

Lesson Plan & Study Guide



# Exploring Christianity:

## Introduction to Spiritual Growth

**iFOLLOW**

Meeting with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

Version 1.0 - 11/4/10



## About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

### Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

### Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

### Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

### Credits

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# Introduction to Spiritual Growth

*This presentation is designed for people who have not yet come to a point in their spiritual journey where they have decided to become a follower of Jesus.*

## Learning Objectives

1. Recognize the need for spiritual growth
2. Explore how spiritual growth occurs
3. Learn some specific strategies which contribute to spiritual growth

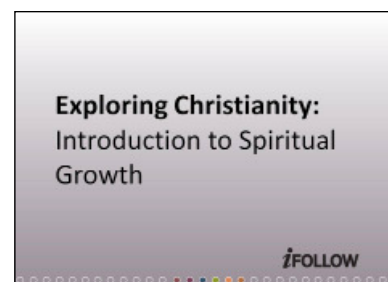
## Content Outline

1. The Need for Spiritual Growth
2. Understanding Spirituality
3. The Journey of Spiritual Growth
4. The Farmer's View: God's Plan
5. Tools for Growth
6. Living a Fulfilling Spirituality

## Background Material for the Presenter

In the autumn of 1992, Michael Plant, a popular American sailor, set out on a solo crossing of the North Atlantic from the United States to France. He was an expert who had circumnavigated the globe alone more than once. His midsize sailboat, the Coyote, was state of the art from hull to mast to sails to navigational and electronic equipment. As far as colleagues and friends and family were concerned, Michael Plant had everything necessary to achieve success on his voyage.

Eleven days into the trip, all contact with him was lost. A massive search was launched. Days went by with no sightings, no radio contact, nothing, even from his top of the line emergency, position-indicating radio beacon. Then came the news that no one had ever expected. The Coyote was found, floating upside down, 450 miles



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Discipleship  
Series:  
Meeting with  
Jesus

Action Plan  
& Presenter  
Notes

Exploring  
Christianity:  
Introduction  
to Spiritual  
Growth

1

northwest of the Azores Islands. There was no sign of Plant, relayed the crew of a freighter who had made the discovery.

The sailing community was surprised that the sailboat was discovered upside down in the water. Sailboats don't normally capsize. They're built to take the most vigorous pounding a sea can offer, and even when knocked on its side or even upside down, they naturally right themselves. Why this anomaly?

Sailboats are designed for maximum stability in strong winds by having more weight below the waterline than above. That's one of the purposes of the keel. Alter that ratio and strong wind poses a serious threat. So when the Coyote was built, an eight thousand pound weight was bolted to the keel in order to provide far more weight than normal below the waterline. That amount of ballast should assure stability.

But when the Coyote was discovered on that fateful day, the four-ton weight on the keel was missing. Obviously the boat's stability had been seriously compromised. So the first wave or wind of any magnitude became the probable deathblow. And a very capable, experienced and much admired yachtsman was lost at sea.

Not enough weight below the waterline. A storm blows. Life lost. In a culture that puts so much emphasis on what people can see rather than on what can't be seen, is it any wonder that so much personal instability results? We worry more about what we wear, what we drive, what we live in, what we possess (money, wealth, power, position), than about what's on the inside (character, spirit, heart issues), below the line of visibility. So when the storms of life blow—and they always do at some point—we don't have the necessary ballast to ride it out safely. We become compromised. We fold. We capsize, and sometimes don't recover. At best, we simply live life trying to survive and function at minimum capacity, as opposed to really living and flourishing and being fulfilled at every level.

## Understanding Spirituality

So how does one go about paying attention to what matters most? This is what is often referred to as "spirituality," taking the time to pay attention to the internal issues of life, the heart-soul stuff that deals with the depth of life, the "below the waterline" concerns. Paying attention to spirituality is what ends up providing stability and ballast and depth. The result is that when the storms of life blow, there's enough internal weight to weather it and end up not just functioning but flourishing. So how do you do it, this thing called spirituality?

**Jesus' Story of the Four Soils:** Jesus tells a fascinating tale about spirituality and the importance of depth in life. "A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell

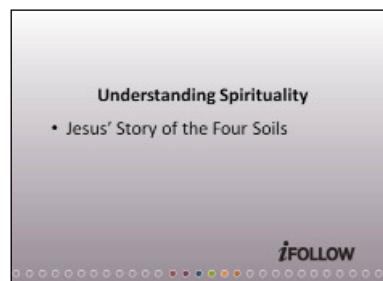
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Action Plan  
& Presenter  
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Introduction  
to Spiritual  
Growth

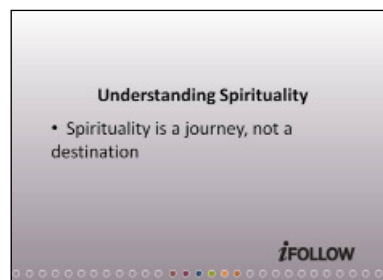
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on shallow soil with underlying rock. The plants sprang up quickly, but they soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the shallow soil. Other seeds fell among weeds and thorns that shot up and choked out the tender blades. But some seeds fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted, a harvest beyond the farmer's wildest dreams." (Matthew 13:3-9)



The dynamics of spirituality (that is, paying attention to what really matters, building depth into life that produces fruitfulness and fulfillment) are quite profound in this story. "The parable of the sower and the seed has a lesson of the highest importance. As a lesson-book Christ has opened it before us to represent the spiritual sowing." (Nichol, p. 1114.) The four soils represent four different approaches to life with four very different outcomes.

**Spirituality is a journey, not a destination:** Before we discuss the dynamics of each soil and how it applies to our spiritual lives, please notice something very important. The fact that Jesus uses an agricultural metaphor to describe the spiritual life indicates that spirituality is a process not just an end result. It is a journey, not just a destination. When you plant a seed, it takes time for it to grow to full maturity. The seed doesn't turn into a plant overnight. The plant does not produce fruit immediately. It is a process, a very dynamic and active process.



