

## Your God is Too Unspiritual

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Rich Nathan

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Your God is Too...Series

John 14.15-27

I read a story a few years ago about a powerful dictator who ruled his country with an iron fist. Every aspect of life in that country was planned and ruled over by this dictator and his various committees. Nothing was left to chance.

Well, the dictator noticed that there were thousands of springs of water all over the country, some of them run through cities and towns. The springs provided water for people, but occasionally they would flood and sometimes they got polluted. So the dictator and his committees determined that they would put an end to the free water flowing everywhere in the country. They decided to set up a network of pipes through which people would get the water and they paved over everywhere there were springs with thick concrete. It was all centrally planned. You turn on the faucet and you would get water. And for a few generations most people were happy. In fact, people forgot that there springs.

A few of the older people who had been around when there were springs said that the new water tasted funny. They remembered how refreshing the spring water was. There was a lot of nostalgia for those old springs.

And then one day without warning the springs that had been underground for generations suddenly burst forth through the concrete. There was a sound like a volcano going off and all over the country these springs, like geysers, shot into the air. Much of the water was muddy and polluted. People didn't know what to do. The dictator and his committees didn't know what to do because they no longer could control the water supply and people could get water whenever they wanted it.

Well that story is a parable of what life has been like in the modern world over the last couple of centuries. This is a parable about spirituality. For a couple of hundred years under the influence of the so-called enlightenment a materialistic philosophy has tried to pave over the hidden springs of spirituality. Much of the Western world pretended that there is nothing really out there other than matter and energy. That our spiritual needs could be met by more consumer goods, more entertainment, more science, and more government.

But here is the thing.

People are inescapably spiritual.

Like the paved over springs in the parable that burst forth through the concrete like a volcano, we have seen an explosion of interest in spiritual things over the last 40 years in the Western world. Just go to any bookstore like Barnes and Noble and you will see shelf after shelf of books in the section marked New Age and Alternative Beliefs. Amazon lists over 167,000 different titles under the category New Age and Spirituality. Over 52,000 books under the Occult and Paranormal.

There is an incredible number of movies out about ghosts and poltergeists. I don't know if you are familiar with the Paranormal Activity franchise of movies – 6 movies – that are all filmed with hand-held cam-corders, security cameras, claiming to capture ghosts and demons on film. These six movies have grossed nearly \$1 billion.

There are TV shows about ghosts and ghost-hunters that have been running for years on the SyFy channel. This Christmas there is a hugely advertised new movie coming out called “Krampus” who is the anti-Santa Claus. He is a half goat, half man demon who shows up to steal Christmas from everyone.

Some of this stuff is obviously ridiculous. There have always been horror movies and spooky stories. Many people like that feeling of being frightened. But there is no doubt that there is something else going on right now – this enormous interest in all things spiritual. Many churches are ill-equipped to respond to the spiritual hunger that's being expressed everywhere. Many churches just roll through the ritual and the routine just as they've been doing for the last 200 years. So we have people in churches trying anything and everything to quench their spiritual thirst.

I've been doing a series all autumn that I've titled “Your God is Too...” And I've talked about all the reduced and distorted views that we have of God that keep us from experiencing God, that keep us from loving God, enjoying God, and connecting with God in a personal and intimate way. Today, as I conclude this series, I've titled my talk “Your God is Too Unspiritual.” Let's pray.

Now, there is all this interest right now in near-death experiences, in ghost sightings, in spiritual healing, alternative spiritual medical practices which all tends to get lumped together in the average person's mind. From a secular perspective, I think there are two basic approaches that the average secular person takes to claims that people have seen ghosts or spirits, to various spiritual experiences that people claim to have. There are basically two approaches that secular people take to spiritual claims.

First, there is a small minority of hard-core materialists who say that there is really no such thing as the spiritual realm at all. That when people are describing experiences, all they are doing is describing what's going on inside their own brains. That every one of these experiences could be explained entirely in terms of people's own psyches, the firing of their neurons in their own brains – there is nothing actually going on out there. A small minority of thorough-going materialists like Richard Dawkins and the New Atheists would fall into that camp.

A much larger group of people would acknowledge that these experiences are real, that people are getting in touch with something that is actually out there, not just inside their own heads. But they don't have any kind of overall framework to fit these experiences into, so they are viewed as one-off experiences. I can't tell you how many people over the years who I've talked with and who in a vulnerable, self-disclosing moment have said something to me like, "Pastor, I know this is going to sound weird to you, but..." and then they've gone on and shared a spiritual experience. "I know you may think I'm strange, but..." and they have no overall framework to fit this into and it is sort of a one-off experience, one of those odd things that happens in life.

