

Earthy Spirituality Part 5

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Your Whole Life Matters to God

2 Chronicles 26:1-18

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A few weeks ago I read an article in the NY Times entitled “How the Worm Turns.” The article focused on a bunch of scientists who spend their entire lives studying, identifying and tracking earthworms. That’s right: earthworms. They’re called oligochaetologists. For instance, Dr. Sam James, a researcher at the University of Kansas, has named 80 new earthworm species in the last 20 years. On a trip to Brazil he found the *Fimoscolex sporadochaetus*, an ordinary pinkish-gray worm that was thought to be extinct.

I could tell you more about the fascinating world of oligochaetology but its Mother’s Day so I’ll stop. Anyway, as I read the article I recalled that back in 6th grade I wanted to grow up and become an entomologist and give my life to the study of insects. So as I read this article I thought, *Whew, thank you, God, that I have a good job. I get to be pastor. I don’t have to spend my life studying earthworms.*

But as I studied this passage it hit me that my attitude was dead-wrong. Somehow many of us – including me – have adopted the idea that God is only pleased – or at least more pleased – with what we might call “religious activities.” The assumption behind this view is that there is a split, a gap, a chasm between two realities: the sacred stuff over here and the secular stuff over here. And the secular stuff is less important. It may matter to you but it doesn’t really matter to God. Unfortunately, that means that a huge chunk of our lives has been severed from God’s good plan and purposes for our lives. For instance, the average North American will spend about 88,000 hours (or 40% of your total time on this earth) on a job. And then there are the non-work related duties that we perform every week: going to your job, changing a diaper, fixing a meal, helping a child with homework, studying for an exam, investigating proteins and amino acid, planting flowers, repairing a fence, mowing the lawn, standing in line at the DMV. With a sacred/secular split those 88,000+ hours don’t matter to God – unless you do something sacred, like volunteer at church or read your Bible or share your faith. Unfortunately, with a sacred/secular split we get cut off from the glory of God’s deep and joy-filled purpose for our lives. (Os Guinness story).

But here’s the good news: according to the Bible, God didn’t invent the sacred/secular split. We did. There is a split in the Bible but it’s not a sacred/secular split. It’s a split that goes right down into every human heart: it’s called a sin/righteousness split or a pride/humility split. According to the biblical story, your whole life matters to God; your whole life is charged with glory and purpose and goodness; your whole life is meant to be a joy-filled offering to serve God and love your neighbor.

That’s exactly what we find in this ancient story tucked away in your Bible. It’s a story of how our whole life matters to God. It’s a story that denies a sacred/secular split and points us to an incredibly good God who wants us to enjoy all of life. But it also contains

a warning: there is a sin/righteousness split, a proud/humble split, and it tells us: watch out! It's disastrous to be on the wrong side of that split.

This is a story grounded in real events and real history. The timeframe begins 790 years before the birth of Jesus. In 790 B.C. Uzziah, the 16 year old son of his father Amaziah and his mother Jecoliah, has been crowned king of Judah. He will reign for 52 years. Imagine that: have you ever stayed at one job for 52 years? Imagine if we had a really good president (oops, that didn't sound good) and he stayed in office for over 50 years. We're told that Uzziah was on the right side of the sin/righteousness split. See verse 4, 5 – "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord ... He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the Lord, God gave him success."

First, notice Uzziah's commitment: he sought the Lord (mentioned twice). That serves as the framework for everything he did – so whether he was rebuilding a city or meeting for Bible study with his mentor or digging cisterns to supply the country with fresh water or organizing the army or making new inventions for national defense or digging in the dirt – flowed out of that basic posture towards God. He sought God in everything.

Secondly, he put some teeth into his spiritual life by meeting with a spiritual mentor named Zechariah. There are over thirty Zechariah's mentioned in the Bible, so we don't know who this is. We do know that he was a spiritual mentor for Uzziah. He gave him a vision for God. He taught him to love and respect God. Here's where we see Uzziah clearly standing on the right side of that proud/humble split. He's the king. He can do whatever he wants. He doesn't need a mentor. He commands and controls everyone in the kingdom. Everyone respects him and honors him, but Uzziah willingly chooses to submit himself to the instruction and authority of Zechariah. There's a principle here: when it comes to our spiritual life, we all need someone to encourage us and (if necessary) to get in our face. No one advances beyond this. Who is your Zechariah? Who is giving you a vision for God? Who challenges you? (My friend Mike).