"The germination of the seed represents the beginning of spiritual life, and the development of the plant is a beautiful figure of growth. As in nature, so in grace; there can be no life without growth. The plant must either grow or die. As its growth is silent and imperceptible, but continuous, so is the development of the spiritual life. At every stage of development our life may be perfect; yet if God's purpose for us is fulfilled, there will be continual advancement. Sanctification is the work of a lifetime." (White 1941, p. 65)

The implications of this picture are quite profound. First, it means that you and I need to be more patient with ourselves as we're on this journey of transformation! Wholeness doesn't happen all at once. We must give ourselves permission to grow over time, not immediately. The seed doesn't become a mighty oak tree overnight! Be patient!

Second, it means that you and I need to be more patient with each other! We need to cut each other some slack and not make judgments about each other's growth or what might appear to be lack of growth. Just because the seed hasn't popped out of the ground to become a seedling yet doesn't mean it's not growing. The growth is in a more invisible stage. We must be very careful about judging other people's spiritual growth.

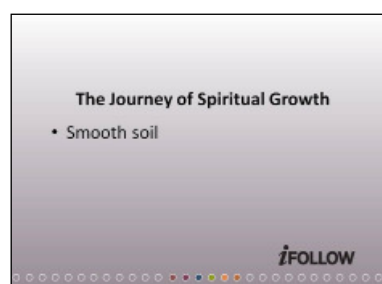
That's why Jesus' story of the four soils describes God as a Farmer who is planting and

gardening. The individual seeking spiritual growth must collaborate with the Divine. That is what the word “spirituality” is about; taking intentional steps to cooperate with Divinity in the work God is doing in our lives.

## The Journey of Spiritual Growth

**Smooth soil:** “Some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them.” (Matthew 13:4) Because they could not sink into the soil, the seeds are exposed to the birds. They simply lay there on the hard surface vulnerable to extinction.

It’s one of life’s truisms: anything that does not sink into your heart makes no long-term impact. Change happens most effectively when the information reaches into the core of the person. As John P. Kotter, in his book *The Heart of Change*, puts it, “Motivation is not a thinking word, it’s a feeling word.” So if you want to be empowered to experience new directions, to set new trends for your life, to accomplish significant things, you have to get your heart involved.



What keeps that from happening? What are the obstacles that keep the “seed” lying on the surface of your life where it is easily snatched away? This story describes the soil as a “footpath.” In other words, there’s lots of traffic that has pounded the soil down to a hard, smooth surface. The reality of life’s busyness is that it hardens us and makes us careless about inner things. “Like the hard-beaten path, trodden down by the feet of men and beasts, is the heart that becomes a highway for the world’s traffic.” (White 1941, p. 44.)

A cartoon pictures a man in a doctor’s office. His shirt is off. He is standing beside the examining table. The doctor’s just finished the examination and is delivering the diagnosis. With hand on the patient’s shoulder, the doctor says, “I diagnose your problem as a biterminal combustion of the paraffinic illuminator. In other words, Charlie, you’re burning your candle at both ends.”

Does that “illness” sound familiar? Chuck Swindoll, in his book *Simple Faith*, describes this reality: “Every day ... 108,000 of us move to a different home, and 18,000 move to another state, the United States government issues 50 more pages of regulations, 167 businesses go bankrupt while 689 new ones start up, 105 Americans become millionaires, Americans purchase 45,000 new automobiles and trucks, and smash up 87,000, 20,000 people write letters to the president, more than 6,300 get divorced, while 13,000 get married, dogs bite 11,000 citizens, including 20 mail carriers, four people call Graceland to speak with Elvis, we eat 75 acres of pizza, 53 million hot dogs, 167 million eggs, three million gallons of ice cream, and 3,000 tons of candy, we also jog 17 million miles and burn 1.7 billion calories while we’re at it.”

Now it doesn't take a PhD from Princeton to conclude that we're simply busy, busy, busy. We're a society of doers, Type-A personalities who can't stop or stand still for very long without getting fidgety or nervous or bored or feeling guilty that we're just not accomplishing something. In fact, one of the great phrases we often hear used to motivate people to action is, "Don't just stand there. Do something!" We're obsessed with being useful, getting the job done, goals and objectives. Our culture revolves around action, activity, doing. North Americans are probably the most urgent people on earth, caught in what futurist David Zach describes as "hyperliving—skimming along the surface of life." We experience only the surface, no depth, just busyness.

But the question is, does life have to be this way, simply skimming along the surface, with no depth, no heart? Our story tells us that if this is the description of our life, then the potential for great fruitfulness and fulfillment, represented by the "seeds," is terribly vulnerable to being snatched away by forces all around us. We'll never become people with depth, balance and inner strength. So when the storms blow, and they always do, no wonder so many people capsize and don't make it.

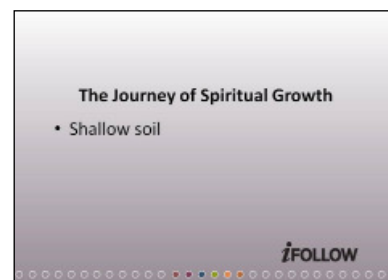
Maybe we need to change the mantra to, "Don't just do something. Stand there!" Stop doing and stand still long enough to pay attention to what's on the inside, to allow the soil of your life to be cultivated, to notice your heart, to deal with internal health, not just external activity. The Bible says, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) Apparently the spiritual part of life can only be experienced in stillness, quietness, lack of frenetic activity and busyness, a fundamental change of focus and priority.

It's said that the surface of the ocean can be whipped up into a frothing nightmare of chaos by hurricane winds. But drop down below the surface 10 or 15 feet and there is only calm and quiet. The awful effects on the surface aren't felt down deep. The seeds of fruitfulness and fulfillment can only grow when they're down deep.

**Shallow soil:** "Other seeds fell on the shallow soil with underlying rock. The plants sprang up quickly." (Matthew 13:5)

Why do these seeds grow into little plants so quickly, unlike the seeds on the footpath? In this ground, there's at least enough cultivated soil for the seeds to sink in and their roots can begin to receive some nourishment. The truth is, most people don't want to lead shallow lives and be seen as superficial. When they're really honest, they recognize that there is more to life than just money, jobs, clothes, and the multitude of things society seems obsessed with.

Perhaps around New Year's Day we make a resolution to pay more attention to the spiritual side of life, the heart stuff, go deeper than normal. We buy an inspirational book and decide to carve out of our busy schedules some regular time for reflection and meditation. We read. We think. We contemplate. And we like the experience. We get excited about what we start feeling and how being more centered impacts our lives. We feel bet-



ter about ourselves. We seem to have more peace. We don't get as anxious or upset with the little things as before. Life feels better and more balanced.