Just a few weeks ago my Jewish mother came to visit Marlene and me and the rest of our family here in Columbus. Marlene and my mom had a great conversation about the Lord. In the course of the conversation my mother told a story that I've never heard her tell before. She said that when she was giving birth to me she almost died. She had severe pneumonia and after she gave birth she found herself suffocating in her hospital bed and she couldn't push the button to call the nurse. She said she could feel herself leaving her body and heading towards this light. She asked Marlene, "Do you think there is something after death? Do you think we continue?" Marlene said to her, "I know we do." Mom said, "How do you know?" Marlene said, "Because somebody came back from the dead. His name is Jesus."

But my mom is like so many people who've had these experiences, but there is no category to place these experiences in. And so they are just one of those weird things I've seen. How many of you are like that today? You would be one of those folks who say, "I know this sounds weird, but let me tell you what I saw, or what I experienced." Maybe you don't have a framework in which to put that experience.

Well, not all spirituality, not everything spiritual is healthy.

### Unhealthy spirituality

Like the people in my opening parable, folks who are starved of water will drink from any spring even if the water is unsafe or polluted. With this explosion of interest in all things spiritual, we're starting to see more and more stories in completely secular magazines about folks having spiritual experiences. For example, in The London Review of Books which is a scholarly periodical, there was a recent essay on Japan and the so-called ghosts of the tsunami. Some of you may remember that following the 2011 earthquake there was a terrible tsunami, a terrible tidal wave, in Northern Japan that drowned 10,000 people and was the costliest natural disaster in history.

The most basic religious faith in Japan is ancestor worship. So even in this very secular country, homes will have household altars, memorial tablets, and books listing ancestors over generations. When the tsunami came, it washed all of that away and the rituals involved in honoring one's ancestors were completely disrupted. So this Japanese man went to investigate the coastline where all this destruction took place. He went with his wife and mother. As he

walked the coastline he found himself overpowered by some invisible force. He began to howl and crawl around on the ground. He started shrieking, “You’re all going to die! You’re all going to drown.” He rolled around on the ground screaming for hours, “All is lost. Help me! Help me! Something is on top of me.” He finally collapsed exhausted. His wife and mother were of course all incredibly upset. When he got off the ground, he had no memory of what happened.

There are all of these stories coming out from Northern Japan about these weird experiences people are having as they explore the ruins of that tsunami-stricken area. What’s going on?

Elle Magazine, a woman’s magazine devoted to fashion and makeup tips, recently published an article from a thoroughly secular journalist who lost her 60-year old husband to lymphoma. There is this woman living a typical upper class white liberal Manhattan life. She gets married to a guy she’s been living with. She finally gets married after 15 years of living together. They are a completely secular couple, who know all the in restaurants and go out for drinks with friends after work, completely career-centered. This woman who is published in all kinds of New York-based magazines and newspapers. She suddenly loses her husband. And she writes this long article about contacting him through a medium who tells her all of this secret information about her husband that only this woman knew. Information that couldn’t be found on the Internet.

How do we sort this?

Well, the Bible doesn’t treat all spirituality alike any more than we treat all water alike. Some water that we drink is safe and healthy and other water is polluted and will get us desperately ill. There are multiple warnings in scripture commanding people to not drink from certain springs, to not engage in certain spiritual practices because these practices will destroy you. For example, here is what we read in Deuteronomy 18:9-13:

Deuteronomy 18:9–13 (NIV)

9 When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. 10 Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, 11 or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. 12 Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. 13 You must be blameless before the LORD your God.

So what does healthy spiritual look like?

Healthy spirituality

Listen to the words of Jesus:

John 14:15–27 (NIV)

15 “If you love me, keep my commands. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. 21 Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

22 Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?”

23 Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

25 “All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

Let me share some of the marks of healthy spirituality that I would draw from this text. I don’t want us to miss this word “another.” In v. 16 Jesus says:

Jn 14:16

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—

Now, you need to understand that there are two different Greek words that can be translated “another.” One is the Greek word “allos.”

Allos = Another of the same kind

The other is a Greek word,

Heteros = Another of a different kind

That’s where we get the word “heterosexual” or heterogonous. Another of a different kind.

