

Three Keys to Spiritual Vitality

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Good morning everyone. Thanks for making it out on such a cold, cold day!

I want to talk to you today about “spiritual vitality.” I don’t know what you think of when you hear that word “vitality” since it’s not necessarily a word that we use a lot in our everyday vocabulary, but whenever I hear the word vitality I always think of *Vitalis*.

Who knows what Vitalis is? It’s a men’s hair product. It was very popular when I was a kid. I remember my dad putting it on his hair and putting it on mine.

In fact, this is an ad for Vitalis that was created in the year I was born, 1957.

That’s Billy Pierce, in case you don’t know, he was an outstanding pitcher for the Chicago White Sox, which I guess qualified him to be the poster boy for Vitalis.

Of course, like all other long-lived successful products, Vitalis has modernized its look and its marketing approach.

Today their message is “experience a new realm of hair care, uniquely *engineered* for a man’s hair.”

They’re not just throwing this stuff together like they used to – they’re actually engineering it to keep a man’s hair in *perfect balance* for *lasting strength*. “It’s *life!*” they say ... for hair.

So, what is spiritual vitality? It’s *life* ... for our spirit. It’s strength, it’s energy, it’s liveliness in our relationship with God. It means that we’re vitally connected and tuned in to God; it means we’re fired up about who He is and what He is doing in us and through us.

And spiritual vitality is what we want, isn’t it? I mean, who among us – whether we belong to Jesus already or we’re still just in the process of observing what it *means* to belong to Him – who among us wants a tedious, draining, and dull experience with God? I can’t think of anyone who would sign up for that!

But the truth is ... that’s where a lot of us live most of our spiritual lives. That’s what a lot of us experience in our relationship with God. Christianity becomes burdensome, exhausting and listless.

Of course, that’s not how it starts out because, as I just said, no one would ever sign up for it if it did. So how does it get that way? It’s gravity. Spiritual gravity. We start up *here* then the gravity starts to bring us down.

Gravitational Pull

Here’s how it works a lot of the time – and I’ve seen this happen over and over to people who’ve been part of this church and who’ve accepted Christ, so I’m going to explain it from that perspective ... but, really, the pattern is the same for almost everyone whether you became a Christian here or somewhere else, or however that happened for you.

Imagine being someone who has never attended church or who has not attended church in a long time ...

1. and somewhere along the way you get invited by a friend, or get a flyer in the mail about a message series, or you

come to an Easter Eggstravaganza/Boo Bash or some other event and then as a result of that you decide to start coming to church on a regular basis, just to check it out.

2. You're kind of wowed by the services. You like the music (John Mayer's song), you like it when we do videos and dramas and you say things like, "Rick (or whoever is speaking) must be following me around because he's talking about things that I wonder about or worry about or struggle with." Of course, we don't really do that. That's just what it feels like when the Holy Spirit is speaking to you.
3. The result of your weekend experience is that you begin to discover that the Bible is relevant to everyday life. You're encouraged by the thought that Jesus might actually be who Christians say he is. You're moved by the thought that He loves you even though you're so far from perfect.
4. So the day comes when you decide to begin a personal relationship with Christ ... you're going to make Jesus your Savior and Lord not just the *church's* Savior and Lord ... and so you begin to experience change from the inside out. You're fired up spiritually. And since you've not ever really had that before, or at least not for a very long time – it's very satisfying to your soul. There's life. There's energy, there's excitement. *Spiritual vitality*.

But then ... it happens: spiritual gravity begins to work on us.

A few months later (or maybe years if we're lucky), that initial excitement and enthusiasm begins to wane just a bit. We start thinking, "you know, when I go to church, services are good; still pretty helpful ... but I feel like I need something more." Some of us who've been around church a little longer and have learned to speak Christian-ese may phrase it as, "I just don't feel like I am growing; I don't feel like I'm being *fed* spiritually." People say this sometimes.

So, then, we start to get a little picky about church. We say, "I'm not sure what it is, but something's different about the weekend services. They don't get to me like they used to.

