

## **How are you?**

Galatians 5:16-26

September 9, 2012

How are you?

It's a simple question, but the way you answer depends on how you're asked!

Usually, it's ... how are you? The emphasis is on "you." By asking, I'm showing interest in you, making a connection to you. It's really more of a greeting than a question. I'm not really asking for information about your state of being. I'm just acknowledging you, taking notice of you, making contact with you. How are you?

But sometimes, we ask it this way: how are you? Now I really want to know! I am interested in your state of being, in how things are with you. Usually I ask the question that way when I know or suspect that something is troubling you. I'm asking you to open up. I'm asking because I want to know. How are you?

But there is still another way to ask the question, a way seldom used, if ever: how are you? How ... are you? How are you being? How are you living your life? I'm not just making contact, not just asking how you are feeling or how you are faring. I want to know how you are living. I want to know more about the path you are following and the way you are following it. I want to know what makes you you. How are you?

That's the question that interested Soren Kierkegaard, not what are you?, but how are you? Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish Christian philosopher who lived and wrote in Copenhagen in the mid-1800's. For much of his life, he did not like to claim the title "Christian," because for him that was exactly the problem: in Denmark, it was much too easy to call yourself a Christian. You became a Christian merely by virtue of being born in Denmark!

For Kierkegaard, being a Christian is not about the "what," about what you are or what you believe. It's about the "how," about how you are, about how you believe, about how you live your life.

For example: how do you know I love my wife? Because I say I do? Because I wear a ring? Or do you know I love my wife by the way I treat her, by the way I listen to her and pay attention to her, by the ways I serve her and put her needs above my own? How do you know I love God?

Kierkegaard distinguishes three ways of being, three modes of living, three stages of human spiritual development, three ways to answer the question: how are you? He titled the three stages: aesthetic, ethical, and religious.

The first stage, the first way of being, is the aesthetic. The aesthetic stage is all about immediacy, about being in touch, about being in tune, with what is immediately present to me, what I see and smell and taste and feel and want. In the aesthetic stage, I live ... as it comes. I go ... wherever! I do ... what comes naturally. I do whatever nature -- nature around me and nature in me -- leads me to do.

We have all kinds of slogans for the aesthetic life! "Just do it," "Let it all hang out." "To thy own self be true." "Be yourself." The only moral absolute, if you can call it that, for this way of life is the duty to obey nature's call, to do whatever comes naturally. The only sin, if you can call it that, is to not be what you are, to go against the flow of nature, to deny yourself, to deny yourself ... anything.

So, my friend, how is this doing "what comes natural" working out for you? You heard Paul's assessment!

*What human nature does is quite plain. It shows itself in immoral, filthy, and indecent actions; in worship of idols and witchcraft. People become enemies and they fight; they become jealous, angry, and ambitious. They separate into parties and groups; they are envious, get drunk, have orgies, and do other things like these. I warn you now as I have before: those who do these things will not possess the Kingdom of God.*

But, of course, that was then and this is now. We have become wiser and better people. You will not find jealousy or anger or ambition among us! We do not get drunk or behave indecently or fight with each other! We do not separate into cliques and and parties and groups!

No? Regardless, the point is that the aesthetic way of life is unreflective. You don't think about it. You don't fret over it. You don't second-guess yourself. You just do it! You do what you want to do. You do what you feel like doing. You work hard at getting in touch ... with your own feelings and desires.

The problem with this way of life, of course, is that I don't live in this world alone. I live in this world with you -- lots of you! -- and what comes naturally to me affects you. The aesthetic way of life enjoys the company of other people, but knows nothing about building community, nothing about loyalty or mutual responsibility or, for that matter, love. The only law it knows is "love yourself," but by doing "whatever," even that one law is broken.

The second stage, the second way of being, is the ethical. The ethical way of being is reflective. You do think about it. You do fret over it. You “step outside” yourself. You look at yourself and what you are doing from “outside,” not just from “inside.” You choose.

That’s the key ethical word: choice. You choose between options, between different courses of action, between different ways of being. If the aesthetic stage is about being yourself, the ethical stage is about choosing yourself, choosing the self you will become, the self you want to be, the self you can be, the self you should be.

