

ISF Lecture Series 2002 Exact Center of Spirituality

By Larry Crabb

Larry Crabb:

That has to rank as one of the more interesting introductions that I've received, so I stand before you as a an acknowledged self-confessed mess, really had planned on presenting myself as totally together this morning. And I, no longer had that option, I am a happy man, I am a happy man for a very simple reason. A good friend who was here knows that I have one of my areas of hunger besides for the Lord is for chocolate chip cookies. And he brought me some Mrs. Field's chocolate chip cookies. And I'd like to call a break, if we could, for about ten minutes. [Audience laughs]

When John invited me to speak to a group of people in ministry, I knew that I wanted to say yes to that schedule allowed, and it did. And I'm grateful for that. And I want to open with a few minutes by telling you why I wanted to say yes to this particular opportunity. And I'm very grateful to to have first reason why. I'm grateful to be here. First reason why I knew I wanted to say yes when John invited me was the the more I get to know John and what he's doing, the more I appreciate him.

I was raised in a very conservative evangelical background to believe practically in the holy duet, not the Holy Trinity. The Spirit of God was part of Orthodox doctrine, but he played little or no personal role in my life or in counseling. So I think I became like Cain, a city builder. First thing I did when God told me he was going to wonder after his terrible sin was to build a city, God

said, Wander, Cain said, No, I'm going to find a way to make it without you and he built his cities. And I think that as a psychologist, I have worked hard over the years to get my theories right so I could always know what to do. I hate appearing incompetent.

Ever feel out of it when you're counseling with people, when you're chatting with people as a pastor, that your real goal is to survive the hour without looking too terribly foolish. And the notion of actually listening to the spirit and being directed by him was a very foreign thought. And I'd like to think that maybe in little ways, with some bumbling, confused steps, that my orthodoxy in terms of believing in the Trinity is shifting to a bit of orthopraxy where I'm perhaps beginning to learn a little bit of what it means to listen to the spirit, to discern perhaps what he's up to in a person's life and to follow him and what he's doing.

I really do feel like a first grader in this, but I think I'm in the right school. I think I'm in the School of Eternal Community. And that school is teaching me to believe that there really are only and this is a bit of a radical thought for many, but that there really are only two kinds of problems, physical problems and spiritual problems. A third category of psychological problems are really rooted in spiritual issues. And so perhaps true psychotherapy has more to do with spiritual direction than sometimes we realize.

I wonder if the history of the church and I know church historian, but I wonder if the history of the church when the the fundamentalist movement and the earlier part of this century was working to present the truth of depravity to the liberal movement. If they began to define sin so superficially by saying that people are really sinful, can't you see you look at the drunkenness, look at the adultery and look at all the obvious things that people are doing. And if as a result of

that, we begin to lose a depth understanding of social care and that the church at that point did not begin to forfeit its role in working with the interior world of people and to turn that role over to some place outside of the church, I'm rather thinking that the movement that has been alluded to by a few of the folks already this morning, the deeper interest in spiritual things and social care, I think there is a change on the horizon that I'm very encouraged by.

I think the spirit's wind is blowing and maybe it's time for us to adjust our sails, maybe one more deeply seeing into the depths of the soul and realizing if our gaze is guided by biblical wisdom, that the real issue in dealing with the soul, whatever the problem, is all the way from a declared hunger for God to an eating disorder. The real issue is ultimately spiritual formation, and the only adequate response to dealing with each other is to become sensitive to the Holy Spirit's movement and the tagalong that spiritual direction.

And I do believe that John and his team are doing rich and solidly biblical, thinking about entering the depths of the soul and understanding how the spirit works and how we can follow along and engage in the incredibly exciting, supernatural activity of involvement with people at a very deep level. So I'm glad to be here for that reason. I respect what's happening at the Institute of Spiritual Formation. The second reason I'm glad to be here is I really can't think of a more important audience to speak to than pastors.

And I have to say that behind your back as well as to you directly, I think you're the group of people that Satan after the family's attacking the most. And I think that the one of the reasons why that perhaps is the case is because the calling that you have as leaders in the Christian

community is at the very center of what God is all about. God has revealed a mystery that he actually has redeemed people to himself. He's reconciled people to himself, and then he's put people into a community, into a church. Now, what he said is, I my plan is for you people to relate to each other the same way the father and son relate.