- "I think it might be that the messages aren't deep enough." (Of course, someone else would say "they're too deep. I can't figure out what they're talking about.")
- "I just wish we would sing more. We don't sing enough." (Someone else would say "we sing way too much; it just goes on and on.")
- "We don't laugh enough – they don't do enough of those skits." (Someone else would say "they're always trying to be cute with those silly videos and skits. I wish they would just get to the point.")
- "It's always the same thing – we sing, there's announcements, the band plays and then Rick speaks." (Someone else would say, "They're always jacking around with things. Sometimes they put the singing at the end of the service and it just messes it all up for me.")

Now, please don't hear this wrong, I'm not saying that what our church or any other church does in the service shouldn't be evaluated and to try to be as creative as possible (and we're in the process of doing that right now) ... but I've got to tell you as a pastor ... when I hear someone equate the "performance" (for lack of a better term) of the weekend service and the fact that they're spiritually bored, listless and lifeless – the opposite of spiritual vitality, I get worried.

Obviously, I'm worried about *the services* because I want to make sure that what we do here is meaningful and helpful, but *a much greater worry* is that when we equate those two things – our lack of spiritual vitality and the "performance" of a weekly church service – more often than not it indicates that we, as individuals, have one of two problems (and maybe

even both).

Problem #1: It could be that we have come to expect that somehow, someday, one hour on Saturday (or Sunday) will meet all of our spiritual needs.

Of course that's impossible, but maybe it hasn't yet occurred to us that spiritual health and vitality is like physical health and vitality: it's not something you do one hour a week. You have to stay on top of it 24/7.

Just as there are no magic weight loss pills, there is no magic "spiritual Vitalis." It takes time and commitment on a personal basis to adopt some habits into our lives that will help us in this area and if we don't do that, we're going to be bored and unfulfilled in our relationship with God.

We'll talk more about that in just a few minutes, but sometimes the problem isn't an unrealistic expectation. In fact, sometimes people are really disciplined about those habits we need to adopt, but they, too, wind up spiritually drained and worn out. And that's really scary because you think, "I'm doing these spiritual disciplines, these habits, so what's the deal?"

Problem #2. The deal or the problem is that sometimes the lack of spiritual vitality is a result of believing you need something beyond the gospel itself to be "spiritual."

In other words, we *start* out with Jesus and the Gospel, but we come to believe along the way that we need to add something else: faith in Jesus *plus* deep biblical and theological knowledge; faith in Jesus *plus* super-cool spiritual experiences that very few people on this earth ever have; faith in Jesus *plus* strict observance of special religious laws and traditions. We think, "if I'm going to be really tuned in and turned on spiritually, believing the gospel and accepting Jesus is where I *begin*, but then I need to move on to *deeper things* (whatever deeper things might be)."

And when that happens, when we move beyond simple faith in Jesus to something else, those "something elses" become idols to us ... and idols, because they have no power, always leave people empty and disappointed.

This is such a huge problem for Christ-followers that almost all of the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament address this issue in one form or another. For instance, the Corinthians came to believe they needed ecstatic spiritual experiences – they were the original charismatics. The Colossians came to believe they need deeper secret spiritual knowledge – they were the original monks. The Romans believed they needed to keep all the Jewish Laws (since Jesus was Jewish and the Christian faith descended from Judaism. I guess they were the original Baptists).

The Galatians went so far as to believe that they needed to be circumcised in order to experience the approval of God (by definition, that would cut out half of their congregation). Listen to how passionately Paul tries to dissuade them of this idea.

He writes:

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ (not through some law). You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News ...

... but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ. Galatians 1:6-7 (NLT)

And then a little later he writes:

Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death

was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross.

Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the Law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. How foolish can you be?

So ...

After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? Galatians 3:1-3 (NLT)

Why are you adding something to the Gospel – why are you trying to move beyond what God has already done for you in Jesus of Nazareth?