So out of this basic commitment to seek the Lord in everything, to keep growing – even to the point of inviting Zechariah to be his spiritual mentor – what mattered to God from Uzziah's life? Now notice that when the Holy Spirit breathed this portion of the Bible into being we don't find a record of Uzziah's spiritual activities; instead, we have a list of his business and political duties and accomplishments. In verse 2 we're told that he "rebuilt Elath." Why is that significant? The city of Elath is now known as Eilat, a resort city on the shores of the Red Sea. Archeological digs on this site show that it was an industrial center with the mining of copper and iron. It was also an important shipping center that connected Judah with the rest of the world. King Solomon built it up but then it was destroyed. Uzziah wrested it from the hands of the Edomites and then he rebuilt it to provide a strategic gateway for trade.

Now let me ask: is rebuilding a city a God-honoring activity? Absolutely! I have some friends who live near Detroit, a city known for its crime and burnt-out tenements and ugliness. People have fled the city in droves, moving to the bland but safe suburbs. Now

some investors are rebuilding sections of downtown Detroit with beautiful condos and restaurants and museums. Is this a spiritual activity? Does it matter to God? Yes, God cares about rebuilding cities. People live in cities and God loves people. And I hope that followers of Jesus are moving into the city of Detroit as an act of worship. Your whole life matters to God.

What else did Uzziah accomplish that mattered to God? He defended his country. See verse 6. This makes us uncomfortable: Do we really have to talk about war at church? I can't tell you that every single war is a just and good war. I can't tell you that there is one and only one Christian view of, say, the war in Iraq. But, on the other hand, I've sat and talked for countless hours with veterans of World War II and I'm convinced that they helped save the world. Literally. It's an honor to defend a country, to fight for freedom, to protect those who are weak and vulnerable. Everything worthwhile in life – freedom, a country, a family, a marriage - has to be fought for. Does that matter to God? Is it charged with God's glory and good purpose? Yes, your whole life matters to God.

Look at verse 9 – “Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate, at the valley Gate and at the angle of the wall, and he fortified them. He also built towers in the desert and dug many cisterns because he had much livestock in the foothills and in the plains.” Again, this is not referring to Uzziah's spiritual successes; it's referring to Uzziah the civil engineer. These people are living in a semi-desert climate. How are they going to get water? Well, King Uzziah built towers in the desert and then collected the water in cisterns. Is this important? Does it matter to God? Was it a high and holy calling to serve the kingdom as a civil engineer providing a system to collect and store clean water? Absolutely! Do you think the professional clergy are going to collect water? No, they don't have the calling or the expertise. Collecting water matters to God.

Then there's a wonderful little phrase at the end of verse 10 – “he loved the soil.” Why did he love the soil? It doesn't say he loved it because it provided the necessary nutrients to grow crops. Based on a straightforward reading of the text I get the sense that he loved it because he just loved it. Soil was fun and challenging and interesting for its own sake. It's like someone who likes fishing or needlepoint or soccer or composing a jazz piece or making a soufflé. It's just fun. (Story of a friend of mine who loved fishing. The first time I met him I thought he couldn't possibly be a good Christian because he seemed obsessed with fishing. Now I consider him one of the most Christ-like men that I've ever met – and I wish I was as passionate about a hobby as he is).

I meet so many people who are afraid of God. They think that if they get very serious about religion or God or Jesus or church, that their life will become miserable and bland and dry. Let me be honest: following Jesus is not easy. There is a price tag. He will tamper with your whole life. But here's the good news: the God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ is incredibly good and He has good purposes for us. Here's a God who says, “I made dirt so why don't you go play with it.” This is a spirituality of dirt. What do you have that's like dirt – it's just good for its own sake? Do you enjoy art or writing a paragraph or cooking or biking or running or fishing or decorating or playing the guitar or watching soccer? About two years ago I realized that I've spent the last twenty years

dutifully doing my job but I don't have anything that's good for its own sake – like soil. So I've decided (my wife hasn't heard this yet) to start saving money for a Harley – or an equivalent. So if anyone has a used motorcycle for a reduced price, drop me an email on Monday morning. Seriously, did you ever realize that our God is that good? Even our hobbies matter to God. They reflect something of the glory and goodness and joy of the Lord.

Read verses 11-14. I want us to notice the incredible organizational and administrative skills involved in these verses. Someone had to count and track and keep records of all of this. Someone had to organize the 307,500 soldiers under the 2,600 leaders. Someone had to order, make and distribute the shield and spears and helmets. Does God care about good administration and record keeping and organization? Yes. Every time you use your administrative skills to balance your budget or plan your family's vacation or to start a new company, you are serving God and serving your neighbor in a way that pleases God.