The word that Jesus uses to describe the Coming Advocate is the word “allos.” Jesus says that he is going to give us another advocate just like himself. Jesus is comforting his disciples by assuring him that they don’t have to be troubled because he is leaving. Jesus is going to send them an advocate who is exactly like himself.

You see, the Holy Spirit is literally the Spirit of Jesus.

Healthy spirituality is Jesus-centered

Look at this with me in v. 18,

Jn 14:18

18I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

Jesus says that the Spirit will be in us and then he says, “I will come to you.” Then in v. 20 Jesus says,

Jn 14:20

20On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

Jesus ascended into heaven and is at the Father’s right hand now. How will he come to us? How will Jesus himself be with us? How will Jesus indwell us? The answer is by his Spirit, this other advocate who is exactly like Jesus.

Here is how to understand who the Holy Spirit is. The Holy Spirit is the personal presence of Jesus in and with us. The Holy Spirit is the one who universalizes the presence of Jesus. Never think, “Wouldn’t it have been great to have been alive when Jesus was here on earth?” Wouldn’t it have been great to follow Jesus around, hear his voice, and listen to his wisdom? Wouldn’t it have been great to hang out with Jesus and have him change your life for the better?

You have Jesus near you. In fact, you have Jesus in you because of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, if you’ve been born again. The meaning of being born again is that the Spirit of Jesus takes up residence in your life. Just as you were born once physically, when you receive the Spirit of Jesus in your life, you can be born again spiritually. And Jesus said that it to the world’s benefit that he ascended to heaven.

When Jesus was on earth, by virtue of his incarnation taking on flesh, he was limited in space. He could only be in one place at one time. He was limited in who he could talk to. But now that Jesus is in heaven, through the gift of his Spirit, his presence is unlimited. He speaks to millions of people in different parts of the world at the same time. The gift that Jesus gives to us is the gift of himself, the gift of his own presence. The Spirit continues the ministry of Jesus in the world.

To understand the Holy Spirit, you should say to yourself: The Holy Spirit is exactly like Jesus. He brings me the presence of Jesus.

Now, going back to v. 16 here is what Jesus said:

John 14:16 (NIV)

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—

I focused on the word “another” before and I said that the Holy Spirit was another of the same kind. The Holy Spirit is just like Jesus. But what does this word “advocate” mean?

The word “advocate” is a translation of the Greek word “paraclete.” And paraclete is a very tough word for translators. Sometimes they translate “paraclete” as counselor; sometimes they translate this word as comforter, sometimes helper, friend, advocate. The word “paraclete” that word that is so tough for translators to translate literally means:

Paraclete = The one called alongside

The Holy Spirit is called alongside us.

As a dad I helped my two children learn to ride their bikes. What I would do in helping them to learn to ride their bikes would be to run alongside them to steady the bike. At first I would hold the handlebars and the back of the seat and just slowly trot alongside. Then I would hold the back of the seat while they got their balance. And finally, I would let them go and run alongside them encouraging them: “Keep your wheels straight. Don’t look back. You’re doing great. Keep going. Keep going.” If they fell, I would run and pick them up, brush them off, and tell them that they were OK.

That’s a picture of what the Holy Spirit does with us in mediating to us the presence of Jesus. We come to Christ and he puts his arm around us and brings us his presence. He walks alongside of us saying, “Steady, steady. Keep going straight. Don’t turn your wheels to the right or to the left. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Listen to him. Don’t go your own way. Submit to Jesus. Surrender to Jesus. Obey Jesus. Follow Jesus and your life will go well.” He trots alongside of us: “Keep going; keep going.” The Spirit exhorts us; the Spirit encourages us; the Spirit brings us Jesus’ comfort when we fall, when we’re bruised.

Just as Jesus comes alongside of us, so the Spirit comes alongside of us.

But you know, friends that Jesus often comes alongside of us by his Spirit, but not quite in the way that we want. Do you know this one?

Marlene and I are raising our granddaughter, Naomi, and so I had the privilege of teaching Naomi how to ride her bicycle when she was 5. At first, she had training wheels, but because she is pretty coordinated I thought she would be able to ride her bike when she was five. So I took the training wheels off and held the bike while she sat on her little bike. I slowly walked down the street with her so that she could get the feel of it. As we moved a little more quickly, she literally turned around and wrapped her arms around me and said, “No! I’m going to fall.” She just

grabbed onto me. I gently said, “No, Naomi, you are not going to fall. Grandpa will hold you. It’s OK.”