I want you to relate in a way that is absolutely impossible to people who don't have the spirit of God within. And I want you to develop a community in your local church, the result of which will be the spiritual formation of its members. I want you to engage in the kind of powerful relating that will actually deal with the deepest issues in the human soul. I want that to happen. Our Lord prayed for that before he died and John, 17, as he was about to go to the cross and he prayed his high priestly prayer, as we call it.

You recall his words when he said, may they be brought talking about you and me, may they be brought to complete unity, the same unity that you and I enjoy, Father. Is that what you're experiencing in churches as watch elder boards look like? I've served as an elder in many, several churches and been on church staffs. And and I know that my hunger is to contribute to the kind of relationship that so often I thought the kind of relationships that encourage safety for people to make known what is deeply in their souls and to receive the kind of movement from another that touches the soul very deeply.

The Lord goes on to say that when they're brought to complete unity, which is his prayer, may they be brought to a complete unity, the same kind of Trinitarian unity that the eternal that the eternal community experiences may they be brought to complete unity, the kind that you and I

father enjoy the Lord speaking. I want them to come to that unity so that the world may know that you sent me. So the basis of evangelism is Christian community.

The basis of evangelism is the kind of relationships in which social. Care takes place so that the world may know that you sent me that I am who I claim to be and that you love them even as you loved me. And I wonder how many of us have grasped the notion that the father loves me the way he loves the son. And I wonder if my church experience and my experience in small groups has led me to a richer appreciation of the realization that at the core of my soul I am loved the way the father loves the son.

Let me tell you an image. I've had it myself for years that let you know that I'm just a baby in the spiritual journey. For years I have seen myself and to this day I struggle with it. I see myself as a bright, shiny red apple on a fruit bowl the middle of the table. And when you walk by this table and you see this bright, shiny red apple from a distance, you might say good looking piece of fruit. I wonder if one of the reasons I travel so much is I never have to get to know anybody this way. I can just display myself as a piece of fruit on the table from a distance. I'll probably not say hello to most of you today. Very few of you will get to know me at all. Maybe I like it that way. Maybe it's my way to survive.

I'm this piece of fruit on the table and from a distance I might look OK. And then maybe you get closer and you pick it up and you feel the fruit and there's no obvious bad spots. And you look at it and say, yeah, I think it's a pretty good piece of fruit. And then you take a bite. Maybe we get

together and we have lunch together. Perhaps you come to me for counseling and you get involved in my in my soul a little bit, get to know me.

And maybe the bite of the fruit tastes continually pretty good. But I know that there's a worm at the center of the fruit and I want to see to it you don't get two bites. That's, I think, the norm Christian community, you're not going to get two bites, I'll let you know me up to the point of safety, and I will never release the core reality of God within me because I'm not sure it's alive. I'm not sure it's there.

If what you're longing to do as a pastor, if what you're longing to do as a Christian minister is to leave the role of CEO behind, to leave the role of being a drawing personality around which you can build your church if you're wanting more than that, to honor the heart of the shepherd by becoming an under shepherd and moving into a relationship with God's people in a in a deep way. If you're looking longing to do that, then my sentence to you when it's obvious you already know this is expect trouble.

The best way to avoid marital tension is to stay single. [audience laughs]] Or if already married, divorced, you won't have as much tension.

Remember doing a seminar in Portland, Oregon a while ago in marriage? And an older gentleman came to see me after I talked about marital struggles and he said, I just want you to know Dr. Crabb said somewhat like that, that my wife and I married 40 years and we haven't had conflict for about thirty five.

And I you know, I didn't know how to handle that. I said, Did you die thirty five years ago? And we chatted a bit to where my abrasiveness was perhaps diminished enough for him to feel a little more comfortable, and he and he said, well, and he said this very sincerely, had tears in his eyes as we talked a little bit. And he said, thirty five years ago we went to separate bedrooms. Only way to avoid relational tension is don't have relationships.

So if you really want to move into the depths of a person's life, expect expect a lot of problems. Here's my topic for the morning, spiritual direction, getting involved in people's lives, in the depths of their souls, spiritual direction, entering the depths of the human soul and releasing the depths of your own soul where the spirit of God dwells to touch the depths of another person's soul so that they're actually spiritually formed spiritual direction where depth, psychology and supernatural reality meet.

