

**“Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World”**  
*Spiritual Maturity and Seeing Gray*

Today we’re continuing a message series called, "Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black-and-White World." In this part we’re going to focus specifically on growing spiritually. Now, actually every message, every Sunday, is about helping us to grow spiritually, but today we are going to focus on how spiritual maturity is also a place of gray.

Sometimes we might wish that everything was black and white, easy, clear-cut answers. But not much of life is that way.

**“Black and White in Christianity”** Black and white when it comes to faith is our desire for certainty. “I want to know what is true. I want to know **exactly** what God is like. I want to know **exactly** what God’s will is for my life. I don’t want to wonder. I don’t want to have to question. I don’t want to trust. I just want to know. I want certainty.” Do you ever have those kinds of thoughts? Wouldn’t it be nice to just have certainty?

The challenge is that faith doesn’t work that way. Faith is not the same thing as certainty! Certainty is **knowing** beyond a shadow of a doubt. Faith is **trusting**. Those two things don’t necessarily go together and yet sometimes that’s what we want. Sometimes we just want the answers. Sometimes you want me to give you the answers. I’m not afraid to tell you what I believe, but mostly I want to encourage you to think for yourself. I want to encourage you to take the Scriptures, listen for the voice of the Spirit, listen to what your brothers and sisters have to say and to use your own mind to bring all those together in terms of understanding.

Absolute certainty would be great, but certainty doesn’t always fit in with faith. And at times it can cause some serious damage.

When we insist on certainty and black-and-white for our faith then we find ourselves getting to a place where we know, that we know, that we know, that this is the way it is, and everybody else who sees it differently, at the least, is wrong and possibly they are evil. In the Christian church we can get so wrapped up in our certainty that we start to freak out about small matters of doctrine or theology and then we divide over them. Within the Christian faith we have a long history of dividing and separating from one another.

Today in America there are more than 3,000 different Christian denominations. There are tens of thousands of nondenominational churches who couldn’t find a single other church to join up with in a denomination! In the Christian faith, when we get into black-and-white thinking we tend to either oversimplify or we polarize and divide.

On more than one occasion I’ve had people tell me that if you’re not a certain denomination, you’re going to hell. You’re not really a Christian. Protestants have done that to Catholics. Catholics have done that to protestant. Some Fundamentalist Protestants have done it to all the other Protestants AND Catholics.

But so many of these people who are different from us still call upon the name of Jesus, receive the sacraments, they try to live a life of love, they claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, they try to listen to the Holy Spirit at work in their lives, they read the same Scriptures! Is there still something else they have to do in order to be considered a follower of Christ?

Some may talk about their faith differently, but I have met an awful lot of people, from a wide variety of Christian traditions, who are deeply committed Christians.

Nicky Gumbel tells the story about a small town where the churches decided to have a city-wide worship service. They decided to have it at the local Baptist church and the preacher there was known to be pretty exclusive and kind of gruff. When the day came it was mostly just Baptists who showed up.

The preacher stood up and looked out over the people and said, “How many of you here today are Baptists?” Everybody raised their hand, except one older woman. The preacher looked at that one woman and said, “If you’re not a Baptist, what are you?” The woman said, “Well, I’m a Methodist.” The preacher smirked and decided to have a little fun. He said, “Well, tell me, **why** are you a Methodist?” She said, “Well, I suppose because my grandfather was a Methodist and my father was a Methodist.” The preacher laughed and said, “Well what if your grandfather was moron, and your father was a moron, what would that make you then?” The woman thought for a second and said, “Well, I suppose that would make me a Baptist.”