I ask you again, does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law? Of course not! It is because you believe the message you heard about Christ. Galatians 3:5 (NLT)

You start your life in Jesus with belief in the gospel and you continue your life in Jesus with belief in the Gospel. You don't move beyond it. You keep coming back to it again and again. What deepens is your understanding of that Gospel, your appreciation of that Gospel and the application of that Gospel to every issue in your life, but it's still the same basic thing: belief in the Gospel.

Paul's warning to the Galatian people – as well as his warnings to the Colossians and Corinthians and Romans and to us – is that if we move beyond faith in the good news about Jesus, we're setting ourselves up for spiritual misery.

OK, those are the two main problems for practicing Christians when it comes to their spiritual vitality: if we feel weak and lethargic in our relationship with God, it's typically because we have unrealistic expectations of what a single hour can do and/or we've added something else to simply believing the gospel and applying it everywhere in our lives.

So, what I want to do in the time that remains for this message is to talk to you about what exactly the Gospel is and how to apply it even after we've become followers of Jesus and then, we'll talk about three habits that are keys to spiritual vitality *if we use them to actually apply the gospel* to our lives.

The Gospel

So, what is the Gospel? Well, as we know "Gospel" is another way of saying "Good News." The Gospel is Good News from God. But what is that good news?

A lot of people would say that the Gospel is "accept Jesus as your savior and when you die you'll get to go live with Him in Heaven." I would say that's true but only a small part of the truth because Jesus himself defined the Gospel much more broadly.

Remember at the very beginning of his ministry we read that he went around proclaiming to all who would listen:

"The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe this good news!" Mark 1:15 (NIV)

What Jesus was saying to those folks – most of them OT-believing Jews who were looking forward to the day when God

would break into history and set everything right – what Jesus was saying was “all the stuff you expect to happen in the future when God becomes the visible ruler of this world is actually breaking into history right now *in Me* and this is going to happen one life at a time, Jesus was saying. And it can begin in your life if you let it. You can experience something of the renewal and restoration that God’s going to bring at the end *right now, today*. (That’s what “The kingdom of God is near” means).

“The Kingdom of God is near,” Jesus said, “so repent – stop living as if God isn’t really there. Stop thinking, believing and acting as if God doesn’t really care and He’s powerless to change anything until at some point when the whole world changes. Repent of that lie (change your thinking) and believe the truth.”

It was a very relevant message to those people in those days because of their historical situation. They were under the thumb of the Roman Empire and they were looking for this great deliverance. But it’s also a very relevant message to us as well, even to those of us who are Christians. We need to hear and believe “the Kingdom is near and the Kingdom is now,” too, and repent of believing otherwise.

Let me give you an example of why I say that. I do not know any followers of Jesus who are not looking forward to the day when Jesus returns to this earth and we literally get to see God with our own eyes. It’s such an amazing promise, such an amazing vision, and I know that a lot of Christians long for that and they’re fired up about that. We think “it’s going to be so wonderful to be in God’s presence all the time.” But sometimes, I think, we can get so forward looking on that, that we also evidence a lack of belief that “the Kingdom is near and the Kingdom is now.”

After all, the Bible says that if we believe in Christ, we have the Holy Spirit living in us right now. Paul says the Holy Spirit is the deposit of what God is going to do for us one day in the future, which means that we don’t have to wait until then to experience the presence of God. The Holy Spirit is in us right now, all the time.

Do you believe that? It makes a difference if you do. It makes a difference in how you see life. It makes a difference in how you experience life, that the Kingdom is near and the Kingdom is now.

Now, the important thing to understand about the Kingdom and the Gospel is that it is not just wishful thinking. It’s not like Jesus came to give us all a divine pep-talk so that we would be *hopeful* to believe whether it was real or not (“the Kingdom is near! Life sucks, but it’s okay!”) That’s not what Jesus was talking about.

Jesus didn’t come to be a cheerleader for wishful thinking about the Kingdom of God: Jesus came to *do* something to actually *bring* the Kingdom near.

Specifically, we’ve talked about this before, in Jesus’ death on the cross and in his resurrection from the grave, God was judging the sin of the whole world and beginning anew. In the resurrected body of Jesus, God was beginning the process of restoring everything to what it was back in the original creation. That’s what it meant that the Kingdom was near and now. God was beginning the process – in the middle of history, not the end of it – of saving *everything* including you, including me, if we’ll believe.

