

The Secrets of Worship - Piety

The word *piety* has fallen on hard times. We probably hear the word used almost in a derogatory way. We hear people saying, 'Don't look so pious', when they mean 'don't pretend you are holier than thou'. People will say things like 'That's very pious-sounding but...' when they mean to say 'you sound more spiritual than you really are, or will be in practicality.' We associate the word with insincerity, or even hypocrisy.

So, sadly, we have an almost negative, if not non-existent, understanding of piety.

We are not going to find the English words *pious* or *piety* in the Bible. But we are going to find the idea of piety everywhere. We are going to find the Bible uses many different words to describe piety. In fact, we are going to find it lies at the heart of worship.

What is piety?

Webster's definitions are actually very close:

'Compound of veneration or reverence of the God and love of his character, or veneration accompanied with love;'

And

'Piety in practice, is the exercise of these affections in obedience to his will and devotion to his service.'

'Having due veneration and affection for the character of God, and habitually obeying his commands.'

Piety is a general term for our entire life's approach to God. It is our whole attitude towards the Person of God. Our piety is the posture and attitude we adopt in the presence of God – which is simply – all of life. So it may be at its core, our fear and love of God, but it is seen in many things:

- [It is how deeply we experience reverence and awe in His presence. Are we flippant? Are we casual? Do we come with joyful, confident trembling?
- [It is how much we are humbled and sense utter dependence upon Him. Are we independent? Can we go without praying? Can we do fine without being in the Word? Are we self-sufficient, self-reliant, independent?
- [It is how deeply we examine ourselves for sin, confessing, repenting, fleeing sin and experiencing contrition before a holy God. How frequently do we hear the Spirit's conviction and confess?
- [It is the depth of your commitment to follow Christ, the sense of utter obligation and willing compulsion to do His will on earth as it is in heaven, the sense of belonging entirely to Him and yielding all to Him in glad surrender.
- [It is the depth of communion we experience with Him. To what degree do we seek and find Him in the meditation on the Word and prayer? How long do we linger? For how long do we wait? How early do we rise to meet Him? Do we

hide His Word in our hearts and seek to remain in His presence in the business of the day? Do we pray expecting answers, looking for God to answer directly?

- [It is how sensitive we are to the Spirit of God leading us, convicting us— showing us the works of God. Do we plod or barrage through our days – or are we truly led by the Spirit.
- [It is how rooted and grounded we are in trusting His faithful promises, trusting His goodness and greatness towards us.
- [It is the degree to which the Spirit of God controls us on a moment-to-moment basis.
- [It is how joyful and thankful we are in God. Are we experiencing satisfaction in God, delighting in His abundant provision, or are we idolaters, seeking other things to fulfil us?

Piety is all these things. It is in what measure we do these things. It is how much of our heart is given over to these things. It is, in essence, the degree to which we are pursuing God? In what measure are we seeking to know and love and experience Christ?

This is piety – the **heat of the heart**. How hot is our heart towards Christ? In what way are we seeking Him?

We will have understood the need for this when we see that the Bible talks about a believer loving, seeking, fearing, serving, obeying God – but then it tells you how – **with your whole heart**.

Deuteronomy 4:29 *"But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul."*

Jeremiah 29:13 *"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."*

Joel 2:12-13 ¹² *"Now, therefore," says the LORD, 'Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.'* ¹³ *So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He is gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing harm"*

Hebrews 11:6 *"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."*

All these verses speak about piety.

But then we hit an apparent contradiction. We want to love, fear, seek, obey Him more, on the one hand; but, on the other hand, we are told that if we do that we cannot

do it on our own. It is God who must give us the desires to be more pious. The apparent paradox is seen in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 30:6 "*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*"

Deuteronomy 10:16 "*Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.*"

The thing we want is more piety. And to be more pious is to experience more of God. And yet, we find that even the desire to seek God more, comes from God. So it looks like we are in a circle. There is a chicken and egg situation. To be disciplined and diligent, we need desire. Athletes are disciplined and diligent because they keep the desire for victory, wealth, fame before them. But, conversely, to grow our desire, we need more discipline and diligence.

So how does it work? Does God randomly disperse desires, in lesser or greater degrees to different Christians? Does that explain some believers are zealous and on fire for God, while others are cool and indifferent? Maybe God gave generous amounts of desire to seek Him to this Christian, but was quite reserved in giving desires to that Christian.

