

Relinquish - Practices that lead to Authenticity and Surrender

Series: Habits of the Heart: Practices to Commune with God and Transform your Life

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Texts: Psalm 137, Mark 8:31-38, Galatians 2.20

One of my favourite movies when I was a young adult was the comedy spoof Zoolander. Derek Zoolander is the world's most famous and photographed male model. His whole life revolves around that fact. But at the New York fashion awards he loses the top model spot. He stumbles out of the ceremony and stares at his reflection in a puddle on the side of the road and asks "Who am I?" His reverie is broken only when a car motors through the puddle, splashing him. I was going to show a clip, but I think the joke might be lost.

20 years on, the film has an insight into the world of social media in which so many of us live. I know this might not be the case for the older members of St George's, but it is the world of your kids and grandkids. Since Zoolander was released we've had the invention of the smartphone with its built-in camera, Youtube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and so on. An online ABC article last week cited the work of UK Philosopher Heather Widdows. She argues that, "We live in a more "visual culture". ... "Courtesy of social media, we are able to constantly examine our appearance in relation to that of others," ... "with a moral judgement that goes both ways". According to Widdows, "We have an epidemic of body image anxiety".¹ We've always been concerned about appearance and beauty. But social media has pumped that anxiety full of steroids. Zoolander points to the fact that anxiety about appearance leads to questions of identity and existence. Now we're all staring at our reflection asking "who am I?" Our sense of self can dissolve when someone stomps in the puddle of our reflection.

Who am I? We live in an age of anxiety because the answer to that question is fragile and contested. I've pointed to social media, but there is so much more. How our family, our school, our workplace, our neighbours, and more, speak about us, feeds into our sense of self. How does the Bible answer this question? This is the 3rd, (ish), in our series on spiritual disciplines, *Habits of the Heart: Practices to connect with God and transform your life*. We've looked at Worship, and the practice of the Sabbath. We threw in an extra week on Fasting. Last week we looked at Openness to God and the practice of the Examen. Today we're taking that third letter of WORSHIP and looking at R, Relinquishing the False Self: Practices that lead to authenticity and surrender. This morning we're going to see how the Bible answers that

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<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-03/body-image-beauty-face-value-heather-widdows-kirstie-clements/101109500>

question “Who am I?” and then we’ll look at 3 practices in one to help relinquish the false self - solitude, silence and self examination. This is a crazy big topic, so we’ll only scratch the surface, but I hope you’ll find resources to help stabilise who you are.

Known by God

Framing today’s sermon under the title of “Relinquishing the false self”, suggests that we can and do deceive ourselves about who we truly are. This is one of the ways to describe the idea of sin - as falsehood. The Bible tells us we are many things - creatures, made in the image of God, loved by him. “Fearfully and wonderfully made” as David sings in Psalm 139. To strike out independently from God, to claim that we are “self made”, is a falsehood that simultaneously makes us out to be god, when we are not, and, at the same time, denies the fact that the true God really does love us. Yet this is what we do. In our first sermon in this series we looked at the idea that what you worship shapes who you are. Having rejected the true and living God, we seek to bolster or create our sense of self through holding on to all sorts of things - success, reputation, status, family, work, health, beauty, a relationship. These things function for us as false gods, idols, and when they are threatened, we are shaken. When they are lost we unravel.

John Calvin famously begins his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, with these words, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess ... consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”² Calvin’s contention is that it is only as we know God that we truly know ourselves. This is a radical and paradoxical claim, because it says God is at the centre of who I am, *not* me. We touched on this paradox last week when we looked at the Holy Spirit. In Romans Paul writes that, “the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” On the deepest level of our being God himself is at work to help us grasp the truth about ourselves. And what is that? That we are known and loved by God.

This is true in creation. Psalm 139 is an exquisite meditation on that fact. And it is true in redemption, and this is Paul’s point in Galatians 2.20. This is the most personal and intimate of language, and it is true for each one of us. Are you confused about who you are? Do you despise yourself? Do you feel alone and unloved? Listen to God’s word to you.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 1.1.1

You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.

2 You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

3 You discern my going out and my lying
down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

4 Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.

5 You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for
me,
too lofty for me to attain.

7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you
are there.

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
10 even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide
me
and the light become night around
me,"
12 even the darkness will not be dark to
you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

13 For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's
womb.

14 I praise you because I am fearfully
and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the
depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were
written in your book
before one of them came to be.

Jesus says, "*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.*"

The paradox of the Christian faith is this. That if you try and discover yourself, make something of yourself, build your platform, cobble together your identity, whatever it is you will fail and lose your life. But if you give up and let go, stop trying to be at the centre, hand yourself over to Christ, to in fact die to yourself, you will find you are given your life back anew. This was the apostle Paul's experience.

*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.*³

³ Galatians 2.20

In the end, the truth of the matter is this - we may not know who we are, but God does. And therefore, who we are is his gift, given to us in Christ, if only we would turn to him.

