BECOMING YOUR AUTHENTIC SELF IN JESUS

Awareness of yourself and your relationship with God are intricately related. In fact, the challenge to shed our "old false" self in order to live authentically in our "new true" self is at the very core of true spirituality.

Paul, expressed this as, "to put off your old self . . . and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22, 24).

Augustine wrote in *Confessions*, in A.D. 400, "How can you draw close to God when you are far from your own self?" He prayed: "Grant, Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee."

St. Teresa of Avila wrote in *The Way of Perfection*: "Almost all problems in the spiritual life stem from a lack of self-knowledge."

The vast majority of us go die without knowing who we are. We unconsciously live someone else's life, or at least someone else's expectations for us. This causes problems for ourselves, our relationship with God, and ultimately to others.

Feelings and the Beginning of a Change

I wonder how many of us feel that our feelings are unreliable and can't trusted. They go up and down and are the last thing we should be worried about in our spiritual lives. But that's an incorrect view.

God created human beings to feel a wide range of emotions. There are hundreds of emotions, each with their variations, blends, and hundreds of nuances. Researchers have classified them into eight main families:

- anger (fury, hostility, irritability, annoyance)
- sadness (grief, self-pity, despair, dejection, loneliness)
- fear (anxiety, edginess, nervousness, fright, terror, apprehension)
- enjoyment (joy, relief, contentment, delight, thrill, euphoria, ecstasy)
- love (acceptance, trust, devotion, adoration)
- surprise (shock, amazement, wonder)
- disgust (contempt, scorn, aversion, distaste, revulsion)
- shame (guilt, remorse, humiliation, embarrassment, chagrin)

When we deny our pain, losses, and feelings year after year, we become less and less human. We transform slowly into empty shells with smiley faces painted on them. Sad to say, that so many people live this way.

But when I began to allow myself to feel a wider range of emotions, including sadness, depression, fear, and anger, a revolution in our spirituality is unleashed. We need to realize that when we don't see the biblical place of feelings within our larger Christian lives it causes damage, and keeps us as Christians enslaved.

Our God Feels

The journey of genuine transformation to emotionally healthy spirituality begins with a commitment to allow yourself to feel. It is an essential part of our humanity and unique personhood as men and women made in God's image.

Scripture reveals God as an emotional being who feels—a Person. Having been created in His image, we also were created with the gift to feel and experience emotions. Consider the following:

• "God *saw that it was good . . . very good*" (Genesis 1:25, 31). In other words, God delighted, relished, beamed with delight over us.

• "The LORD was *grieved* that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was *filled with pain*" (Genesis 6:6).

• "I, the LORD your God, am a *jealous* God" (Exodus 20:5).

• "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, *I cry out, I gasp and pant*" (Isaiah 42:14).

• "The *fierce anger* of the LORD will not turn back until he fully accomplishes the purposes of his heart" (Jeremiah 30:24).

• "I have *loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness*" (Jeremiah 31:3).

• "How can I hand you over, Israel? . . . My heart is changed within me; all my *compassion is aroused*" (Hosea 11:8).

• "He began to *be sorrowful and troubled*. Then he said to them, 'My soul is *overwhelmed with sorrow* to the point of death' " (Matthew 26:37–38).

• "At that time Jesus, *full of joy* through the Holy Spirit" (Luke 10:21). (Emphasis mine throughout)

You Feel—Even if You May Be Unaware of It

The problem, however, is that we can't reflect and respond thoughtfully to our feelings if we don't know what they are. So much of our true selves is buried alive—sadness, rage, anger, tenderness, joy, happiness, fear, depression. Yet God designed our bodies to respond physiologically to those in the world around us.

God speaks to us through a knot in the stomach, muscle tension, trembling and shaking, the release of adrenaline into our bloodstream, headaches, and a suddenly elevated heart rate. God may be screaming at us through our physical body while we look for (and prefer) a more "spiritual" signal. The reality is that often our bodies know our feelings before our minds.

I often hear comments such as these:

- I am not very good at feelings.
- I really don't have time for this.
- Anyway, my family was more about doing.

The problem for many of us comes when we have a "difficult" feeling like anger or sadness. Unconsciously we have a "rule" against those feelings. We feel defective because we shouldn't be feeling the "wrong" things. We then lie to ourselves, sometimes convincing ourselves that we aren't feeling anything because we don't think we should be feeling it. We shut down our humanity.

There are some temptations we face as human beings:

TEMPTATION ONE: I AM WHAT I DO *(Performance)*

The devil said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (Matthew 4:3).

Jesus had apparently done nothing for thirty years. He had not yet begun his ministry. He seemed like a loser. Nobody believed in him. He was hungry. What contribution had he made to the world?

Our culture asks the same question. What have you achieved? How have you demonstrated your usefulness? What do you do? Most of us consider ourselves worthwhile if we have scored sufficient successes—in work, family, school, church, relationships. When we don't, we may move harder and faster, go inward into depression out of shame, or perhaps blame others for our predicaments.

TEMPTATION TWO: I AM WHAT I HAVE *(Possession)*

Jesus was taken to see all the magnificence and power of the earth.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Mat 4:8

The devil basically said to him, "Look around you at what everyone else has. You don't have anything. How can you think you are somebody? How will you survive? You're a nobody." The devil played on profound issues of fear and the source of his security.

Our culture measures our success by what we own. Marketers now spend more than $733 Billion globally each year seducing children and adolescents to believe they have to have certain toys, clothes, iPods, CDs, etc.