And what do we have to believe? We have to believe, “I am a sinner” and that “Jesus is the Savior for sinners.”

We have to believe that “I need what Jesus did” and “what Jesus did was to live the life I should have lived (perfection) and died the death I should have died (as a sinner).”

See, the deal is that you cannot be a Christian without those two truths together. You can’t separate those because “I am a sinner” without “Jesus is the Savior”, if all you think about is “yeah, I’m a sinner” you’re going to feel guilty and you’re

going to be driven to somehow atone for your sin before God on your own effort. And, you will ultimately despair because you cannot atone for your sins. You can't even count your sins. You don't even know sometimes when you're sinning. I don't know when I'm sinning. "Jesus is the Savior" without "I am a sinner" also has no meaning because it means Jesus was just a great teacher, probably a pretty good guy, great role model, but he is not the answer to the world's greatest need.

But when you put both of those together, when they collide – "I am a sinner and Jesus is the Savior for sinners" – that's the Gospel and when that happens, everything begins to change for you. God forgives your sin, God declares you righteous in Christ, God gives you eternal life, God adopts you as His child, God ushers you into an intimate relationship with Himself. It's an amazing thing that happens to us.

And a lot of us in this room have experienced the collision of those two truths and it's a wonderful thing. We've had that "salvation experience" with Christ but a lot of us mistakenly believe that now we need to move on to something else.

But we don't because the *implication* of the Gospel – what it says about us – is where the power to experience life-change and spiritual vitality comes from.

And that implication is this: "Though I am far more flawed (and sinful) than I would ever believe, God loves me far more than I can ever imagine."

That's the implication of the Gospel. That's what the Gospel tells us is true about us. The fact that Jesus would die for us, as sinners, proves that it's true.

We can *never* lose sight of that. We have to always keep that truth in front of us. That's the motivation and joy that comes from the Gospel. It's empowering and overwhelming. It changes you when you start to think that way.

Let's put it this way:

If you really want to grow & change, if you really want spiritual vitality and joy in your life, that comes from repenting of your unbelief about who Jesus is and who God is.

It's the same thing we did when we came to the initial point of accepting Jesus.

Let me just show you this from the scripture because I don't want you to think I'm just making this up. There are so many places you can find this principle in the scriptures. Let me just show you one ...

In his letter to the Christians at Rome, Paul writes:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Romans 1:16-17 (NIV)

Now remember, Paul is writing to people who already believe. So I would think he would be saying, "hey, I'm not ashamed to go out and preach the Gospel to all the lost sinful world because it's the power of God for all those *un-believers* so that they can get saved." And that's true, but what Paul is saying is the power of God is in the Gospel, it's the salvation for even those who already believe. Your salvation, every day of your life, whatever the issue is, it's still in the Gospel.

That means that if you're a Christian, you must continue to believe every day, constantly, that God has a plan to renew, restore and regenerate this world and that plan includes you. You have got to continue to believe every day that you are a sinner but Jesus is the savior; you've got to continue to believe that you've messed up but you're forgiven; continue to believe every day that in your human nature, you are weak, but in Christ you are strong; you've got to believe every day that in the eyes of the world you have to prove yourself and your worth, but in God's eyes, you are worthy because He says

so; you've got to continue to believe every day that even though "religion" says you have to obey in order to be accepted, the Gospel says you are accepted and therefore you obey. Always, over and over, you have to beat this kind of thinking into your head. It's the Gospel. It's life for sinners, it's life for converted sinners, and we need it.

Three Habits

So how do you beat this into your head over and over?

That's where the three habits come in – three keys to spiritual vitality *if we use them to actually apply the gospel* to our lives. I say it that way because these habits themselves can become idols – we can start trusting in the fact that we're doing these habits instead of letting these habits lead us to trust Jesus more, to know more of him and the Gospel and his love for us.