"But the plants soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the shallow soil." (Matthew 13:6) As it turns out, this particular soil was shallow because there was a thick layer of bedrock not too far below the surface. What little soil was there was good and provided just enough depth for the seeds to take root and sprout. But because rock was just underneath, the roots couldn't go deep enough to receive adequate nourishment. So when the external conditions got challenging (like the burning hot sun), the seedling couldn't stand the heat and withered and died.

A person tells of a year in which she made a resolution to bicycle every day first thing in the morning. She had a good bike. She even recruited a partner to go with her so she had the support to keep it up even on mornings when she didn't feel like it. She was faithful with that resolution. She was proud of herself. Every morning she was up early, working hard. She started feeling better. She got excited about her progress. And it was fun!

But then she hit the "rock." The fun factor dramatically diminished. She began to hate getting up early. When that alarm went off she wanted nothing more than to simply turn over and go back to sleep. She began dreading the pain from pushing her lungs, heart and muscles to their limits. The initial excitement was gone. Now it was just hard work! She had hit the "bedrock" of difficulty.

Isn't it true that many of our resolutions get derailed when they become difficult to keep doing? The emotionalism of initial excitement wears off in time. If decisions are based purely upon a momentary "high," they never last. The time in between whatever it is we resolved to do daily or weekly gets longer and longer. As a result, we often give up altogether. Soon, we're back to our normal lives. We've failed again. And with each failure, it gets increasingly difficult to make more resolutions because we simply don't want to keep failing.

So our good intention of spending quality time deepening our lives, developing meaningful spirituality, often goes by the wayside when it gets difficult to keep doing it. Consequently, we never end up developing real depth in our lives. We stay on the surface, keeping extremely busy, doing the urgent things in our lives, following our significant routines, but maintaining only a superficial reality.

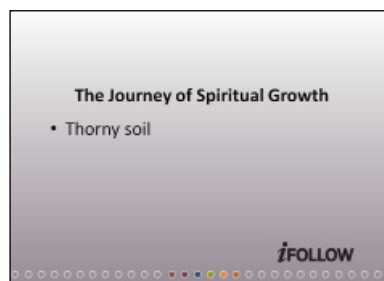
Then something happens; a crisis of some kind strikes. The storm winds blow ... a marriage goes sour, a job is lost, a medical diagnosis is lethal, a friend betrays us. And we suddenly realize we don't have the depth we need, the inner resources necessary to handle it well. We fold, cave, give up. We never get to the place of being able to enjoy fruitfulness and fulfillment that come from real depth that produces long-term commitment. The "hot sun" has withered the plant and it dies.

"No mere theory of truth or profession of discipleship will save any soul. We do not



belong to Christ unless we are His wholly. It is by halfheartedness in the Christian life that men become feeble in purpose and changeable in desire. The effort to serve both self and Christ makes one a stony-ground hearer, and he will not endure when the test comes upon him.” (White 1941, p. 50.)

**Thorny soil:** “Other seeds fell among thorns that shot up and choked out the tender blades.” (Matthew 13:7) The seeds in this soil end up growing quite well. At least well enough to produce plants, tender blades. So what’s the problem? Unchecked weeds, growing up alongside the seedlings, end up choking the life out of the plants. The plants die. The storyteller explains: “The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares of this life and the lure of wealth, so no crop is produced.” (Matthew 13:22)



Have you noticed how easy it is to give attention to the loudest voices in your life? But often the loudest aren’t necessarily the most important. We use the phrase “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” to describe the positive nature of repetitive urgings, whether by an employee to a boss or someone who’s just trying to get something from another. Unfortunately, though that paradigm often holds true and may help us get the resources needed to accomplish what we’re trying to do, it also suggests a reality that can prevent us from focusing on the most significant things.

If we only pay attention to the loudest voices in our lives, we may very well not end up being fruitful. For example, for many of us our work demands constant consideration. The voice of our employer speaks very loudly and urgently. But if that’s the only voice we listen to, we’ll end up turning a deaf ear to other voices that may be even more important in the long run; a spouse, a significant other, a child, a parent, the voice of conscience, the inner spirit that calls us to stop activity and be still long enough to reflect upon our values, the depth of our hearts, eternal issues.

As Jesus pointed out in this story, we can so easily be lured away from the significant by the cares of life and the obsessive pursuit of wealth. Those things become like the weeds that choke life out of the tender plant. “The soul ceases to draw nourishment from Christ, and spirituality dies out of the heart.” (White 1941, p. 51.)

We come to the end of our lives and wonder about significance and realize we only listened to the loudest voices that demanded our immediate attention. We neglected the most important ones. Richard Foster, the noted writer about spirituality, has said, “The desperate need today is not for a great number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”

As this story graphically indicates, there is no way to cultivate depth and fertile soil which results in great fruitfulness and fulfillment unless attention is paid to the subsurface of our lives, unless we’re willing to be bold and confront the weeds of life, to do whatever

it takes to spend time paying attention to the right voices, to actually be still and listen, especially to God's voice. To neglect the right voices results in a sad end.

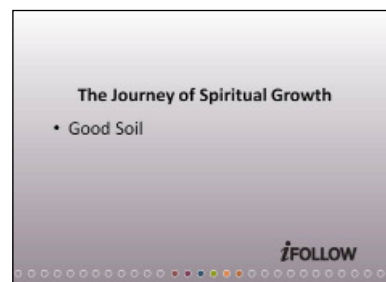
Frederick Beuchner, one of today's more profound spiritual writers, tells about his mother who died a very lonely death as an old woman. She never learned how to listen to the right voices. "She was by no means heartless, but I think hers was a heart that, who knows why, was rarely if ever touched in its deepest place. ... Being beautiful was her business, her art, her delight, and it took her a long way and earned her many dividends, but when, as she saw it, she lost her beauty, she was like a millionaire who runs out of money. She took her name out of the phone book and got an unlisted number. With her looks gone she felt she had nothing left to offer the world, to propitiate the world. So what she did was simply to check out of the world—that old, last rose of summer—the way Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich checked out of it, holing themselves up somewhere and never venturing forth except in disguise. My mother holed herself up in her apartment, then in just one room of that apartment, then in just one chair in that room, and finally, in the bed where one morning, perhaps in her sleep, she died at last."