We walked down the street a little farther and then I began to trot with her and she was so nervous that she turned her wheel and tipped over. I picked up her bike, but before I was able to get to her, she ran home, ran into the house and told Marlene, “Grandpa is being mean to me.” I walked into the house and Marlene yelled at me and said, “Why have you been mean to Naomi?” I said, “I haven’t been mean. She’s ready to ride her bike.” Which, by the way, she did after just two more lessons.

But that picture of coming alongside of Naomi on her bike communicated to me something very deep about the way that Jesus comes alongside of us by his Spirit. He often comes alongside us and leads us, but not always in the way that we want to go. Consider the end of the gospel of John.

Jn 21:18-19

18Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

19Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

Jesus was there alongside of Peter at the moment of Peter’s death saying to Peter every step along the way, “follow me.” Historians tell us that Peter died a martyr’s death on Vatican Hill in Rome where he was crucified upside down as a leader in Christ’s church.

Have you ever been led by Christ into places you didn’t want to go? Have you ever been led by Christ to stay in places that you didn’t want to stay? Christ comes alongside us, by his Spirit, and he leads us but he doesn’t always lead us to the place that we want to go. You say, “Lord, anything but staying in this marriage. I want to leave. I am exhausted.” And in his ministry of being a paraclete, he comes alongside and says, “My will for your life is to stay put.”

You say, “Lord, anything but missions. Keep me firmly planted in Columbus, Ohio.” Christ comes alongside us through the Holy Spirit and leads us to another country.

You say, “Lord, anything but singleness, or anything but widowhood, or Lord, anything but this trial for my loved one...come alongside me, Lord, and lead me.” But sometimes he leads us to a place we don’t want to go. God runs alongside of us the way I ran alongside of Naomi. And then just like my wife, Marlene, yelled at me, we want to yell at God: Why are you being so mean? Why are you leading me this way?

But you see, the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. He’s not the Spirit of self-expression. The Holy Spirit is not sent so God can make much of you. The Holy Spirit is sent so that we can make much of



Jesus. The Holy Spirit is not sent to fulfill all your dreams. The Holy Spirit was sent to fulfill your Father in heaven's dreams for you.

Healthy spirituality will focus our attention on Jesus - Jesus' person, Jesus' words, Jesus' will, Jesus' activity. Healthy spirituality causes us to look more like Jesus. Spirituality that gets us consumed with something other than Jesus, this weird phenomenon, this strange experience, this incredible power – if Jesus is not in the center of it, then that's water you probably don't want to drink. Healthy spirituality is Jesus-centered spirituality.

Second,

Healthy spirituality is morally demanding spirituality

None of the spirituality that you'll find in the alternative belief section of Barnes and Noble, or the New Age and Spirituality section on Amazon, none of the spirituality that you find in the movies these days places any moral demand on the so-called spiritual person.

Lillian Daniels, who is a pastor, wrote a hugely popular essay back in 2011 in which she voiced her total exasperation with people that she meets who say that they're spiritual, but not religious. Here is what Ms. Daniels wrote.

*On airplanes I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is "spiritual, but not religious". Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo. Before you know it, "he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets."*

"These people always find God in the sunsets," Ms. Daniel said. "I find God in walks in the woods."

Now, who doesn't like sunsets or walks in the woods? But I want you to compare the spirituality of someone who says, "I find God in rainbows and in puppies and in the laughter of babies and warm chocolate chip cookies right out of the oven." I want you to compare that kind of spirituality with the tough-as-nails, morally demanding healthy spirituality of Jesus. Listen to Jesus:

John 14:15 (NIV)

15 "If you love me, keep my commands.

And in case we missed what Jesus is saying,

John 14:21(NIV)

21 Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father...

And then in v. 23:

John 14.23

23 Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

And in v. 24:

John 14.24a

24 Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching.

What Jesus is saying is that it is impossible to be spiritually healthy and disobey his commands. What commandments did Jesus give us so that if we say, “I’m interested in becoming spiritually healthy, drinking clean water, what commands do I need to obey?”

The gospels contain dozens of explicit from Jesus. But let me suggest just two of Jesus’ commands.

Consider this dialogue between Jesus and his disciple Peter.

Matthew 18:21–22 (NIV)

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Jesus said, “If you are going to follow me, you need to forgive and forgive people repeatedly.” He goes on and tells a story of someone who refuses to forgive and is tortured for their unforgiveness.