Now you know I don’t think that way! But we have a way of doing this to one another which is why I think when Jesus was praying the night before he was crucified, when he was filled with such anxiety that he sweat drops of blood, he prayed these words in John 17. **“May [they] be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them...” (John 17:22-23, NIV).**

Why did he have to pray that except that he knew what would happen. When I think of how we have divided as denominations and as Christians over matters of doctrine and theology I can’t help but wonder if Jesus looks at us and thinks, "When did you become the Pharisees? How did you become the very thing that I was fighting against?" In

Matthew 23 Jesus says: **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:23-24, NIV).**

This is how we are. We tend to nitpick and strain out these little points of doctrine and we divide from one another and we look down our noses at someone else, but in the process we miss out on what Christ actually called us to live like. We no longer live a life of love or pursue the things that are really important.

When we talk about spiritual maturity and seeing gray, it's the capacity to look at people who are in different places theologically and spiritually than yourself and say, "You are still my brother in Christ and I have something to learn from you. You are still my sister in Christ and I have something to learn from you." I know that some of my deepest spiritual moments, some of the pieces of wisdom that I truly treasure, have come from pastor friends who are Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic, and non-denominational.

I have two children and they are both very different from each other. They like to do different things and they each relate to me differently. Every once in a while they'll get in a little pretend argument as they sit on my lap, They'll start saying to each other, "My daddy." "No, MY daddy." "No, MY daddy." I think they're kidding. But is it true? Do I belong to one them and not the other? Do I love one of them more than the other? Of course not! I love them both the same and I treasure the fact that they are different. I celebrate their uniqueness and I'm grateful for their differences.

Gray is that capacity to look at people who are different from you and who disagree with you and say, "We might disagree but I still love you. I am not going to be so undone by the little things, those places where we differ, and instead I'm going to actually listen to you. I'm going to listen to what you have to say and maybe my own faith might be strengthened as a result." This requires humility. It requires grace and a willingness to listen.

This leads to another major division defining Christianity and that's the division between liberals and conservatives. **Liberal and Conservative Christians.** This is a division that we see currently among Christians but it's not just a 20th century phenomenon. It's been going on since the beginning of Christianity.

In the very beginning of Christianity the conservatives and liberals were known as Legalists and Libertines. The first eight chapters of Romans, the third chapter of Philippians, the entire letter of Galatians, and probably the letter of James were written to address the theological debate within the early church between the Liberals and the Conservatives. And the debates are largely the same today! Is the faith just about obeying the rules, or is it all about grace? Is the Bible the literal, error-free word of God, or is it just the words of human beings? That has implications. Should women be silent in church as the Scriptures say, or were those words for a specific church and time? Is the faith **just** about winning souls at any cost, or is it **just** about helping the poor and the outcasts? These were the polarities of the faith 2,000 years ago, and they still are today!

Over the years I've wrestled with this. I've looked at these two groups and I wondered if these were my only choices. Is it really that you are either a flaming liberal or radical fundamentalist? Or is there some middle ground here? For me and for millions of other Christians around the world it seems as if the answer was somewhere in between these two extremes. Yes, we need holiness but we also need grace. We need the social gospel which calls us to address the issues happening in our world. But without a personal relationship with Jesus, we don't have the power to actually go do and sustain anything.

Yes, the Bible is the inspired word of God, but it was also written by human beings and the interplay between the divine and the human helps us make sense of a lot of the challenging passages in Scripture. The Bible doesn't have to be black and white in every place because it's meant to be a living Word.

It seems to me that if all we have is the gospel of the right end of the conservative we have a faith that is imbalanced. Likewise, if we have a gospel that's only representing what the liberals propose then we have a faith which is imbalanced in the other direction.

Ideally, if you can bring those two together, and they could counterbalance one another, you might have a faith which is rich and captures the fullness of who God is, and the fullness of the call of Jesus Christ on our lives. That place of balance is what we call gray.

The ability to hold these two different things together is sometimes called conjunctive faith. This leads us directly to the issue of spiritual maturity. James Fowler, a psychologist and theologian at Emory University in Atlanta studied people's spiritual development in depth for many years. He wrote a book called **Stages of Faith**. This book is not gospel truth but it's a very helpful metaphor for us to think about our spiritual life. Fowler identified six stages of faith development and said that as we grow up we have the possibility to mature through different stages.