Relinquishing the False Self

The New Testament constantly pictures our life as a contest between the old life and the new. We're called to take off the old life, and put on the new. The old life is turned away from God. Closed in on itself. Grasping for popularity and power. Obsessed with image management. Corrosive to relationships. Envious and insecure. The new life is from Christ and like Christ. Full of life and light and joy and peace. Generous. Open. Relaxed. Humble. Self forgetful. Loving God. Loving our neighbour. Practices that Relinquish the False Self are those which help us to put off the old life, and to receive and live out of the new life God gives us in Christ. They are things we can do to help us surrender to God; to let his light shine in the dark places of our lives; and to live authentically, that is to say, where God is the author of our story.

I want to look at 3 practices together - Silence, Solitude, and Self Examination.

Silence. We live in an age of unparalleled noise. Technology makes it possible to only have silence when we're asleep. Constant noise can mean we don't pay attention to our hearts or to God. Silence asks for patience and waiting, and I don't know about you but I find that hard. But again and again in the Bible God calls us to *Be still, and know that I am God.*⁴

Solitude. Throughout the Bible people meet God in a place of solitude. Moses and the Burning Bush. Ezekiel by the Chebar canal. Jesus withdrawing from the crowds to pray. In solitude we can be alone with God. We no longer have to perform for others, the mask can drop and we can be honest with God. Jesus says to us, *when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father who is unseen.*⁵

So, each day, set aside time where you can be quiet and alone with God. If this is something new for you, try just 10 minutes. Turn off your phone. Put aside distractions. Be still in God's presence. As thoughts bubble up, imagine them as boats on a river. Offer them to God as a prayer. Then let them be carried away in the river of his peace. Return to God with the words of Samuel, "Here I am Lord."

Self-Examination.

⁴ Psalm 46.10

⁵ Matthew 6.6

David prays in Psalm 139, *Search me O God, and know my heart / test me and know my anxious thoughts. / See if there is any offensive way in me, / and lead me in the way everlasting.*⁶ None of us likes to have our dirty laundry aired. The truth is nothing is hidden from God's sight, but he invites us to come and find full and free forgiveness in Christ. He loves us and knows us better than we know ourselves. Therefore we need not be afraid of examining our hearts, that what is in darkness may be brought into the light so that we can walk in his light, and by the power of the Spirit we may put off the old and put on the new life of Christ, our true life.

So, in the silence, alone before God, remember that he loves you. Ask him to help you see yourself as he does. Ask him to shine his light on your darkness. Then reflect on where you have been walking in darkness. You could use the 10 commandments as a guide. As you recognise particular sins, ask, what motivated me to disobedience? What did I believe was sweeter than God and his promises? Was I seeking approval when only God is my judge? Was I seeking power when only God is Almighty? Was I seeking comfort where only Christ is my lover and heaven is my home? Was I seeking control where only Christ is the King? As you identify these deeper idols of the heart, name how weak they are and how strong Christ is. Name how they enslave you, and ask for Christ to set you free. Name how they dishonour Christ. Then, say, "I leave this at the foot of the cross. Jesus, thank you for dying for this sin. Please forgive me." Receive Christ's forgiveness. Rejoice in him. Give thanks to him for the particular way he meets that need of your heart. Praise him for who he is to you at this point. Ask for the Spirit to help you live for him in obedience in this area.

For those of you who have done the Gospel in Life studies, I would encourage you to re-read the home study for chapter three on idols of the heart, and incorporate this into your times of self-examination.

I've presented self examination as a path to confession, and it's something we should do daily. This is to help us put off the old self. But many of us have tender consciences, and Satan, the accuser, loves to play on them so we forget the promises of God's full and free forgiveness. We forget just who he names us to be in Christ - his children, holy and dearly loved, temples of the Holy Spirit. The overwrought conscience can be an inverted pride, that says I am beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. In solitude we can meditate on the promises of God and what he says about us. We all need this, but if you have a tender conscience I especially encourage you to do this.

⁶ Psalm 139.23-24

I want to finish with a poem that sums up that contest for the self that we all find ourselves in, buffered by what others say and our own doubts and failures. It was written by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer while awaiting his execution by the Nazi's.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell
composed and cheerful and steady,
like a lord from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would speak to my guards
freely and friendly and clearly,
as if it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of calamity
calmly, smiling and proud,
like one in the habit of winning.

Am I really that which others say of me?
Or am I only that which I know of myself -
unsettled, yearning, sick, like a bird in a
cage,
gasping for breath, as if someone choked
my throat,
starving for colours, for flowers, for
bird-song,
thirsting for good words, for human
presence,

quivering with anger at capriciousness
and petty grievances,
vexed by waiting for great things,
powerlessly fretting for friends at endless
distances,
too weary and empty to pray, to think, to
create,
faint, and ready to take leave of it all?

Who am I? This or that other?
Am I the one today, and tomorrow the
other?
Am I both together? Before people a fraud
and before myself a despicable,
self-pitying weakling?
Or is it like - what is in me still - a beaten
army,
that gives way in disorder before victory
already won?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely
questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am
thine.