The answer is in Philippians 2:12-13.

In these two verses you see two works. In verse 12 you see our work – our response to God, giving everything. In verse 13 you see God's work. The one is grace, the other is freedom.

Every time we hear the word '*grace*', we should think – '*Holy Spirit*'. He is the Spirit of grace.

God's grace comes to us in the form of the Spirit of God working inside us. The Spirit of God is the source of our love for God. The Spirit of God is the source of piety.

Now look closely to see the two things which the Spirit does inside us. He works in us *to will*, and He works in us *to do*.

'To will' – this means He works in us to create desires to love God.

'To do' – this means He works in us to give us power to become like Christ.

So, the secret of this thing called piety is how we cooperate with the Spirit of God. And this is what we must understand. ***It is a cooperative effort.***

Colossians 1:29 makes this clear.

How are we to understand the Holy Spirit's work within us?

Perhaps the best analogy is the Bible's own – ***Fire***. Every time God manifests Himself, something of fire is seen. You will recall that at Pentecost, what seemed like tongues of flame were seen above the disciples' heads.

The Spirit is a fire burning within us. We said piety is the heat of the heart. The Spirit of God is the source of that heat – He is the fire. For us to be on fire for God, is to work with Him as He works in us. It is to work out what He works in, to labour together with Him. He is going to continually seek to stir up desires for Christ within us. What we do with those desires will determine the rest of our Christian life.

The primary thing the Spirit of God does to create desire for God in us is to reveal truth about Christ.

John 16:13-15 *"However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. ¹⁴ "He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ "All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you."*

Think on these illustrations:

Truth about God creates desires.

God is kind; we respond with gratitude.

God is great; we respond with awe.

God is strong; respond with confidence and a lack of fear.

God is holy; we respond with obedience.

Now as the Spirit seeks to use various means to teach us truth about God, we can use our freedom to respond in one of two ways:

1. We can quench. (I Thes. 5:19)

We quench Him by being indifferent towards truth about God.

Every truth about God demands a response.

To rebel against how we should respond quenches Him.

To be indifferent about that truth is to quench Him.

To be lazy or apathetic towards truth about God quenches Him.

We quench Him when we treat the various means of grace in an indifferent fashion. The Lord will use the Word of God, prayer, obedience, fellowship, evangelism, to give us more truth about Christ to respond to. If we are indifferent to these means of grace, we quench the Holy Spirit.

If we quench a flame, what are we doing to the temperature? We are cooling it.

The result of this coolness is to set off a cycle of increasing coolness. We get used to being indifferent towards truth, so the truth we now have does not affect us as much. The means of grace, such as attending church, reading our Bible, praying, do not seem to affect us as much, so we lose interest in them, further cutting ourselves off from truth about God.

And so we understand the truth of what Christ meant when he said:

Luke 8:18 *“Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.”*

2. We can fan into flame (2 Tim 1:6)

The word ‘*stir*’ here is from a word that refers to fire in its dying embers, the remains of a fire. This word means to rekindle; to blow on the embers; to re-ignite; fan into flame what is there. This is our other option. As the Spirit of God seeks to reveal truth to us, we can respond wholeheartedly to Him. The more intensely we work out the desires He gives us, the greater our piety and religious affections.

Appropriate responses to truth bring more truth.

Love should be requited with love and gratitude.

Greatness and sovereignty should yield humility, awe, dependence, submission etc.

The more we respond to the Spirit, the more we are living as what the Bible calls ‘*Spirit filled*’. We are giving the Spirit more and more room to burn the truth about Christ’s glory in to our hearts. Once we start to blow on these embers, another cycle can be in place – hearts enjoying God, craving more of God responding wholeheartedly to every avenue for more truth about God.

Again that verse says:

Luke 8:18 *“Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.”*

How then do we respond and work with the Spirit of God?

1. Give God His Exalted Place and present ourselves to God as a surrendered offering (Rom 12:1-2). This is where we make ourselves available to love God above all else. This requires a renunciation of self and its manifestations. It is a surrender to His Lordship and to the centrality and supremacy of Christ. (Eph 3:17). It is a desire for love for Christ and an abandonment of pride. It is emptying ourselves of what crowds out Christ – self.