That's what I want to talk about to you for the time that I have this morning before I break and let me introduce my topic by issuing an invitation that I think will perhaps after the morning is concluded, might be able to to encourage some some profit from the mourning that might linger and continue and hopefully grow as opposed to having a pleasant morning and limiting it. Just to that, I'd like to think that more the spirit will be pleased to do more than simply that.

Here's my invitation to you after today, and I know some of you are already involved yourself in this activity. But after today, I would like to invite you if you already haven't, to ask God to give you one person, ask God to give you one person. That is a self-confessed mess, that

acknowledges a spiritual hunger, that says to you at some level, I really would like to know God better. I would really like to know what it means to move by the new and living way into the manifest presence of God. I would like to know what it means to experience the reality of God in the very core of my soul. I would like to know what all these words about listening to the spirit. I'd like to know what that means.

I would like to practically, functionally, existentially a living. Only believe in the Holy Spirit has a reality in my soul that reveals the person of Christ in the depths of me to the glory of the father. I would love to be spiritually formed. Will you help me ask God to give you one person that will let you spiritually direct them? And I know that is people in ministry who just like me. You're talking to lots of folks all the time.

You're visiting in hospitals and you're meeting people in marital crises and you're comforting the bereaved and you're guiding folks when they're teenagers or in rebellion and you're meeting with committees and you're trying to set visions and you're you're doing lots and lots of things. And many of you travel as I do, and you meet friends for lunch and you have a good time and you have wonderful conversations and you assume that you're in the community, but by invitation to you is to let the spirit direct you to one person, perhaps in your church and your spirit ministry who's aware of spiritual hunger, who may or not may or may not be in crisis and spend regular time for at least a year indefinitely, maybe weekly, maybe biweekly, maybe monthly for the explicit purpose of intentional spiritual formation.

As I've begun to think about this notion of spiritual formation and spiritual direction and made a bit of a shift away from what I've been doing traditionally as a psychologist for years and moving in a different direction, I really have found that it's much easier to think about it than to do it. It's much easier to talk about it, write books about it, give lectures about it than to actually sit down with somebody.

Because the risk of maybe sounding boastful when I get behind the microphone, I really feel like I can probably pull it off. But then when I get to know one of you people and you say, Larry, something you said triggered a thought, can you can you talk to me about there's times that I just feel like I got to catch a plane. I don't know. I really want to get that involved because I'm going to feel so inadequate in this presentation.

I want to ask the question, what do you what do you and I need to know and who who do you and I need to be to provide spiritual direction? If you're already involved, you're going to get involved. And I'm going to continue to be involved in people at a at a deep level. And if I'm going to enter the battle for their souls, if I'm going to enter the battle for people's souls, what what is it going to mean to do that?

What am I going to have to see? What am I going to have to know? Who am I going to have to be to enter the battle for people's souls? Think about that just for a moment as I continue to talk to who do you know right now? Maybe it's your take about your spouse. If you're married to the person that you're working with in the ministry, think about one individual that you could say, I know the battle that that person is fighting.

Some time ago, I got up in the morning and I was praying and I spent some time praying for my wife. And and I found as I was praying for my wife, that I literally began to be bored as I prayed. And I thought about that. I think I said to myself, you know, the reason I'm bored is I don't know what her struggles are. I don't know what's happening in the deepest part of her soul. I take the woman for granted. I don't know the struggles of her soul, because about four years ago, when my wife and I were the downtown hotel in Denver, we were staying the night in our home city. But we had a hotel that night. I was speaking early in the morning at a hotel function. And at 4:00 in the morning, I developed a pain that I had never experienced before, turned out to be a kidney stone I wasn't familiar with at the time, but I'm familiar with it now. And the pain was intense and uncomfortable. And I rolled out of bed and began rolling on the floor, making noises appropriate to the occasion and feeling that are that are oneness.

And Christ demanded that she be a part of this experience. So. I roused her from her slumber to share in the moment, and she saw me rolling on the floor screaming in agony and she called 911 and they they came. They have my first ambulance, right? Actually, they came and wheeled me out of the hotel room and took me to the ambulance downstairs and out in the parking lot. And my wife was in the front and I was in the back. And we drove to the hospital about a 15 minute drive, about 4:30 quarter to 5:00 in the morning. And and the the the paramedic who was attending to me in the back was doing lots of things. I think he might have even drawn blood. I forget if that was the case, but he had a little thing there. And he was taking my temperature, of course, and asking a bunch of questions. And he got on the phone and call the hospitals said bringing a white Caucasian male about 62. I said 54 [audience laughs]. And just making this fuss

over me all the time, and I at one point when the pain subsided, I said to him, why all the fuss? I made an ambulance ride. You're asking a thousand questions. You call the emergency room and why? What are you doing all this for? And it was a dumb question, I suppose, but I asked it and I'll never forget his answer. He said, we need to know what battle we're fighting.