It's too easy to pay more attention to the loudest voices in our worlds; the voices that shout to us about who they think we should be, that we're only valuable for what we possess or buy or influence or wear or accumulate or accomplish. Even weeds sometimes look attractive. So we're tempted to keep them growing alongside us. But we neglect to pull the weeds at our own peril. Listening to the wrong voices always has a painful end. Ignoring the right Voice reaps a bitter harvest.

**Good soil:** "But some seeds fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted." (Matthew 13:8) Now the story comes to the secret of a fruitful and fulfilling life. Fertile soil. And what does fertile soil look like? In the context of this story, it would certainly be soil that was adequately cultivated, as opposed to the smooth footpath. It would not have rocks under the surface, thus being cultivated and deep. And it would be free of weeds.

What would this look like in human life? What does it take to be a deep person, a person with enough stability to not only weather the storms of life but also be fruitful? How does one cultivate the soil of the heart and mind to build fertile depth conducive to growth and wholeness and meaningful fulfillment?

Gordon MacDonald, in a book about "weathering the storms of life that threaten the soul," suggests that one of the significant ways we can cultivate the soil of our hearts and minds to create fertile depth is by regular self-reflection. We need to carve out specific time in our busy schedules to do this. We need to find ways to quiet the many shouting voices vying for our urgent attention, and be still long enough to hear the significant voice of conscience, character, spiritual longings, and God Himself.



We can do this, MacDonald suggests, by asking ourselves some serious questions, “personal, below-the-water-line” questions that tap into the soul’s archives. Here are a few: (1) Who am I really trying to please? (2) What needs am I trying to meet? What insecurities am I pampering? And what feelings am I storing up? (3) With whom/what am I competing? (4) What rewards am I seeking? (5) What guilt or shame might I be covering?

It’s amazing how questions like these can lead to deep reflection. They attempt to deal with motivation; what is it that drives us to do what we do? What are the foundations upon which we’re building our lives? If we’re honest with ourselves in answering these questions, we are forced to realize that often we act from completely selfish and self-centered needs. We’re actually looking for our needs to be met in the wrong places, places that offer things in the end don’t really satisfy our real needs.

A Gary Larson cartoon shows three frogs sitting in the middle of a dry, desolate desert amidst cactus, a scorpion, and a crack in the parched earth. Two of them have shovels over their shoulders. The third is pointing his shovel down to the ground and says, “We’ll put the swamp here.” Now that’s quite a picture, isn’t it? Not much subtlety about it! I mean, swamp frogs, of all creatures, in a desert digging for water? It is a clear picture of a misguided search, an elusive goal, the wrong destination.

The reason this cartoon is so profound is because one of the greatest temptations a person faces in life is to dig for water in the desert, to look for life where it cannot be found, to attempt to satisfy deep thirsts with unsatisfactory methods: He wants the promotion so he can be recognized so he can feel like he is somebody; she wants to please so she can fit in and feel like she belongs; she wants to earn that money so she can buy things in order to have status with her peers; he wants to compete and win so he can feel like a winner; he fantasizes so he can feel like he is in control; he wants his rival to fail so he can feel more successful. Humans spend a lot of time and energy digging for water in the desert.

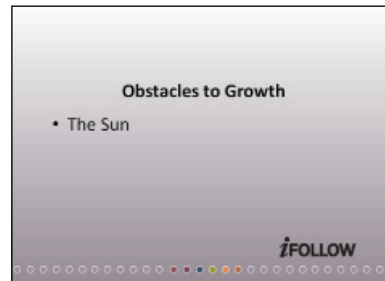
The only soil rich enough to produce the harvest of satisfaction and contentment is one of depth. A life “well-examined” is the only life worth living. As Socrates once wrote, “The unaware life is not worth living.” There must be a willingness to enter into regular reflection about the foundation of our lives, the character issues, whether or not our choices, our beliefs, our paradigms are based upon truth and reality bigger than ourselves, like the reality of God. Anything less produces a shallow life subject to the whims and shifting of the tides, vulnerable to the storms that blow in and wreak havoc especially upon shallow lives.

## Obstacles to Growth

**The sun:** The noted psychiatrist Scott Peck, in his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled*, begins his tome on the reality of life with these profound words, “Life is difficult.” Some of us would say that that is the understatement of the year. But nonetheless it’s certainly true, isn’t it? Life is difficult. Living isn’t always easy. We’re constantly faced with the challenges that come from crisis and its companions, pain and suffering. Storms do come

whether we want them to or not. It's a reality of human life.

Jesus' story describes the sun as that external force that can either bring healthy growth to the seedling or withering death. The sun will always be a factor. Trying to hide from the sun isn't an option. The plant needs the sun for growth. So what is it that determines which outcome the seedling will experience? Root depth.



Jesus' story also describes the weeds as the internal force (within the soil) that has the potential of choking out the life of the seedling. Weeds grow; another fact of agriculture. So what is it that determines the outcome for the tender plant? Weeding; dealing proactively with that which has the potential of choking out life.

The same is true for human life. There are both external factors and internal forces that threaten our equilibrium and balance. We can't escape this reality. A drunk driver smashes into our friend's vehicle and kills him. We have no control over that external threat. How we deal with that tragic loss depends much upon the inner strength of our lives, the depth of our hearts and minds, the anchor points we've pulled into our lives through the years. Some people cave in with such grief and sorrow. Others, though deeply grieved and sorrowing, not only survive the loss but continue on flourishing and living productive lives.

Sometimes the threat or storm comes because of our own internal issues or choices we make ourselves. Someone chooses to be unfaithful to his wife. His marriage fails, his kids become estranged from him, he loses his job, his self-respect, and the effects go on. The question is, how you handle all those losses depends much upon the depth of your life and the inner strength of your character. Do you cave in under all the pressures and simply give up on life, letting guilt and shame spiral you down to destruction? Or do you look at your internal issues and choose to proactively deal with them so you can learn and grow and move on in healthy ways that result in productivity?

The first point is that storms come – simple as that. As long as we are human, we will experience both external and internal storms – storms of others' making that impact us, and storms of our own making that threaten us.

