



Embodiment in Community; Soul and Culture Notes and Questions
Loss of Transcendence
Dr. James Houston
Lesson 14

Dr. Houston continues with the theme of session 13 that being in love with God gives rise to the desire to experience the intimacy of love's touch (Song of Songs 1:2). He gives the example of the contrast of Gregory of Nyssa's (335-394 A.D.) [1] embodiment of faith (Matthew 5:8) with its absence in contemporary Christian scholarship. Gregory's experiences awoke his accurate empathic affection for who God is. Through communion with God he overcame learned corrupted affections in his family experience, which developed into more accurate empathic affections. This capacity for accurate empathic affections came from differentiating and Integrating true affections from the corrupted. God's Grace puts us in touch with the memory of the true image the Father gave us prior to our birth. The image of His transcendent love has been: 1) tainted by the nature of our family experience, 2) tainted by our response towards faith in our family, 3) and tainted from our experience of not finding the hope of what we truly seek in our family experiences. The sense of what is missing, Augustine asserted, will be rewarded with finding what we seek by persevering in our faith with an openness towards our transcendent memory of our heavenly Father, who first loved us as we should have been loved.

Consistent with Augustine's inward journey towards memory of our heavenly Father's empathic love towards us, Dr. Houston himself shares how he was struck by his own transcendent admiration of Gregory's affection for his older sister's faith. Gregory, rather than choosing to experience Cain's envy over Abele's favor with the Father's love (Genesis 4:1-8), or the older brother's envy in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25-30), exemplified instead the embodiment of his purity of heart through his transcendent memory of the Father's love expressed in the admiration he held for his sister. Instead of envy, Gregory was attracted towards the depth of his sister's faith. Such empathic love for her became the embodiment of his own experience of his heavenly Father's empathic love for him. His transcendent memory of the Father's love broke into his consciousness.

Session 14, Question 1: How has your family experience shaped the tangibility of your faith?

Dr. Houston links Gregory's example to teach us that embodiment of our faith is developed from our spiritual friendships. He frames it as having two pairs of eyes to obtain a wider range of view to the reality of God's presence in ourselves and our neighbor. When we see Gregory's emphasis towards friendships in the early Church, we begin to realize what the early Church meant by embodying the body of Christ as the Church. Spiritual friendships are the building blocks of accurate emotional insights that make the body of Christ tangible. Gregory, through his friendship with his sister, became aware of the central role spiritual friendships have for developing knowledge of God and ourselves. He also became aware of other complimentary forms of embodiment, such as to live in the harmony of music, or to live in the presence of the poetic.

Session 14, Question 2: In what ways have you felt the embodiment of your faith through the communion of spiritual friendships, music, or the poetic?

Embodiment of our faith is much larger than saying I have my body, my sense of self, and I seek to relate with you. This would be a self-centered way of viewing it. To enter into empathic communion with someone and something other than ourselves is much more. Every culture or person can provide new cultural lens through which to understand ourselves, as well as expose ways in which we misunderstand ourselves.

An example of a culture's distorted understanding of itself occurred in the Renaissance. We can see the riches and practices of commerce by the Venetians through the eyes of Dante. The play writer Ruzzante recounts what Dante saw in the 16th Century. A dead man reports on the encounter with two paradises in the world beyond: one for those who live the active virtuous life and deserve to be served with good wine, dine well, and do whatever they please. The second paradise is for the saints who by the practice of abstinence do not eat and drink. Heaven is split in two dimensions. You enter into a paradisaal belief that paradise is the all-important place and reward for the practice of only your soul's morality. Knowledge of God and ourselves is not the motivation and purpose. The goal is to avoid hell, because it denies

access to all the material benefits of paradise. To avoid hell, you have to climb out from the dangers of hellfire and up a ladder of seven virtues to escape the purgatory of the pit.

Session 14, Question 3: What is your view of paradise?

The image depicted in Ruzante's play of a materialistic fulfillment in paradise is what Dante is fighting against. Dante had a conversion experience that changed him from being a worldly merchant and politician into becoming a pilgrim. After his escape to avoid the inferno, he gives us a completely different view of Satan and of the life of the Christian. The Christian is a homeless exile and pilgrim, cleansed of the old imagery of Ruzante's play. Satan is no longer seen in the inferno of a fiery furnace; the inferno is now an ice-locked lake. Satan is imprisoned in his ultimate narcissism. Hell is a self isolated in itself for the sake of itself. Dante's critique is a condemnation of today's narcissistic culture. Ultimate narcissism is what Hell is. In contrast, the Christian soul is a soul created in the image of the Holy Trinity created to be in accurate empathic relationships with each other, rather than a self-enclosed self for itself. The Christian soul is moved by a countercultural desire that is in opposition to the satanic desire for self-enclosure in a hellish narcissistic reality. [2] For Dr. Houston Hell is modern America. Satan is the great beast frozen in itself.

Session 14, Question 4: What is your view of Hell?

We are all affected by the consequences of the absence and distortions of divine experiences in our families. Dr. Houston's childhood experience resulted in being afflicted with deep insecurities that haunted him into adulthood. He frames his identity struggle as being afraid to breath and take away other people's oxygen supply. However, the more he came to know God, the more his fears subsided and turned to boldness. Like most of us, he has a tendency to generalize his family experience on to others. For example, he refers to Europe between 1347 to 1547 as driven only by fear of the Black death. He makes no mention of anything else in their lives. We are given a view of Europe tainted with his bias towards fear. He goes further to generalized fear

today as a physiological phenomenon by partnering with a medical psychiatrist Ted George to write a book on fear. Human relational struggles from fear are reduced to chemical productions in the brain's lower thalamus. He constructs a belief system with Ted George that reduces fear to parts of the brain, because an area in the brain flash red on a monitor when fear is experienced.