Finally, notice verse 15. What were these? This translation suggests that they were a catapult of some kind. But the Israeli general and scholar Yigael Yadin contends that these “*devices*” refer to special structures added to towers and battlements. We have archeological evidence of similar structures from the end of the eighth century in Judean city of Lachish. They were most likely wooden frames into which round shields were inserted. These huge shields formed a protective barrier behind which archers and stone-throwers could safely stand instead of crouching awkwardly.

Now the important thing to note is that Uzziah invented these devices. God didn't just want him doing religious duties; God allowed and encouraged and blessed Uzziah's use of imagination and ingenuity to develop a brand new invention. Do you have a creative, imaginative streak within you? Your creativity matters to God. Maybe you'll be involved in finding a creative new drug for cancer ... Do you want to invent new devices or try new ways of doing things at work or create new works of art or music? Does this even matter to God? Yes, God cares about beauty and excellence and creativity.

Notice that God doesn't have a line dividing the sacred and the secular. It can all be an offering to him; you can seek God in all of it. But notice that there is a very clear line in this passage: the line between sin and righteousness and the line between pride and humility. For most of his life Uzziah has been on the right side of that line (see verses 4-5). But you can see a storm coming in this story. On three occasions we're told that Uzziah grew powerful (verses 8, 15 and now in verse 16). He was successful – not just in one area but in areas as diverse as urban renewal, national defense, civil engineering, new inventions and even in his hobbies. So three times we read that he became powerful. Let me just stop and ask: Have you become powerful? Do people view you as a successful person? Have you experienced success in your business or practice or studies? That's a good thing, but the question is this: What will you do with your success? Are you on the right side of the pride/humility line – because if you're on the wrong side, you're life is in big trouble. This incident probably happened when Uzziah was around 50 years old. He's at mid-life, half-time. He had experience, fame and success but notice the next line in verse 16 – “his pride led to his downfall.” As we would say, his success and power

went to his head. Did you notice what pride does to us? It lies to us. We think we're going up when really we're headed down.

Like any good Jew of his day, Uzziah knew where his power and authority stopped. He knew the boundaries. God had told a group of people called the Levites to take care of worship. It was their God-given job. Uzziah is clearly overstepping his bounds. Remember back in verse 5 when Uzziah had Zechariah to train him in the fear of the Lord? Now Uzziah has no one to get in his face. He doesn't listen to anyone. He does not receive specific instruction and correction. In a word, he's arrogant. Notice his downfall doesn't come until he's given a chance to repent, but he ignores it. Here's another incredibly good thing about God: he always offers us a chance to repent, to change our minds, to grow deeper. God always extends his hand out to us and says, "I know you've messed up; I know you've wandered off the path, but here's my hand. Take it. I'll lead you back on the right track." Now, people may not always do that for you. People may cut you off and cast you out, but God doesn't do that. Even when Jesus was dying on the cross, he looked at the very ones who were crucifying him and he cried out, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." Uzziah is offered God's grace and he refuses it (see verse 19).

Which side are you on – sin/righteousness or pride/humility? Where do you stand? Is your heart proud and arrogant? Does it matter? It will matter – if you're proud, you think you're going up but you're really going down. Watch out! Here's the problem: we keep slipping into the wrong side of that line. How do I know if my life is acceptable before a righteous and holy God? God has provided the way ...

Jesus died not only to forgive your sins, but to remake the world. Most of us who grew up in the church or in some kind of religious system learned that Jesus died so we could have our sins forgiven and go to heaven. That is wonderfully true, but that's only the start of it all. Jesus died to remake the world and you. That's why when you trust in Jesus as your Savior you become a new creation (read 2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus died so that your whole life can become right with God – your whole life can become an offering to God.

Every legitimate vocation is equally acceptable to God. There are no sacred/secular distinctions. My friend Willis Finifrock from Minnesota show up every Sunday morning with grease and oil on his hands because he stayed up half the night fixing furnaces. Is that a high and holy calling? Yes. Who else will fix your furnace on a cold night in Minnesota? Willis can. Every time I saw Willis with those grease-streaked hands, I felt like I was standing on holy ground. Bob H. – I sat in on his lectures and listened attentively to descriptions of amino acids and lipids and proteins I thought, "My gosh, this is astounding! Someone has to tell other people about this. Someone has to explain this to people."

All of life becomes an act of worship and an opportunity to serve and please God. Colossians 3:17 – Marked by excellence, creativity, inventiveness and joy.

The commitment to the church. Ephesians 3:20.

Commission people to their jobs.