The second point is this: notice, in both cases the appearance of those forces reveal the depth of the soil and the strength of the plant. Jesus is clear that one of the positive outcomes of crisis is that it is like a thermometer measuring the temperature of our souls and hearts. It reveals to us how much we need to do to become healthier, what issues we need to address to flourish. It's like a mirror that suddenly gets held up in front of us and we see ourselves as we really are.

That's why the Chinese character for crisis is a combination of the symbols for "danger" and "opportunity." Which side we fall upon determines the end result – we either get

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to Spiritual  
Growth

10

swallowed up by the danger or we grow by the opportunity. It's our choice when side-swiped by crisis.

This is probably what the biblical author Paul had in mind when, in commenting about how people deal with life said, "For we know that all things work together for good." (Romans 8:28) Is he saying that no matter how bad or painful or evil a given situation is it's good for us? Certainly not! He's describing this human reality of crisis – within every crisis and storm there is the potential of "good" emerging based upon how we choose to respond to and deal with it.

"Through conflict the spiritual life is strengthened. Trials well borne will develop steadfastness of character and precious spiritual graces. The perfect fruit of faith, meekness, and love often matures best amid storm clouds and darkness." (White 1941, p. 61.)

But lest we get discouraged by our inability to deal proactively with crisis, in that verse Paul is actually commenting on God's power to bring good from everything. In other words, God has chosen to make Himself that Resource which can empower us to possess the inner strength to deal proactively with every situation, good or bad, in our lives - so that the end result is greater fulfillment and healthy growth. That's the divine miracle of redemption inherent in the storms of life. So one of the significant issues in dealing with storms is what kind of use are you making of God's inner resources in coping and dealing with your crises?

**The birds:** In Jesus' story of the four soils (Matthew 13:3-9), He introduces a significant dynamic which intensifies the difficulty in the process of developing depth. It's a dynamic that goes beyond the normal and sometimes abnormal circumstances we encounter externally and internally, those natural forces that tend to influence our choices. Jesus introduces a spiritual force that exists for the purpose of hindering our growth. In this story it's described as the birds: "A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them." (13:3-4)

What do the birds do? They steal the seeds. And what's the result? The seeds have no opportunity to grow and produce fruit. They end up having no life. In this scenario, the birds are being described as anti-life; those forces that take away life or keep the possibility of life from taking root and growing.

So who are these "birds"? Jesus doesn't leave us in the dark about this significant dynamic. He identifies the "birds" later in the chapter. "The seed that fell on the hard path represents those who hear the Good News about the kingdom and don't understand it. Then **the evil one** comes and snatches the seed away from their hearts." (13:19)

Evil is present in our world. Evil is that which steals life from people, keeps individuals



from allowing the seed of life to sink down into the soil of their hearts and germinate and then grow and produce fruitfulness. In the following story Jesus tells describes this reality in more detail: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. But that night as everyone slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat. When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. The farmer’s servants came and told him, ‘Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds!’ ‘An enemy has done it!’ the farmer exclaimed.” (Matthew 13:24-28)

So even the existence of the weeds in our lives that, as the four soils story described, can end up choking out the life of the seedling, those things in life that distract us from developing real depth, come from the enemy. It’s the enemy’s influence that can result in a lack of fruitfulness and productivity and depth in our lives.

Notice how Jesus, in this second story, identifies the enemy. “I, the Son of Man, am the farmer who plants the good seed. The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom. The weeds are the people who belong to the evil one. The enemy who planted the weeds among the wheat is the Devil.” (Matthew 13:37-39)

Jesus is clear that there exists an evil force, a dark side, an enemy to real life and fruitfulness, whom He names The Devil. The Devil’s primary goal to use whatever means he can (people, things, circumstances, inherited tendencies and character weaknesses) to keep us from developing depth in our lives, to keep us from being centered upon what’s truly important, so that we don’t experience real life, genuine fulfillment, eternal significance.

Perhaps this is why Dr. Scott Peck, in his book *People of the Lie*, in discussing the existence of evil in this world (a reality he has observed as a psychiatrist working with many people), notes that the word “evil” is in fact “live” spelled backwards. In other words, the whole point of “evil” is that which detracts from and diminishes life. The evil one will do and use anything possible to keep us from experiencing life. He will steal life, he will distort life, he will diminish life, he will distract from life, he will detract from life, he will choke out life; anything it takes to keep that seed of life from germinating and growing into fruitfulness and significance.

“God is love. The evil that is in the world comes not from His hands, but from our great adversary, whose work it has ever been to deprave man, and enfeeble and pervert his faculties.” (White 1923, p. 429.)

No wonder it’s often so difficult to stay focused, to do the hard work of developing depth, to prioritize our priorities, to push through hardships and endure, to deal with character issues. There is an enemy working overtime to keep us from growing life and becoming all we were meant to become. Evil exists to destroy life. So we are in a serious battle every day. The sooner we recognize this reality, the sooner we can throw ourselves into the Resources available for this conflict.

## Aids to Growth

Given everything that is happening in the field in this story, what would you say is the farmer's ultimate desire? Is it to bring harm to the seeds and seedlings? Does he simply not care what happens to them and leave everything to chance? Does he merely do his planting and then walk away hoping things will take care of themselves? No, the whole point of farming is to produce a harvest in the end, to bring seeds into full and mature growth, to be productive.

"Some seeds fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted." (Matthew 13:8) The purpose of planting is harvesting, and in this case, the harvest far outpaces the planting. Here is a picture of abundance, complete fulfillment and satisfaction beyond anticipation. This is what the farmer wants above all. It is why he farms. It is his ultimate dream.



The fact that Jesus identifies Himself as the farmer is significant. In other words, Jesus' whole purpose is to bring productivity, fulfillment, significance, abundance to life. In fact, he says precisely that in another place: "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give life in all its fullness." (John 10:10)

There's a significant dynamic being suggested in that statement. While acknowledging the reality of evil and its purpose of destroying and diminishing life, Jesus says His goal, in contrast, is to give life in its fullness. So Jesus is saying that He has the ability to take evil being perpetrated against us (whether from external or internal sources or spiritual dark forces all around us) and redeem in some way to produce something good and life-enhancing for us. In other words, this Farmer can take that little seed, and in spite of the hot sun or the choking weeds, nurture it, take care of it, and ultimately bring it to maturity and fulfillment.