And if you've been around NHCC for a while (if you've attended the Introduction to NHCC class or other classes that we do sometimes on spiritual growth) you've probably heard these three habits and you're going to go "oh yeah, I'm familiar with that". And if you've heard them you know that they're not very complex, but these are very powerful because we've seen these over the years how they've made a difference in our lives (those of us who are pastors here) and also in the lives of the people in our church who have adopted these. So here are the three...

1. **Solitude - Time alone with God for the purpose of allowing our hearts to be shaped by the Gospel.**

Now, it's very important to understand that we're not talking about time alone as in isolation, in other words "the world is too much and I've just got to get away from these people, this job, it is just driving me crazy" and just disconnecting and becoming isolated – that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about calling a time out. Fasting from people, fasting from noise, fasting from entertainment, from work, whatever it is, just for a period of time. It may only be 5 minutes a day. It might be an hour a week. However it works for you. Solitude – where you disconnect for the purpose of letting the Gospel message just flow over you again. Let God speak the truth to you about who He is and who you are.

How do you do that? Well, for some people they just go take a walk and just reflect on what they know of the Gospel. For other people, they listen to Christian music or worship music, and the Gospel is in worship music. Some people pray and they say "God would you just remind me, tell me where I'm falling short and remind me again that I am loved and that you saved me and that you're changing me." Bible study, listening to sermons, whatever it takes, it's different for different people, but you've got to stop hearing the world, hearing your own junk out of your own mind, examine where you are trusting something else to be God other than God – and then repent of that and believe that the Kingdom is near and it is now.

I don't know about you, but for me, I *need* this. This is the hardest of the three for me. But the truth is about me (and I'll tell you a little more about this in a minute) - I cannot live without this. I cannot live without regular reminders of who God is, of who I am and what Jesus has done for me. I just need it.

Okay, second key habit is community (and I don't mean community like "we live in the Northland and know all our neighbors"). I'm talking about:

2. **Community – connection with other followers of Jesus that challenges and encourages us to repent and believe the Good News.**

It's a thing that pushes you back toward the Gospel. This might be formal, like you join a small group here at the church. It might be in your family - you live with other folks who are Christians and you can talk at these levels. They understand the Gospel and they are willing to challenge and encourage you in that way. It might be people you work with or people you know from other churches.

Whoever it is and however it happens, it's for the purpose of allowing other people to know enough about you (to know where you're weak) and to have enough trust in them where you allow them to point to things in you about where you are trusting something other than God and then to encourage you to repent of that and to believe the Good News that even though you're still a sinner, still a mess, you are loved and forgiven beyond your wildest dreams.

And I've talked to you before about how this works in my life. I have a friend, he's the pastor at First Baptist Church in Platte City, Rusty Savage. For the last 12 years pretty much every Thursday morning he and I have met at Panera, and this is what we do – I'll come in there, and he knows me, he knows what I whine about, and I'll be whining about something and he'll just kick my butt and say, "Look – what do you believe in? Why are you acting that way? Why do you think that way? You need to repent!" And I do the same thing for him. However it works, you *need* to have this in your life.

Okay, the third habit is ministry. And when I say ministry, a lot of times people think, "oh, you mean like what *you* do, your job." No, that's not what I mean. Ministry is something that *anybody* can do because it's just giving and serving.

3. Ministry: giving and serving so that our hearts will long for others to repent and believe.

That's what we're talking about and that's what is formational about this. Again, this might be something formal you do such as taking a volunteer role here in the Children's ministry or the Arts' ministry (you run a camera) or maybe you give 10% on a regular basis to the ministry of the church. Or ministry might be something informal too, something in the moment, you give a cup of cold water to someone in need.

In either case, however you do this, the goal is to freely offer up something good out of your own life so that other people can have a little taste of what it's like to receive the grace of God – the undeserved and unearned goodness that he lavishes on us in Jesus. And that's what we're trying to do in ministry – to actually experience the Gospel. We share with other people so we can be reminded of what God has done for us.

Okay, those are the three basic habits.