2. Ask the Spirit of Christ to fill us so that we can love Him supremely (Eph 5:18, Luke 11:11-13, Ephesians 3:16-17). Believe He will and does (Gal 3:2)

3. Be saturated with the Word of Christ (Col 3:16). Fill our minds with truth. Take every opportunity to learn more of God in His Word. Memorise portions of it. Call it to mind for all of life; meditate on it often (Psalm 1:2, Josh 1:8). Let it cause thoughts that God can use and bless (Phil 4:8). Let it be truth about God which the Spirit can burn.

4. Live one obedient choice at a time. You get one choice at a time. Each choice counts for eternity. Therefore each choice is precious. One ultimate goal – love God; one wholehearted choice at a time. We can either make one obedient choice at a time,

or one selfish choice at a time. An obedient choice is a choice made in love to God in dependence on His Spirit from the truth He brings to our hearts. A selfish choice is a choice made in love of self, trusting in self.

One wholehearted choice at a time, is really one wholehearted response to God at a time. *Each choice is a response to truth about God.*

Respond *sympathetically*, and immediately, to truth about God.

Respond *submissively* to truth about God. (Includes confession of wrong).

Respond *single-mindedly* to truth about God. This is the heart temperature required to ignite truth about God.

5. Cultivate a companionship approach to the Spirit of Christ. Keep in step with His work of testifying of Christ (Gal 5:25). Remember the Spirit is not a force, but a Person. He is a Person seeking our submission and cooperation as He seeks to exalt Christ. Seek to live in continual communion, praying, thanking, trusting.

6. Discipline our lives to capture and increase desires for God. Discipline is planned obedience through structures and limits. It is still Spirit-empowered:

- [Discipline of not procrastinating- have a schedule.
- [Discipline of doing the hardest things first.
- [The discipline of prioritising - have a schedule, a routine.
- [The discipline of persevering – set goals and complete them. Don't allow the Holy Spirit's work to dissipate through laziness, disorganisation and weakness.

7. Give ourselves wholly to the means of grace. These strengthen the previous five steps. *Personal meditation, memorisation, personal prayer, intercession, confession and obedience, corporate worship, evangelism.* Our attitude towards these things affects the heat of our hearts.

Consider Numbers 28:3-8. Notice how God wanted both a morning and an evening sacrifice. Begin the day with him, end the day with Him.

8. Stoke the fire with other reading:

Read classic devotional works - (*City of God; Pilgrim's Progress; The Pursuit of God; E.M. Bounds on prayer; Imitation of Christ* – Kempis).

Read edifying hymns and poetry.

Read classic theological works (*The Christian in Complete Armour* – Gurnall; *Rutherford's Letters; Calvin's Institutes*).

Read biographical works. Read Historical works.

If we want to think of it as an analogy, think of our hearts as the altar of God which was to continually burn before Him. The Word of God is the fuel, and the Spirit of God is the fire – the fire of love for Christ. Our piety is the state of that furnace. What we want is that altar burning brightly with love for God. If we do not yield to the Spirit of God, there will be no flame. On the other hand, if we do not saturate our lives with the Word of God – there will be no fuel for Him to burn. And if the furnace is damp and cold with indifference to truth about God, nothing will ignite. We need all

three: The Spirit of God; the Word of God; and response to truth from the Word of God.

We see God's desire for this in Leviticus 6:9-13.

We can also think of the Golden Candlestick which was to be kept continually burning. God is demonstrating to us – keep the fire burning – keep desire high.

What about when desire is flagging or lacking? How do we then get motivated for seeking God more? The only answer is faith. When the heart is cold, we have to believe that God has promised to revive us if we follow this pattern in Scripture. Faith is a promise of something better than what we have now if we will trust and obey.

But here is the thing to remember – this life of responding to the Spirit is not a far out thing that no one can reach.

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 *"For this commandment which I command you today is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. ¹² "It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' ¹³ "Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' ¹⁴ "But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it."*

In other words – the link to keep responding to God is right here. We can always keep the fire burning. The Spirit is working in us to will and to do. So continually fan into flame what He is doing.

The thing we all have in common is the Spirit of God working in us to create desires. What makes us different is what we are doing with those desires. Some of us are fanning them into flame, and we are getting all the hotter. Some of us are quenching them, and are getting all the colder. So ever before us lies the choice – we can be as spiritual as we want to be.

Complete (Jackie)