So what does that mean for you and me? We say we want to grow spiritually. Jesus says, “Have you forgiven everyone for everything?” Are you holding a grudge against anyone? Are you still bitter about something? Are you percolating inside because someone hurt you or abused you or abused a loved one or was unjust? You need to forgive. You say that that’s really hard. You don’t understand what they did and how awful it was. That’s exactly right. Healthy spirituality is morally demanding. It is not just a walk in the woods, or finding God in the sunsets. Healthy spirituality is tough as nails. Healthy spirituality is hard!

How about this commandment of Jesus.

Matthew 5:23–24 (NIV)

23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

You say, “Rich, I’m not presenting any gift at the altar.” But I tell you, week after week here at Vineyard Columbus we take communion together and it is no great extension of Jesus’ command to say, “Before we take communion we ought to examine ourselves and ask if someone has something against us.” We’re aware that we’ve hurt someone – a spouse, a child, an ex-spouse, and ex-boyfriend. Jesus says that we need to clean that up before we present our gifts.

Now, yes, friends, there is wisdom in how we communicate – whether we write a note, or sit down with them and a pastor, or them and a counselor. There is wisdom regarding timing and what we say and how we say it. But we can’t just blindly push ahead and say everything is right between me and God when I have on this conscience that I may have hurt someone and haven’t cleaned that up. I can’t keep taking communion week after week without coming up with some sort of plan to fix this relationship.

Healthy spirituality is Jesus-centered. Healthy spirituality is morally demanding. And finally,

Healthy spirituality is miracle-expectant

Consider Jesus’ promise here in John 14.11-12:

John 14:11–12 (NIV)

11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves. 12 Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

Jesus is making an audacious mind-boggling promise to us, one that we surely will have to struggle with, if we let these verses have their impact on our lives. Jesus says if we believe in him, we’ll do the same miracles he did and even greater miracles than the ones he did. Because of the audacious nature of the promise, and because it seems so far from fulfillment and far from anything we could be able to do, commentators have sought various ways to water it down. Surely, Jesus couldn’t have meant that. Surely we must be misinterpreting it. Surely, we must have misheard him.

But Jesus said a lot of things that stretch our faith. Jesus said that if we believe in him, even though we die, we will live forever with him. Do you believe that? Jesus said that if we believe in him, we never need to be anxious about what we will eat or wear. God will provide for us. Do you believe that? Jesus said there is one prerequisite for seeing miracles, that’s faith. He says,

John 14:12 (NIV)

12 Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

So, let me close with a couple of thoughts. Faith is a choice. The call to faith is addressed to our wills – not first of all to our intellects, or to our emotions. The call to believe in Christ is addressed to our wills. Here is what Jesus said in John 7.17:

John 7:17 (NIV)

17 Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.

One of the struggles we have with faith is we look at situations and say, “I can’t imagine, I can’t understand how this situation could turn around. I can’t understand how this breakthrough could occur. Therefore, I must not be able to have the faith to believe Christ for a miracle.”

Jesus would answer and say, “Friend, faith is not addressed to your intellect. Faith is addressed to your will. Will you choose to trust me, even if you can’t understand how this could possibly work out?”

The great Augustine understood this principle. He said 1600 years ago:

*I don’t seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand.*

We don’t seek to understand in order to believe. We believe in order to understand. Many people want to understand first. Help me to understand how this cancer could be healed, or this back pain can disappear, or this marriage can be saved. But when we’re praying for a miracle, we start with: Lord, I choose to believe that healing is always your will. The only issue is timing. I don’t have to guess whether God wants to heal or not. God is a healer. Jesus healed everyone who came to him. The only issue is will they be healed now, or tomorrow, or next month, or in eternity. I don’t understand God’s timing; to choose to believe, I will understand later. Right now I’m going to trust in God as healer as I pray right now.

Faith is also not addressed to our emotions. Very often when we’re praying for a miracle, we’re praying for a breakthrough. We’re praying for something major to happen. Our feelings, our emotions will not feel like faith. Listen, when you pray you will often feel anxious. Anxiety provoking situations make us feel anxious. But we can choose to believe despite our anxious feelings. Do you know this one? You can choose to believe despite the pressure you’re under. You can choose to believe despite your depression. You can choose to believe despite whatever feelings you have to the contrary. Don’t get distracted by your feelings. And don’t get distracted by your intellect. Choose to believe based on Jesus’ promise when he said:

I tell you the truth anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing.

Jesus is not a liar. Healthy spirituality focuses our attention on Jesus. Healthy spirituality obeys Jesus. And healthy spirituality expects Jesus to work miracles in our lives. Let's pray.

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