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit will experience life and peace. They will bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which Paul mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. He said, “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*  All these fruits of the Holy Spirit are the original image of God. All these virtues in Christ were endowed to men by God when he breathed his life into us through our nostril. When we deny ourselves and follow Jesus Christ, we bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with and governed by the Holy Spirit, we will restore our original image of God. When we walk by the Spirit, we will not be tempted and controlled by our fleshly desire.

The richness and depth of our relationship with the Holy Spirit and spiritual maturity is measured by our attitude toward God. I mean that those who are mature spiritually always show their gratitude toward God. As Paul said, they give thanks to God in all circumstances. (1 The 5:18) They are always thankful and joyful because they believe that all things came from God and that in all things God works for the good for those who love him. (Col 1:16, Ro 8:28) They teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in their hearts. (Col 3:16) Satan tempts us to deny God’s glory in our lives and shut our mouths and dip them into the pit of despair and fear. But the Holy Spirit enables us to remember God’s grace and glorify the name of Jesus through our praise and worship. When we sing loudly and praise the Lord with all our hearts, the cloud of darkness and shadow of death disappear. Amen!

In conclusion, the way of the cross is the focal point of our spiritual life. The Son Jesus is the image of the invisible God. (Col 1:15) The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being. (Heb 1:1) As Paul said, when we imitate Christ Jesus, we restore the original image of God. When we follow Jesus Christ as his disciples, we glorify God the Father and we will bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit. May God richly bless you when you follow Christ’s example and follow his beautiful footsteps. Amen!