In the second story in Matthew 13, the one about the enemy planting weeds in the field of wheat, when the farmer was confronted with this terrible reality, he had a strategy, a plan for what to do about it. After the servants informed him, they asked anxiously, "Shall we pull out the weeds?" His response: "No, you'll hurt the wheat if you do. Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds and burn them and to put the wheat in the barn." (Matthew 13:28-30)

The farmer knew exactly what to do to make sure a good harvest happened, in spite of the evil design of the enemy. Jesus' point is that God has the redemptive power to produce good even in the midst of evil. He cares about what happens to us. He doesn't want to see us hurt unnecessarily. He wants to see us grow and mature and become productive. So He applies His wisdom to the process to achieve that end, no matter what the obstacles.

Here's the length He will go to accomplish that redemptive end. The very next story following the earlier purpose statement by Jesus (John 10:10), is about Lazarus, Jesus' best friend (John 11). Lazarus becomes deathly ill and soon dies. Jesus goes to his tomb and asks for the stone to be rolled away, opening up the death chamber. People object saying that the stench will be too terrible (not to mention the act of desecrating the dead). Besides, what's the point; the man's already dead. No hope!

But Jesus says to Lazarus' objecting sister, "Didn't I tell you that you will see God's glory if you believe?" (John 11:40) Apparently, Jesus sees the situation from a different perspective. He knows that difficulty and evil can be redeemed by God no matter how dark or imposing or impossible they appear.

The stone is rolled away. Jesus shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus emerges, alive and well (John 11:43-44). Jesus' statement about God's glory is profound. God's glory is revealed by being able to take the most imposing, impossible and evil situation and redeeming it for good, bringing abundant life instead.

The Farmer is all about growth and productivity, fulfillment and abundance. And He pledges His resources to making sure the harvest happens no matter what the opposition.

## Tools for Growth

Have you ever seen the Walt Disney story about Dumbo, a young circus elephant who was born with unusually enormous ears? Because he was different, he was treated as a freak by all the other elephants. Except for Dumbo's loving and protective mother, all the elephants made fun of him.

Poor Dumbo. He could hardly walk without tripping over his ears, and he found himself in all kinds of trouble because of them. Oh how he wished he'd never been cursed with those big floppy ears!

Then a small circus mouse, named Timothy, felt sorry for Dumbo and made friends with him. Timothy encouraged Dumbo to ignore the criticism and instead see himself as someone special. But things just seemed to go from bad to worse.

And then comes one particular scene. A turning point for Dumbo. He wakes up one morning to find himself and Timothy nestled high up in the branches of a tree. They can't figure out how in the world they got up there. After all, elephants can't climb trees!

Suddenly the moment of revelation strikes. The light bulb flashes on. Timothy cries out, "Dumbo! You must've flown up into the tree! Dumbo! You can fly!"

It is the next statement from this little cartoon rodent that is so incredibly profound. He looks at his perplexed elephant friend and says, "The very things that held you down are going to carry you up and up and up!"



What a powerful perspective! “The very things that held you down are going to carry you up!” What brings Dumbo success in the end, what makes him the big star of the circus, the famous flying elephant, is not a change in his situation. He still has the big, drooping ears. What changes is his perspective. Now he sees his potential. His handicap turns out to be his best friend. His deformity hasn’t changed; he changed. Instead of seeing his difference as a curse, he begins to see it as a blessing. His paradigm has radically shifted. And that transforms his life. The very things that held him down are now carrying him up!

You see, life is really all about perspective. It’s what you think about what you’re experiencing that makes so much difference. You may not be able to change your situation, but you can choose your response to it. It’s what you do with what you have that helps shape your outcome.

Isn’t that what the four soils in our story tell us? The difference between the good soil and the other three isn’t the external circumstances. The seed in the good soil experienced the same hot sun, the same birds flying overhead, weeds popping up there, too. But what made the difference in the end was the depth of the soil, the amount of cultivation taking place, the working and tilling and fertilizing and weeding done to this soil, the soil allowing the farmer to do what he does best. The result was an abundant harvest symbolic of a life of fruitfulness, productivity and satisfaction.

**First, do whatever work is necessary** to build depth into your life. Address the character issues; are you a person of integrity, honesty, admitting your failures and learning from them, developing unselfish motives in serving others, recognizing and minimizing the distractions that keep you from growing, paying attention to why you do what you do? Are you taking regular time for reflection about the quality of your inner life, about your thought patterns, your feelings and emotions, your desires, your joys and sorrows? Do you carve out space to stop the busyness and be in solitude and quiet, times to just be? Do you take the time to regularly evaluate your goals and dreams, your priorities, and how your actions and behaviors and choices are either facilitating or detracting from them? Are you intentional about building relationships with others who can support you, hold you accountable, and encourage you toward your potential; people with whom you can be completely transparent about your struggles and temptations and pitfalls? Are you paying attention to what’s “below the waterline” of your life?



**Second, make use of the resources God provides** in this process. What does this mean? What are God’s available resources? In our story, think about what the farmer offers to the seeds. (1) He plants the seed in the soil. In other words, he offers the seed a place for growth and maturation. (2) He develops the soil into a cultivated, fertile environment for the seed conducive for abundance. (3) He uses external sources and forces to bring about a rich harvest. With that in mind, consider what God is willing to do for us in our journey toward wholeness and fruitfulness.

**1. A Safe Place:** One writer remembers a friend who is a massage therapist as an example of a safe place: “I often think of the room in which I have received massages through the years. My friend offers me a massage whenever I’m in the area and fits me into her busy schedule as a gift of affirmation and encouragement. The room is decorated nicely, the lights are down low, a candle burns, and my favorite music is playing softly. The temperature is set just right. As I lie there on the table waiting for her to enter the room, I feel my entire body beginning to relax and let go. There’s a profound feeling of safety and security that envelopes me and begins to thaw out my heart. Whatever bruises and battering my life has taken up to that point, I find myself being able to release. That room has become a safe place to me where I find real healing.”