Their very identities depend on it. As adults we measure ourselves through comparisons: Who has the most money? The most beautiful body? The most comfortable life? Often our sense of worth is tied to our positions at work—the money and perks. Who has the best education from what school, the most talents and awards, more degrees on their résumé? Who has the most attentive, handsome boyfriend or husband? The best-looking girl or wife?

TEMPTATION THREE: I AM WHAT OTHERS THINK *(Popularity)*

Some of us are addicted to what others think.

"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." **Mat 4:6**

Satan invited Jesus to throw himself down from the highest spot of the temple that people might believe in him. At this point people did not think anything of Jesus. He was, in effect, invisible. How could he think he had worth and value?

Most of us place a higher premium on what other people think than we realize. What will I say or not say in a conversation? What school will my child attend? Who will I date? Do I tell that person he or she hurt me? What kind of career will I pursue? Our self-image soars with a compliment and is devastated by a criticism.

True freedom comes when we no longer need to be somebody special in other people's eyes because we know we are loveable and good enough.

How do we do this?

The following are four practical truths to begin making the radical transition of living faithful to our true self in Christ.

***1.* PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR INTERIOR IN SILENCE AND SOLITUDE**

We want to be the men and women God has called us to be—our true selves in Christ.

Yet enormous distractions keep us from listening to our feelings, our desires, our dreams, our likes and dislikes. Many people around us would like to fix, save, advise, and set us straight into becoming the people they would like.[15]

We need to be alone so we can listen.

***2*. FIND TRUSTED COMPANIONS**

I don't know many people who shed many layers of their false self in order that their true self might emerge unless they have a few trusted mature companions to help them along the way.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer in his classic *Life Together* warned: "Let the person who cannot be alone beware of community. Let the person who is not in community beware of being alone." We are to be "alone together," a "community of solitudes."

Some of you here may be saying, "I don't have anyone to walk with me in this journey." **Pray.** Ask God for his person(s) during this season of your life. Let him surprise you. Often God seems to lead us to people who are very different from us and who are not pastors or leaders. Ask those you respect for suggestions. And pay attention to what he might be saying to you.

***3.* MOVE OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE**

Dying to your false self and allowing your true self to come out can be frightening. For some of us giving or receiving a compliment feels wrong. Others have an allergic reaction to being in the presence of angry people. For others to enter into conflict feels like death. To some asking for help feels like complete failure, and even thinking about disagreeing with a friend can send some into an evening of insomnia.

To begin to do things differently, especially in the beginning, will feel very awkward.

4. PRAY FOR COURAGE

When we differentiate into our true self in Christ, it is always accompanied by a reaction from those close to us. We may meet with a countermove or "Change back!" consequence from other people when we give up our old ways of behaving and living.

Murray Bowen, the originator of the term *differentiation*, emphasizes that in families there is a powerful opposition when one member of the family matures and increases his or her level of differentiation. He argues that even a little growth can cause a reaction in those closest to him or her.

In the same way, I have seen repeatedly that when anyone makes a change in themselves (becoming their true self in Christ), a few people around them often get upset.

Murray Bowen describes the opposition in three stages:

• Stage One: "You are wrong for changing and here are the reasons why."

• Stage Two: "Change back and we will accept you again."

• Stage Three: "If you don't change back, these are the consequences"

Pray for the Holy Spirit's power to continue. You are doing something that has never been done before in your history! In some cases you will be challenging deep multigenerational patterns. Expect that you may stir up some profound emotionality!

When we choose to begin to make changes in our life, the pressure can feel like either our inner person or exterior life relationships will implode in the process. The shaking that happens in our life can

be compared, I believe for each of us, to breaking the sound barrier for the first time. **Both require great courage.**

The year was 1947 and nobody had successfully broken the speed of sound—760 mph at sea level. There was a widely held belief of the existence of a "sound barrier," an invisible wall of air that would smash an airplane that tried to pierce the speed of Mach 1. In fact, a British plane, along with the pilot, had been blown to pieces in an attempt earlier that year to break the barrier. The plane could not sustain the pressure.

About that time, the United States Air Force was developing a project to put military pilots into space, but they first needed to punch through the sound barrier. Chuck Yeager was invited to be their test pilot. His boss, Colonel Boyd, informed him, "Nobody knows for sure what happens until somebody gets there. Chuck, you'll be flying into the unknown."

The plane had the latest technology and design, but neither the air force nor the colonel could guarantee the outcome. Nobody had been there before.

In the same way, no other person has ever lived your life. You may be wondering what will happen if you engage in this journey of emotionally healthy spirituality, if you take seriously God's purpose for you to increasingly live faithfully out of the life he has given you.

After nine attempts, on October 14, 1947, Yeager finally broke the sound barrier. He wrote later about the experience: *"I was thunderstruck. After all the anxiety, breaking the sound barrier turned out to be a perfectly paved speedway. . . . After all the anticipation it was really a let down. The 'unknown' was a poke through Jelly."*

The point of this story is not that we live our life flying at high speeds. (My prayer is that you will slow down!) Hebrews 11 tells us that some people conquered kingdoms. Others were sawed in two for their faith. Only God knows your future. Yet you can be sure of one thing: your life, like Yeager's airplane, will shake in the process of you maturing into the person God intends.

Why? The raw material of your life is unaccustomed to flying in order to break through the sound barrier. It will initially feel uncomfortable, as if the plane of your life is shaking from the pressure.

If you move forward, however, you will find that God is with you and behind you. His grace is sufficient. His power is accessible. And the unknown before you is really like poking through Jelly.

Getting to know yourself so that you might know God is the adventure of a lifetime.