I want to capture these for you briefly and you will find them listed in your notes. **“Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective. Stage 2: Mythical-Literal”** Fowler described these first two stages as what happens to children when they are coming to faith. Small children hear about God and even sense God, but at this stage faith is very literal and we need something concrete and so we see that God is a person that you can see and touch.

Over the years I've had a few kids point at me and say something like, "Mommy, look, there's God! Daddy, look, there's Jesus!" I keep waiting for the lightning to strike as they say that! Todd Taylor our Director of Children's Ministries gets that all the time. But for kids, Jesus must be a person who works in a church who talks about faith things. The faith of children tends to be very literal and based in large part upon what you as parents or Sunday School teachers tell them to believe.

Fowler called **stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional Faith**. We reach stage three in our older elementary or teenage years. In stage three we begin to adopt the faith of our peers. That's why your peer group is so important in your teenage years. If we end up hanging around kids with no faith then we often end up saying there is no God. If we're hanging around with kids who do have faith then we tend to feel like there is a God.

In High School my friend Rodney was very influential in my faith journey. I looked up to him and remember wanting to model my faith exactly like his. I wanted the same kind of Bible he had, I wanted to read the same books he read, I wanted to think like him and have faith like his. He was patterning his faith after our youth director. So I was following Rodney, who was following David, who was following Jesus. It was a wonderful faith, but it was kind of removed from me.

This can be very beautiful and Fowler says that some people never leave behind Stage 3 faith because it is simple and beautiful. But it's a faith that's often unexamined. We don't really ask questions of it. We don't dig deeper. It is not necessarily a faith that we have owned but rather we have adopted it from someone else.

Fowler called **stage 4 Individuistic-Reflective Faith**. At this stage you begin to ask questions of your faith. You begin to really wrestle with your faith and you wonder if what you believe is really true. You start wondering, "Does my faith really work? Does this really make sense to me? Do I believe because I believe or do I believe because someone else believes?"

A person can enter this stage at any time in young adulthood from age 18 to well into their 40's.

For me the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 happened my Junior year of college. I spent that year in Japan as an exchange student. That was the time in my life where I was questioning everything, looking at other religions. I got on the plane to Japan and said something like, "God if you're real, and you want me, come and get me." I didn't go to church, I pretty much put away my Bible, and distanced myself from the beliefs I'd held my whole life. I allowed myself to think that maybe there was no God at all. In stage 4 old ways so of looking at God and faith don't work, but unbelief doesn't work either. It's a stage of uncertainty and disillusionment. It can be a stage of skepticism and exploration. It can be a stage of spiritual depth and wonder. It's a stage where what you thought you knew, you realize you don't.

A lot of the time people move from Stage 3 to Stage 4 during a tragedy. When a tragedy happens in your life and suddenly your faith that was unexamined no longer fits, you find yourself saying, "Now where do I go?"

Listen to this letter from a woman named Kathy who shares about what happened to her faith after the death of her three-year-old son in a car accident. *"I had people tell me that it was my son's time. I was having a hard time believing in a God who would plan to take my child at age 3. I learned that tragedies were not necessarily a part of God's plan, but that God gave us free will and sometimes bad things happen in this life. Understanding this helps me to turn to God instead of away from him. Since my son's death I believe that my faith has grown and continues to grow. His death changed the way I view God and my faith. I no longer have a naïve, childlike faith where God protects you from all harm and makes everything okay. It's a deeper faith which has been tested through tragedy. I know that God doesn't promise me a pain-free life, but he does promise to always be there to love me, comfort me and guide me. My faith gives me something people without faith don't have—hope—hope for the future—hope in the knowledge that one day I will see my son again."*

Because stage 4 is one of discomfort, many people long to move on, but are skeptical that it's possible. But that's often what leads to **stage 5 which is what he called, "conjunctive Faith."** Conjunctive Faith is when you are able to deal with paradox. Your faith becomes broader and wider than it had been before. Your faith is able to deal with complexity. You're able to hold things together that seemed to be opposites and you say, "I think there is truth in both of these things. I think there is truth in two places and they don't have to be mutually exclusive."