Reducing fear to physiology removes accountability for the origins of the fear we experience. Simplistic descriptions conveniently seek to explain away and deny this unconscious feeling of accountability. Unconscious guilt, daily violations of a congenital memory of right from wrong, of knowing what empathic love is while not practicing it, are conveniently neglected. Rather than facing the transcendent origin of our fears, the rationalizations of the Ostridge policy are preferred. The biblical origin of fear is fear of the lost eternal intimacy between God and ourselves. Fear is not a primary response due to physiology. As seeds of Adam, fear has a transcendent connection and is a secondary response to violating a heavenly relationship prior to our birth. Scripture refers to it as the fig leaf syndrome after the Fall. By error of omission Dr. Houston is neglecting the transcendent origins of fear with what he teaches elsewhere on the lives of the Saints.

Reducing fear to mechanical brain functions neglects the clinical evidence of rigorous psychoanalytic observation of human psychopathology. A classic book on schizophrenia concluded that fear results from a Need-Fear Dilemma. [3] Fear is a human emotion driven by the fear of not receiving what is desired most: an infinite need of advanced accurate empathic love that transcends fear of death (Song of Songs 8:6-7). The terror of these infinite needs not being met is unbearable. For the Christian, God's intervening grace is indispensable to overcome the inevitable idolatrous and compensatory substitutes we choose to contain the anxiety from birth in this world. To overcome this fear of intimacy with our maker our hearts need to experience our maker's empathic love again for who He made us to be from the beginning. It is communicated through accurate empathic love expressed by God through His Holy Spirit, which personally reveals Himself through His Son and His witness through human history. The secular understanding of "*the need-fear dilemma*" was well understood by William of St. Thierry in the 12th century, who said sin is where we run away from God. It is where we sin, where we run away from Him, that we find the clues to finding our way back to Him and the self He foresaw of us before the Fall. [4] Transcendent fear is the consequence of the human condition after the Fall from being created in the image of God.

My childhood experience was different from Dr. Houston's. I grew up in an extremely narcissistic family environment. I was driven by an early desire for authentic empathic

relationships, which did not mix with the compensatory impulse to narcissistically collude in the family. Like the idiot in Dostoyevsky's novel, being rejected due to my desires and expectations for accurate empathic affections was deeply painful. However, by God's grace, my desire for authentic relationships was stronger than my transcendent fear of the pain of being abandoned in a world without authenticity. I resisted my family's narcissistic collusions and became identified as the black sheep. Rather than being driven by the fear of my oxygen supply being taken away from me, I hoped to connect with a deeper tenderness hidden in my family's defenses. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I sought to cut off their narcissistic oxygen supply to reach what they were avoiding. However, my best efforts mostly failed. The few times I succeeded was enough to preserve my hope to persevere, but at the painful cost of experiencing rejection and fear of abandonment. Later in life, through God's grace, I was enabled to become aware of the difference between myself and memory of the Lord's presence in my heart. I identified with St. Augustine's understanding that fear is a secondary transcendent impulse. [5] Fear is a byproduct of a fallen unmet desire for intimacy with God. Desire of intimacy with God and each other is the deepest unmet need that transcends everything else.

We are created in the image of the Holy Trinity (Genesis 1:26-27) and come into the world with a memory of having been loved before by our heavenly Father. Since the Fall of Adam, we are the offspring of his seed and have lost memory of our Father's empathic love imprinted in the depths of our soul. Like Adam and Eve, we are plagued by this basic fear of intimacy. We cover our most intimate parts with a fig leaf to compensate for the lost memory of the Father's love (see parable of the prodigal son). Memory of His love is lost in our consciousness. However, it is not completely forgotten, since it is recognizable in the guilt we hide. The memory is unconsciously present in our fallen attachments towards substitutes that are used to deny the intimacy we fear. Memory of the Father's love is in our D.N.A. (1 John 4:19), as 95% of the world's population seek some form of God. Few are those who find their way back to this lost intimacy (Matthew 22:14) mediated by Father's Son, the second Adam, (1 Corinthians 15:45) and recognized from experiencing the accurate empathic love of His Holy Spirit (John 3:5-6, 14:26).

Session 14, Question 5: How has your family experience helped or hindered your sense of relationship with your heavenly Father?

Notes:

[1] Gregory of Nyssa was an erudite bishop and theologian who made significant contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity and the Nicene Creed. Gregory's philosophical writings were influenced by Origen.

[2] Interestingly Jean Paul Sartre, the French atheist and existentialist philosopher, defined hell in such terms. He was influenced by the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard influenced many, including Dr. Houston who stated him as one of his top three favorite authors. He influenced Dr. Houston's view of the family's effect on our interpretation of God. Kierkegaard himself was influenced by Augustine's developmental memory of the Father's empathic love. Augustine's influence can be seen in these three Kierkegaard quotes: *"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards. Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced. Once you label me you negate me."*

[3] Schizophrenia and the Need-fear Dilemma, a book by Arthur I. Gladstone and Donald L. Burnham.

[4] The Golden Epistle and The Enigma of Faith by William of St. Thierry.

[5] The secular Neo-Freudian Michael Balint moved away from Freud and identified through clinical observation that empathic love is the primary human need. He concluded narcissism is a secondary compensatory motivation that seeks to fill the absence of what he called Primary Love.