Wonder who knows what battle I'm fighting, I'm fighting battles. As of yesterday, I had a couple hours where inside of me, I thought I had nothing to say to that group of people tomorrow morning. I'm fighting battles. What do you need to know to help me? What do I need to know not to help? I don't like that word. What do I need to know to join you, to be with you, to discern what's going on in you and to release whatever is inside of me that is of God into your life that might help lead you into a deeper relationship with the Lord.

What what is required for spiritual partnership and walking together? What is required for for discipleship, true discipleship? I don't think there's any great distinction between rich spiritual direction and true discipleship. This is a new term we're getting maybe more familiar with, but I'm not sure if it's very different than than discipleship. I don't. But I have to say discipleship. I don't mean this merely the simplistic memorize the verse and witness once a day and you'll be fine. But there's some kind of a depth discipleship that actually shapes the soul that spiritual direction is all about. So I want to ask what we need to know to enter deeply into the battle for somebody's soul.

Then after I talk about that for a little bit this morning and my first presentation over lunch, I want to ask the question, well, what exactly are we aiming toward? What is the exact center of

spiritual formation? What is what are we aiming toward? What are we what are we playing God will do in this person's life? What is the evidence that formation is actually happening? At a conference tonight, I'll be asking the question, what is the role of community in all of this? So the question for this particular address, what do you need to know? Who do you need to be to provide true discipleship or spiritual direction?

Let me frame my comments by talking about an incident that took place yesterday. My secretary called yesterday and said and I'm disguising the name and disguising the story a little bit, but pretty close to what actually happened. She called yesterday and said, Peter is trying to get hold of you. And he sounded very desperate. Peter is a good friend who I've known for maybe 10 or 15 years, associate pastor and large church in the area where I live. We were social friends. We see them now and then. Not too often. Our paths don't naturally cross, but we consider ourselves friends and younger than I am. I've spent some time with them in a counseling discipling kind of way.

So several years ago and she said that he is urgently trying to get hold of you. And so I called him yesterday afternoon, just set up here and my cell phone and called him. We talked for nearly an hour. Phone call began like this. He he answered and he said hello. And I said, Peter, yeah, this is Larry. Larry, good of you to call. I thought you told me that you were trying to get hold of me. I gather something tough is going on. How do you start a conversation? Oh, I don't know, just talk. Tell them what you know, something going on. And I'm highly trained. You can tell him. [audience laughs] Well, thanks for calling, Larry. Yeah, it really is is, Larry. It really is pretty bad. And I paused and said nothing. And then he said this. He said, well, there's there's a

real level of tension that's just eating me up between me and another staff member at our church. And this tension kind of blew up a couple of days ago. And and I don't know why, but just the fact of this tension between me and his brother on the staff and has just erupted, it just has triggered so many fears in me. I'm afraid of losing my job. I'm afraid that I'm just incompetent and what I'm doing. And you didn't use this language, but is the worm showing in the core of the apple? And they said, Larry, the tension has gone beyond any warrantable level of explanation.

And I'm and I found myself terrified of a lot of things. Why would my wife stay with me? I'm just going through incredible anxiety. I'm so terrified. I'm shaking. For the last couple of days, I've not been able to sleep. I don't know what to do. That was the conversation yesterday. How do you feel when somebody hear something like that? You've all been there, right? You've all had people say things, something like that to you. What do you feel when you hear that what happens inside of you is your first thought?

Praise God for the opportunity to demonstrate the skill that is within me and my soul as a trained man or woman of God. Boy, if you're there, if you're hopeless, let me tell you. I'm 57, I've been doing this for 30 years, I've had a lot of conversations with a lot of people about their problems and what's increasing, there's a profound sense of what to do.

What do you say next? Let's have a word of prayer. [audience laughs] Have you thought of this passage? What do you do? Talk about your father that seems, you know. Think of it this way, here's a man that's just told you, think of yourself as being on the other end of the phone, make

make yourself the person who has heard that you've all heard something similar and let it be that he has just told you his what I like to call his journeying reality.