God provides safe places for spiritual healing. One of the significant safe places is a sanctuary in time where our battered and bruised hearts can find rest and peace and healing. The Bible uses the term “Sabbath” to describe this place in time. All through the many millennia’s of history, there have been people who have enjoyed safe sanctuary there. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, the well-known Jewish philosopher and theologian, put it this way: “In the tempestuous ocean of time and toil there are islands of stillness where man may enter a harbor and reclaim his dignity. The island is the Sabbath, a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as attachment to the spirit. ... The Sabbath is the exodus from tension, the liberation of man from his own muddiness, the installation of man as a sovereign in the world of time.” (Heschel, p. 29)

Imagine having one whole day every single week to stop life’s busyness and chaos, and pay attention to the heart and soul of life, to reevaluate priorities, to reengage with the most important people in your life, to restore and revitalize your heart, mind and body, to recapture your sense of destiny and purpose. It’s a sanctuary in time, a safe place away from the harshness of life, to experience healing and wholeness. It’s one of God’s great gifts to us, an amazing resource to help us experience abundance and fruitfulness and significance.

As one author noted, just as in the Indianapolis 500 super race the cars must have pit stops for refueling and retreading and restoring if they hope to complete the race, so the Sabbath is one of those “pit stops” necessary for successful life. We ignore it to our detriment.

**2. A Fertile Environment:** A fertile environment denotes soil that has had unnecessary rocks and weeds removed from it, where the soil has been deeply cultivated and developed, and plenty of moisture made available for the seedlings to grow. It’s the responsibility of the farmer to provide that for the seeds.

How does God provide that environment for us? Here’s what I’m discovering in my life. Most often He has used other people to surround me and facilitate growth. For example, I have three prayer partners with whom I talk and pray every week via phone conversations. Each one has ended up taking on a unique and valuable role in my life. One of them specializes in affirmation and encouragement of my identity and self-worth (the

moisture). Another is able to ask me questions that help pinpoint areas of growth and maturation I need to keep me on track (the weeding). And another is invaluable in giving me a sense of where God is in my life, helping me to connect more meaningfully with Him (pointing to the sunlight). All three have been provided to me by God to provide an environment significantly conducive to my growth and development.

The psychiatrist Paul Tournier has made the profound observation: there are two things in life you can't do alone – be married, and be spiritual. We were designed to experience wholeness in life in the context of meaningful relationships with others. God provides people in our lives to facilitate a fertile environment for growth. We cannot do the journey alone and expect to end up with a harvest of abundance and fruitfulness.

**3. A Redemptive Miracle:** There's another classic story about Jesus recorded in the Bible (John 9) that describes this powerful resource God offers. Jesus and His close friends come upon a blind man. The current Jewish philosophy and theology stated that blindness came as a result of sin, either the man's sin or his parents'. But Jesus offers a radically contrasting paradigm when his friends ask him about the cause of the man's deficiency. Jesus says, "Neither this man or his parents' sin caused this blindness. He was born blind so the power of God could be seen in him." (John 9:3)

In other words, Jesus refuses to get into the debate about what caused the man's disability. Rather, Jesus is interested in what God wants to do about it in the present. How does God want to reveal His power in this man's life right now? So to show that new reality, Jesus ends up healing the man of his blindness – powerful evidence to observers that God is all about bringing good out of evil. It's His redemptive miracle.

Just before healing the man, Jesus makes this statement: "While I am still here in the world, I am the light of the world." (verse 5) In other words, it's His mission to bring light into darkness. Wherever darkness and evil exist, He comes to bring the goodness of His love into the middle of it. And we all know that when light shines into the darkness, darkness is dispelled. Even a little bit of light puts a noticeable dent in the darkness. That's the radical difference God can make in our lives.

Because of this reality, the most prolific writer of the New Testament, Paul, states with confidence: "If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since God did not spare even His own Son but gave Him up for us all, won't God, who gave us Christ, also give us everything else?" (Romans 8:31-32)

He goes on to state his conclusion. If this is true, if God is really on our side, then the final truth is that nothing can separate us from God and His loving desire to bring us to wholeness and abundant fruitfulness – death can't, life can't, angels can't, demons can't, fear can't, worries can't, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away (8:38). "God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them." (8:28) This is the most amazing resource of all. God's redemptive miracle in which He promises to bring good out of even the most evil in life.

What then should be our response? As the seeds have to do, we must simply trust the Farmer, to let the Farmer do what He does best (produce a harvest). So the significant questions are these: (1) Am I willing to trust God with my life? (2) Am I willing to acknowledge His place in my life and find direction from Him? (3) Am I willing to take the time to build a strong connection with God, talking to Him and listening to Him? (4) Am I willing to center my life around God's purposes? (5) Am I willing to accept His love for me and believe that He will, if I let Him, produce an abundant harvest of fruitfulness and significance in my life?

Paul states this reality with absolute confidence: "And I am sure that God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again." (Philippians 1:6) When the Farmer plants the seed, He will make sure it grows and matures into an abundant harvest if we let Him. That's His pledge! Is this a Resource to the fulfilling life you and I are willing to embrace?

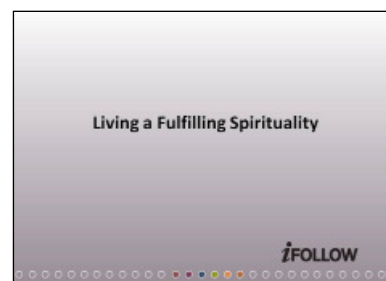
## Living a Fulfilling Spirituality

The Paul who has been quoted several times so far, is the most prolific writer in the Bible's New Testament. He writes of an experience that profoundly impacted the depth of his own personal life. He, too, faced incredible "storms" in his life, one after another. At one point, he and his partner, Silas, were severely beaten by authorities and thrown into jail, their feet clamped in stocks. Their crime was that they had ruined the business of local fortune tellers by liberating a demon-possessed slave girl who told fortunes for people. So there were Paul and Silas, bodies badly bruised and bleeding, feet painfully clamped in leg irons, thrown into a dark, damp, dirty dungeon. Talk about time for a pity party or despair and disillusionment or retreat and resignation! The storm is blowing hurricane forces upon them.

Here is the rest of the story: "Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening." (Acts 16:25) Imagine that! What kind of a response to unjust pain and suffering is that?

That's the response of people who have true depth in their lives, whose soil is so cultivated and fertile that no external or internal forces can keep the seed of true life from growing. Paul and Silas have obviously paid deep attention to what's below the surface of their lives. They've learned how to lean on the resources that God alone can provide for them. And that has empowered them to face the storms of life with confidence and fearlessness and fruitfulness.