It's the capacity to see the world with mystery and recognize that you won't understand everything there is to know about God, and that's okay. It comes with a certain measure of humility and a great deal of grace.

People who are in stage 5, who have been Christians a long time, might say something like, "The more I know, the more I realize I don't know. The longer I'm a Christian, the bigger God seems and the smaller I seem to be, and the smaller my 3 pounds of gray matter seems to be, as I try to fully comprehend the mystery of God. But I'm okay with that and I trust him and I love him and I will seek to follow him and know more about him. But I'm okay with the fact that I probably don't have it all figured out and I probably never will."

One person who seems to me to be an example of someone who has moved into stages 5 and 6 is **Billy Graham**. Billy Graham is amazing as you look at the transformation over his life from when he was first leading his crusades until today. He's led more people to faith in Christ than anyone else who has ever lived. People on the far left and people from the far right have found inspiration in Billy Graham.

The magazine *Christian Century* had an interview with Billy Graham several years ago. He said, "*I am now aware that the family of God contains people of various ethnological, cultural, class and denominational differences. Within the true Church there is a mysterious unity that overrides all divisive factors. In groups, which in my ignorant piousness I formerly frowned upon, I have found men so deeply dedicated to Christ, and so in love with the truth that, I have felt unworthy to be in their presence. I have learned that although Christians don't always agree, they can disagree agreeably. And that is what is most needed today. It is for us to show an unbelieving world that we love one another.*"

*Newsweek Magazine* did a cover story on Billy Graham in 2006. The author John Meacham, wrote this: *Billy Graham as an evangelist still is unequivocally committed to the Gospel but increasingly thinks God's ways and means are veiled from human eyes and wrapped in mystery. Graham says, "There are many things I don't understand." He does not believe that Christians need to take every verse of the Bible literally.*

*"Sincere Christians," he says, "can disagree about the details of Scripture and theology. I am not a literalist in the sense that every single jot and tittle comes from the Lord. This is a little difference in my thinking through the years."*

Listen, that's not a little difference in thinking! That's a monumental shift. This is a picture I think of spiritual maturity—grace, humility and a capacity to allow mystery.

Here's what's interesting: Fowler says you usually don't reach this stage until you're 40 or older, but I find an increasingly number of young people is in this exact place. I hear many young people saying, "I don't want your canned answers and your pat responses to faith. I am not interested in your certainties. I don't think it's an either/or kind of world. I believe the truth has to be somewhere in between the two." This is exactly why I think that there are a number of young people who find their spiritual home in a place like this—because we have a view to the gospel that recognizes the gray.

Fowler says that most of us will not reach **stage 6** in this life but it's at least what we strive for. He calls it "**Universalizing Faith**". This is when we completely empty ourselves, and we're focused only on other people and on God all the time. We seek to love God in every situation and to honor God above all else. We're no longer concerned with ourselves and whether we are right and someone else is wrong. As we look at other people our primary motivation is to express love to them. Not very many people reach that in this life, but it's what we strive for.

The apostle Paul puts it this way: **And now faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.**

Spiritual maturity is trusting with childlike faith AND growing in faith so you can love God and neighbor in an imperfect world with shades of gray.

As I describe these stages of faith, do they ring true? Is there one where you say, "That sounds like me. That sounds like where I am right now." Listen carefully, one stage is not better than another. It's not about arrogance or competition. But I challenge myself and I challenge you, to pay attention to where you are, to look closely, to feed your soul, to do the things you know to do that make you truly alive in Christ. And see where that leads you. Oftentimes it will be a place, not of clear-cut answers, of black-and-white. But a place of gray, a place of trust, a place of love, a place of grace. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton for his resources in this message from his book Seeing Gray and his message series on this same topic.*