That's a reality right now. And part of his journey, if the gospel doesn't speak to it, then we don't comprehend the gospel. He's shared with you a reality on his journey. This is something that's going on right now in his life. He's having a real life tension. He's having a relational tension. Jesus prayed that his people would come to complete unity that they'd relate like the father and the son. And these two guys are not relating like the father and the son.

There's some spiritual issue going on. And this brother of mine, the spiritual brother of mine, who calls and tells me the story. And I feel profoundly adequate for profoundly inadequate to know what to do. May I tell you that a lot of people and I lead the pack, a lot of people live in this kind of conversation to cover their inadequacy. And many people get training in order to become adequate. And the more adequate you feel, may I suggest, the more likely it is you're going to quench the spirit.

Is it possible that a feeling of inadequacy is a profound opportunity? Because oftentimes when I hear somebody share something like that, I feel inadequate as well as a little irritated. Haven't you got it together yet? A little better than that. You still whining about this kind of stuff? Anybody as immature as I am here, please. Thank you. There is a brother back there. Thank you, [inaudible 00:25:19] that's fine.

And what we do with our inadequacy is we sometimes just try to stick it behind behind something that we've learned that we hope will work and we don't ask the question what is really happening inside of me as this person is presenting his journey into reality? We don't go there. We simply ask, all right, what do I do? And then we come up with something that we hope will be helpful. And as a result, we become a manager of this person's life, not a spiritual director.

Peter shared with me the name is not accurate, I'm using a phony name here, but Peter told me in the phone yesterday that he went to his senior pastor with a struggle. And the senior pastor, he told me, suggested some communication strategies. He talked about some listening skills and moving toward this brother in some ways that he could maybe follow a certain method to bring reconciliation about, he urged Peter to try to work it out with the other staff member, according to a couple of the communication techniques the senior pastor gave him. And I want to suggest to you that if those skills were to work, if Peter were to take the skills that it was suggested, he follow in working through this conflict with those skills work, the immediate fire might be put out, the crisis could be resolved or at least averted for the time, but an opportunity for spiritual direction would be lost.

The tension between these two brothers might be relieved, at least for the moment, but Peter would be no more in love with God and no more like Jesus, and no more depended on the spirit than he was before. Let me suggest at the time that I have left, let me suggest for things to consider, for things to consider as you interact with Peter, whoever your Peter happens to be. Each of you, just like me, has many conversations where people share a journey. In reality, it might be a crisis of a staff tension. It might be a marital crisis. It might be a concern over a child.

That might be a sexual addiction issue. It might be a desperate hunger to know the Lord more deeply. It might be a boredom with prayer, whatever the reality might be that when somebody feels safe enough with you to share a journey with reality, let me just suggest four things.

First thing I want to suggest is this look first into your own heart as the other shares his or her life, look first into your own interior world. Notice the natural tendency and resist it, noticed a natural tendency and resist it to respond to the person's yearning reality by asking yourself, what do I do? I've got to help notice that and resist it. Don't fix people. In my own judgment, the small group movement in America is the most untapped potential for spiritual life in the church today. Many of you involved in small groups have been involved in small groups a lot in the course of my adult life and what I've seen happen time and time again, I've been a party to it, and perhaps you've seen it as well as you've seen people share in a small group, a particular struggle at some point and say, well, it's been a lousy week, let me tell you why. And the group gathers around the person with love and concern and fundamentally they give advice.

And have you thought about doing this? We are such a culture of fixers and maybe we don't understand what's driving us internally to require the fix. Maybe there's a terror within our own souls that we're trying to relieve by fixing somebody else. The first thing I would suggest is you got to look into your own heart and ask yourself what's happening inside of you, what's happening inside of me. When Peter shared with me and I was sitting up on the campus with my cell phone talking to Peter yesterday for an hour. And even as he shared this, I just found myself pondering, Larry, what what are you feeling right now? What's going on inside of you? And I felt a little bit irritable. I felt a pressure. I felt like I had to look at my watch to see if I had time for this. I felt like I had to maneuver gracefully out of this so I could get to what I had to do next.