Joan Chittester writes about a time when a great army invaded a country and created a path of destruction wherever it went. Its greatest wrath was reserved for the holy people they found, particularly the monks. When the invaders arrived in one village, the leader of



the village reported to the commander, “All the monks, hearing of your approach, fled to the mountains.”

The commander smiled a broad, cold smile. He was proud of having a reputation for being a very fearsome person. But then the leader added, “All, that is, but one.”

The commander became enraged. He marched to the monastery and kicked in the gate. There in the courtyard stood the one remaining monastic. The commander glowered at the figure. “Do you know who I am?” he roared. “I am he who can run you through with a sword without batting an eyelash!”

The monastic fixed the commander with a serene and patient look and replied, “And do you know who I am? I am one who can let you run me through with a sword without batting an eyelash.” (MacDonald, p. 77)

It is, as one author put it, in the “disruptive moments” of our lives in which our true depth is revealed. Then we really discover what we’re made of. We truly see the quality of our lives. Accomplished sailor Michael Plant made that painful discovery too late and was lost at sea. His attention had become focused on his past achievements and he became overconfident. His priorities centered on what was above the waterline, all the trappings of a state-of-the-art sailboat. But he lost the real weight below the waterline that could have brought salvific balance in the storm. His story can be instructive to you and me.

## Handout in this Package

1. Participant’s Notes



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19

## Additional Resources

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- Willard, Dallas (1998). *The Divine Conspiracy: Discovering Our Hidden Life in God*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

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Jesus

Action Plan  
& Presenter  
Notes

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to Spiritual  
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20

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel you have “enough beneath your waterline” to keep you generally balanced as you move through the storms of life? If not, what do you want to do about it?
2. Which of the soils has given you the most trouble? (hard, rocky, or weedy)
3. Birds and sun are both things which are positive in themselves. We couldn’t live without either of them. Yet in this story they have negative influences. In what ways have you seen things that are good in themselves have a negative impact on your spiritual life?
4. What is your safe place?
5. What makes an environment fertile for your spirit?
6. What is the redemptive miracle you most wish God would do for you?

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Jesus

Discussion  
Questions

Exploring  
Christianity:  
Introduction  
to Spiritual  
Growth

21

## Group Activities

**Purpose:** To develop some specific strategies for spiritual growth.

**Preparation:** Set up several tables and place art supplies on each, such as flipchart paper or poster board, markers, crayons, magazines, scissors, and glue. Have at least one house plant on each table, as well. It would be a nice touch to have a small “zen garden” (dishes with sand, a few larger stones, and tiny rakes) for each table.

**Assignment:** Divide the group among the tables. Tell them to choose one of the following activities:

1. Make a poster or collage which represents one or more major experiences which has had a spiritual impact on them, indicating which of the four soils they most resembled at that time.
2. Work with a house plant and/or mini sand garden to contemplate the three tools of spiritual growth described in the presentation; a “safe place,” a “fertile environment,” and a “redemptive miracle.” Write down two or three specific strategies you would like to implement in your life in order to deepen your spirituality.

**Debrief:** Share ideas, emotions, reactions. Make covenants with each other to be intentional about devoting time and energy to deepening spirituality.

**Time:** Allow at least 20 minutes for people to work at the tables, and then at least 20 minutes for debriefing.

**Closure:** You may like to have a simple dedication ceremony in which you pray over each other’s plans and strategies.



# Handout

## Introduction to Spiritual Growth

### Participant Notes

**Personal Reflection:** Take five minutes to write your responses to the following questions: If a storm blew into your life right now, how would you handle it? Would you have the internal resources to weather the storm? Describe a time when you faced a storm and how you handled it.

### 1. Understanding Spirituality

Definition: Taking the time to \_\_\_\_\_ to the \_\_\_\_\_ issues of life, the \_\_\_\_\_ stuff that deals with the \_\_\_\_\_ of life, the “below the waterline” concerns.

### 2. Story of the Four Soils

“A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The plants sprang up quickly, but they soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the shallow soil. Other seeds fell among weeds and thorns that shot up and choked out the tender blades. But some seeds fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted, a harvest beyond the farmer’s wildest dreams.” (Matthew 13:3-9)

#### **Spirituality is a Journey, Not a Destination.**

“The germination of the seed represents the beginning of spiritual life, and the development of the plant is a beautiful figure of spiritual growth. As in nature, so in grace; there can be no life without growth. The plant must either grow or die. As its growth is silent and imperceptible, but continuous, so is the development of the spiritual life. At every stage of development our life may be perfect; yet if God’s purpose for us is fulfilled, there will be continual advancement.” (Ellen White, Christ’s Object Lessons, p. 65)

### 3. The Journey of Spiritual Growth

Smooth Soil = \_\_\_\_\_

Rocky Soil = \_\_\_\_\_

Thorny Soil = \_\_\_\_\_

Good Soil = \_\_\_\_\_

#### “Below-the-water-line” personal questions:

1. Who am I really trying to please?
2. What needs am I trying to meet? What insecurities am I pampering? And what feelings am I storing up?
3. With whom/what am I competing?
4. What rewards am I seeking?
5. What guilt or shame might I be covering?

### 4. Obstacles to Growth

The sun = \_\_\_\_\_

The birds = \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. Resources for Growth

The Farmer’s View: “My purpose is to give life in all its fullness.” (John 10:10)

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. But that night as everyone slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat. When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. The farmer’s servants came and told him, ‘Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds!’ ‘An enemy has done it!’ the farmer exclaimed. ‘Shall we pull out the weeds?’ they asked. He replied, ‘No, you’ll hurt the wheat if you do. Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds and burn them and to put the wheat in the barn.’” (Matthew 13:24-30)

Lazarus (John 11)

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## 6. Using God's Tools for Growth

A \_\_\_\_\_ Place (for me would be) \_\_\_\_\_

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A \_\_\_\_\_ Environment (for me would be) \_\_\_\_\_

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A \_\_\_\_\_ Miracle (for me would be) \_\_\_\_\_

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## 7. Living a Fulfilling Spirituality

Paul and Silas (Acts 16)

The Monk

### My Response:

In what way(s) is your life like Michael Plant's experience?

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Would you like your life to reflect spiritual depth? What are some specific strategies you can develop to build a life with stabilizing balance and significance?

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