



## Foundations of Christian Spiritual Formation

### Lesson 4 *Four Stages of Spiritual Development*

#### **St. John's Four Stages**

\*St. John of the Cross was a 16th century Spanish mystic and Carmelite friar. He is best known for his spiritual writings, especially his two poems, *Spiritual Canticle*, which he mostly wrote while in prison for various reforms he was trying to institute, and for *Dark Night of the Soul*.

His four stages of spiritual development are:

Love of Self for Pleasure Sake  
Love of God for Pleasure Sake  
Love of God for Love's Sake  
Love of God for God's Sake

#### **Love of Self for Pleasure Sake**

\*We all start at this point of self-centeredness and self-interest. Many people remain at this point for life.

#### **Love of God for Pleasure Sake**

\*Love of God for pleasure sake is the true beginning of the spiritual life. It represents the infancy stage of spiritual development.

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

— 1 Peter 2:2–3

\*In this stage, God gives the believer strong feelings of spiritual consolation to encourage growth and sustain excitement in the process.

\*He calls us to mature past this early stage of growth though.

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

—Hebrews 5:13–14

## **Dark Night of the Senses**

\*To move us to the next stage of development and to move us beyond a feeling-based relationship, God withholds His consolation. This dryness is called the dark night of the senses.

This transition stage holds several temptations:

- To slip back into feeling the guilt and shame of original sin.
- To use the spiritual practices to recreate the good feelings.
- To give up on the spiritual practices and disciplines all together.
- To despair from experiencing God at all.

\*During this time of dryness and distance, God is calling us to a deeper relationship.

Steps to remember during the dark night:

- Be open to God in the midst of your dryness. Talk to Him about it.
- Be open to the reality of the purgation of your hidden sin.
- Open your heart daily to God and know that He is at work.
- Find a spiritual friend or mentor that can walk with you.

## **Love of God for Love's Sake**

\*This stage is marked by illumination where the heart is finally living in the reality of God's love.

\*Another dark night is awaiting the soul as you grow into the fourth stage.

## **Love of God for God's Sake**

\*This final stage is marked by union with God. The soul truly loves God with no other agenda besides the truth that He is completely and utterly worthy of our worship and love.

## Reflections

♣ Open your heart to hear from God where you are at in these stages of development.

♣ Is there a difference between where you thought you were on this journey before this lesson and where God is revealing you are today?

♣ Are you experiencing or have you experienced a dark night of the senses? Take some time to open your heart to God about this experience of dryness and deep growth.

♣ Do you feel it is possible or true to experience that we move forward and backward between these stages of spiritual development?