I became aware of all that sort of stuff. And then I became aware that beneath all of that, there was this a deep sense of and I can talk about this, but I don't know how to do it. I feel inadequate. And I found myself aware. This is all in kind of a flash of a moment. You don't begin your self-examination in this moment. If it hasn't begun, you're going to get before. This will be a little difficult at the moment.

But I found myself thinking that my sense of inadequacy, which is so profound, is I try to handle it by by proving something. And my real goal as I interact with Peter, I found myself thinking, you know, when we hang up the phone that there's something in me that once, Peter, to hang up and walk away saying, man, am I glad I called. Larry didn't find the word good. I survived another exchange. I've got to prove something about myself.

What is your real goal as you're interacting with Peter? The proverb says in chapter 20 and verse five that the purposes of a man's heart are like deep waters. What's he saying? Enter the dead. And discover the mystery of your own depravity, enter the depths and discover what you've so long lived to deny that in the core of your soul, apart from the work of the spirit, you're fundamentally out for yourself, just like me. I've got to prove something.

I've got to make Peter think I'm really smart. I've got to make Peter think I'm really caring. I've got to make Peter think that boy Larry is the right guy to call. Am I glad I have him for my friend? We've got to prove all that. I don't want to look stupid. I want to be able to help.

And I suggest the urge to help is perhaps the most lethal to the true spiritual direction requires you to assume control, to make something happen. Maybe it's wise to identify our own fleshly ambitions. Our own ways of hiding our insecurities might be better. Somebody shares a yearning reality and we take a look at our own interior world to let our desperate demand find ourselves, to prove ourselves to be somebody might be helpful that all of that realization lead us into personal brokenness, because only when brokenness meets brokenness does life erupt.

Only then will the spirit do his richest work, first thing I want to say then is realize that when somebody share something with you, that first thing to do is not to figure out how do you solve the problem, how do you be helpful, but look first in your own heart and see what's stirring in your own depths. And that obviously is something that needs to be a lifelong process, not just something that in the moment of a conversation.

The second thing I'd like to share with you is this in vision and vision, what the spirit could do in the other person's soul envision. Listen carefully what the spirit could do at this point, not how he is moving. That comes later in vision, not what is the spirit doing right now. Don't think about that yet, I would suggest. But get a vision for what could happen. What is God's plan? What is God up to?

What did Jesus die for? What's the point of the gospel isn't the point of the gospel that God receives glory out of the people that are more in love with him than with anything else? And then we start envisioning what would it look like for Peter to be spiritually formed? What would it look like for Peter in the middle of a tension with a staff member in the middle of feeling a bit

angry with his senior pastor for having missed him and his agony and giving him dismissive advice as Peter saw it?

What would it mean for Peter, who's now mad at a senior pastor, ticked off at a fellow staff member and full of anxiety over losing a job, maybe even losing his wife, facing his own miserableness? That's a pretty picture. I mean, this is the spirit of God up to this. And I wonder if we could become Galatians 4:19 type people who when somebody shares adjourning reality, we get excited and we begin to feel the pains of childbirth.

Until Christ is formed and does this passion begin to excite us, a passion that we look at this person with a with a vision of what God could do in this person's life? And can I tell you that when when the vision of what God could do is enflaming your soul, the other person will smell it in you and they will begin to feel the beginnings of safety with you and they will begin to be willing to open up a little more deeply. This person believes in me.

Number two, to envision what the spirit could do when the other person, not how he's moving right now, because you don't know that yet. But what could happen? Galatians 4:19. That's number two. When Peter paused after he said all that he said about the tension with the staff member and I don't know what to do. And my pastor told me some communication techniques and that felt like he didn't hear me very well. When Peter paused, I reflected for a moment of my own interior world. As I've said, I realized that I felt somewhat aggressive in my irritability and impatience to get things handled. And so I chose to remain silent for a bit because whatever I said I knew would come out of my flesh. And so I quietly repented of that and began to pay

attention what was happening in me that might reflect my confidence in God's spirit and what I longed for and Peter.

And so what I said was this and this is not verbatim, of course, but it's close as I try to jot down my memory of the conversation of yesterday afternoon after Peter shared his journey to reality. And I thought about my interior world for a moment and thought about what the spirit might do in Peter's heart. Here's what I said to him. I said something along these lines. I said, Peter, when Claudia told me that you call that you called and this is not a sentence. There's no point in lying about this. When when Claudia called and said that you were were struggling and wanted to call back, I want you to know and in addition to feeling some time constraints and some, I have time to call them back and all of that, I want you to know that I really felt a desire to call you back. And now that I'm hearing your voice, now that we're chatting, can I can I tell you three things that are happening in me?