In the ethical stage, you take control of your life, and assume responsibility for who you are and how you are ... which points to both the virtues and the flaws in this way of being. We do have the power to choose, but not always to choose well. We can steer our human nature, but not tame it. An ethical awareness brings grief and shame into my life as I become all too aware of my own flaws and failures. And an ethical awareness can bring despair when I consider the huge divide between the world as it should be and the world as it is, between my self as I should be and my self as I am, and when I realize that I have very little power to make it any different.

I think much of the church and many of us live in the ethical stage. We have a more or less clear set of values, a more or less clear vision of the world as it should be. We live out of a sense of duty and responsibility, and we hope to help fashion a world that embraces the same values and the same vision.

But that leads to conflict, to what we have called the culture wars. A church that embraces the ethical way of being butts heads with a culture that is enmeshed in the aesthetic way of being. The world is the naughty little child and the church is the finger-wagging parent. The world is the wayward prodigal son and the church is the stern and joyless older brother.

Think about that! The church is cast in the role of the stern and joyless older brother, and it doesn’t matter whether we’re talking about right wing/ conservative/ family values churches or left wing/liberal/social justice churches. We’re all pointing the finger and telling our neighbors how they should be.

Is this what Jesus meant by “letting our light shine?” The light the church is supposedly shining on humanity all too often leads people to feel judged and debased and devalued, not to be eager to offer praise to our Father in heaven! We sure generate a lot of heat, but I’m not so sure about the light.

Maybe we’re fighting the wrong battle ...

The third stage, the third way of being, is the religious. The religious way of being does not reject the other two ways of being, but goes beyond them. That's an important point to make because the religious way of being does not leave morality or duty or responsibility behind, but finds something above and beyond them, something more precious and more real and more life-giving than they can be. And the religious way of being does not ignore the virtues of the aesthetic way of being, of being in touch, in tune, with what is immediately at hand, of being able to live freely, even playfully, almost without thinking.

Almost. But we do think. We do choose. What we choose is a new immediacy, a way of being present, of living in the presence of God. What we choose is not "be yourself." not "choose yourself," but choose God. We go beyond the aesthetic stage by taking control of our choices, but we go beyond the ethical stage too by choosing to give up control!

The new immediacy of the religious stage is not about doing whatever I want, but about doing whatever that Spirit wants. Paul told the people in the church in Ephesus: "Let the Spirit direct your lives!" To put it in another way: love God with all your heart and mind and strength! Love God before and above everything else, and let the One who gave you life take charge of your life.

The mystery and the wonder of the religious way of being is that when I give away my life, I get it back again. When I bind myself as God's servant, then and only then am I truly free. When I acknowledge that I cannot do anything by my strength alone, I am given strength for ... everything.

When we let the Spirit direct our lives, the Spirit produces its own fruit in our lives. And these are the Spirit's fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.

Love: putting the other first ...

Joy: finding delight in what is ...

Peace: bring people together, not pushing them apart ...

Patience: trusting God's timing ...

Kindness: showing mercy like God shows mercy ...

Goodness; valuing righteousness more than success ...

Faithfulness: keeping promises because God keeps promises ...

Humility: letting God be God and me be me ...

Self-control: not being pushed around anymore by the whims of nature and public opinion ...

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control: these are the signs of the Spirit's presence and work in us. This is how we let our light shine! It is kindness and joy and humility and love, genuine love, that will lead people to offer God praise for what they see in us.

So how do we do it? But that's the point: we don't do it, the Spirit does. This is what the Spirit produces in us. It is our job to open ourselves to the Spirit and to prepare the way -- by prayer, by seeking intimacy with God above everything else, by humility, by confession, by surrender.

By surrender. Let the Spirit direct your lives!

How are you?

Are you doing whatever feels good, whatever feels right, whatever seems to come most naturally and most easily to you? Are you seeking above all else to be yourself?

Have you chosen a life of duty, of careful observance of a sacred code of laws and values? Are you doing your best to be your best?

Or have you surrendered your life to the One who gave it? Are you seeking above all else to be God's?

May the fruits of the Spirit be seen in us! May God's light shine from us, so that people will see the good things we do and praise -- not us -- but our Father in heaven!