Now, the larger point here is that all three of these things need to be in place in your life if you're going to maintain your spiritual vitality in your relationship with God...

... if want to have a relationship with God that is refreshing and invigorating, you've got to have all three of those. The diagram shows them drawn in a balance, but they will be different for different people - how they are balanced - because some people are extroverts and some are introverts. Personality comes into this. But, the point is, at some level, all three of those things need to be active in your life. And if you find you've only one of those things going on in your life, or maybe two, you're going to be worn out, burned out. So, let me tell you how this works in my life so you can see an example of this.

If I spend a lot of time in solitude (just listening to God; letting God remind me of who He is and who I am) and I spend a lot of time doing ministry (doing my job here) ...

... but I don't have much community, I get arrogant and prideful. I start thinking "it's all up to me. God has this mission for Rick McGinniss and I'm going to get out there and *I've* got to do it." That's because I don't have any people around me who aren't so impressed with me that they won't tell me the truth about me. That's what happens. My life just becomes a mess if I don't have community.

If I have community going on and I've got ministry going on but I don't have any time for solitude ...

... eventually I don't have the emotional capacity to handle the stress of dealing with people. I'm an introvert. I'm a "D" personality on the DISC profile. I'm a task-oriented person by nature and so that's where I start seeing it. I start getting short with people or I start getting jaded about the ministry, "nobody cares, nobody is going to give, nobody is going to serve" and I get this jaded attitude. Guess what – then I have a problem with solitude. I don't have God reminding me that He is the source.

If I have solitude and I have community but I'm not doing any ministry (like if I'm on vacation or whatever), then I get real self-centered.

I don't start thinking that it's all up to me – I start thinking it's all *about* me. I become this fat little pig who just takes it in, "Jesus loves me. God loves me. All these people around me love me," but I'm not doing anything for anybody.

It may work the same way in your life. It probably does. Or it might look different, but the same principle is true. You need all three of those habits going because all three of those things together are keys to your spiritual well-being and your satisfaction in Christ.

So the question I want to ask you is: How is your relationship with God these days? Would you say you are experiencing spiritual vitality, or are you bored? Are you weak? Are you drained? If the answer is, "yeah, that's how I am. I'm kind of bored, weak and drained." Then the question is: do you need to find some balance in these three areas? Are you out of balance? Are you missing one of the three things that would help you? How would you say you're doing in those three areas of community, solitude and ministry?

If you're a believer in Jesus, it's critical that you think about these things and decide how you can integrate these into your life because they bring the Gospel back into your life. They help pound it into your head and into your heart. And you – and I – need the Gospel but we won't get all that we need of it in just one hour a week.

Worship – Reminder of the Gospel

Now, having said *that*, I need to also say that the one hour thing together each weekend ought to help us remember the Gospel and help get it put into us.

Whether you're an observer here – someone who is still investigating the faith and considering what it would mean to actually belong to Jesus – or whether you are a person who is already all-in on Jesus, the one hour a week ought to help explain "here's the deal about the Gospel." Help you remember the Gospel.

So that's what we're going to try to do as we close the service this morning. The band is going to come up and we're going to sing three songs together that I think are going to illustrate some of these truths we've been talking about this morning. The first song is called "Sweetly Broken" and it talks about how Jesus was broken for our sin on the cross and it invites us to be broken in repentance and response. As we sing this song, you might want to be thinking of where you are not believing the good news in your life and where you're still living like "God doesn't care. God doesn't see. God's not involved." And then repent and move on from that.

The second song is called "From the Inside Out" and it reminds us that when we do repent and believe the good news, God's grace and forgiveness has already covered our sin. And He begins to change us from the inside out. He makes us alive – whether it's the first time we've come to that point or the thousandth or the millionth time.

The final song is "Jesus Saves" and it's really up and it's an opportunity to simply rejoice in the Good News that ... Jesus saves!

So, we're going to repent of our unbelief here for a few minutes; we're going to be reminded that we're forgiven and being made alive by God; and then we're going to rejoice. That's applying the Gospel.

Let's pray and then we'll stand together and sing.