It's always dangerous when you say that, because I always forget the second two when you say the first, but. But I took the risk and because I just three things kind of popped into my mind and I'm willing to say, golly, that might be the spirit of God. And so I said, now that I'm hearing your voice, I'm feeling three things. I'm I'm feeling a warmth. And it's funny how awkward we get in saying this. But I said, I. I just like you. I'm feeling a warmth, I'm just like you.

Second thing I'm feeling is, is a respect. I've tasted something of who you are and and I know that who you are is alive beneath whatever mess you're going through right now. And I just feel respect doesn't interact with with my brother. And third thing, and this is premature and it's not

meant to encourage you, is just meant to share what's happening in me. I'm just being open with you. I really feel a hope. I have no idea all that's going on. I have no idea how it's all going to work out. But I, I can sense a vision of the real you emerging out of this mess. I just said that simply and Peter said nothing for a few moments, thought maybe the cell phone had died. And then in a broken voice, he said, you don't know what it means that you believe in me. I said, well, without Christ, I wouldn't. It's kind of warm. Without Christ, I really have no hope for you. But he's in you and you want him. So I figure that's a winning combination. And I think my confidence in the spirit is well placed. That's what I said. Then the next thing I said was this. I said, Peter, tell me what's happening. Tell me your story. I mean, I suggest that when you're spiritually directing, it's it's not just in some esoteric here, relevant abstract way, a mystical process. There is a mystical element here, of course, but it's a mystical element that is grounded in reality. And you want to get specific. And when you're asking somebody when they're saying at attention with this guy and talk to Senior, I'm mad at him. I'm tense with this guy. And, you know, you want to you want to get a little more specific. And so I said, well, give me an example. Give me an example of the most recent tension that you had with his brother and tell me what happened and tell me how you handle it. I'd I'd like to hear the specifics of your story for just a moment, because I believe that if you stayed general, that theology remains abstract. But if you enter the real battle going on, theology comes alive. So tell me what's happening and then people begin to tell their story.

Ever notice how people tell their stories? It seems to me there are at least four ways that people tell their stories. And I'll say this very quickly and simply, you listen to people tell their stories. They usually tell in one of four ways, one way as they tell their stories of tragedy. Oh, let me tell

you what happened, I mean, it's unbelievable, this guy is just he just doesn't understand me. It's a victim thing. I just it's just awful what this person is doing that I just can't believe it.

Larry, I have tried so hard and I've been I've been faithful. I really have been faithful. But it just I just can't believe what's happening. And people will tell the story is a tragedy present themselves as a survivor. And their pull on you as the spiritual director is one, what are they pulling you to do their pull when they tell the story as a survivor? They're saying as a survivor, I'll make it. And your job is help. I'm telling my story is a tragedy. I'm a survivor. I'll make it now. You help. And if that's the way the conversation is going, there's you got to learn how to resist that pull sucker. The way people tell the story, is it a romance? And the more classical sense of the term, not the Harlequin novels, a romance. Where can I share with you? And and this will sound a bit cynical. So forgive me, because it's a valid version of in which the following sentence could be said, but it's an invalid version.

We have to distinguish a difference. Can I share with you what God is doing in my life? Praise the Lord for how I'm growing. I want to make that known to you. Now, that could be said validly. That can be said humbly and gratefully, or it can be said as a parade.

And the person who tells the story is a romance. Yes, things are difficult, but oh, praise God. There's a sense in which Christ isn't the hero. I'm the hero. They present themselves not as a survivor, but as a hero. And they're sentenced to you is not all make it, but I'm making it. And your job, should you care to accept it, is to applaud. Third way people tell their stories is as an irony, not survivor, not hero, but cynic in this world. Nobody really makes it a spiritual

formation stuff yet. Finally, somebody who's actually formed. Yeah, right. Her crab. He's a self-confessed master of Erdem, and boy, is he ever using the half has not been told about that guy all day. Nobody really makes it, says the cynic. Telling the story is an irony. What's his poll? Join me in my cynicism. Sneer at life with me. Give up hope. Last way people tell the stories is a comedy. They present themselves as a clown and we're all making it rains. God, superficial healing. We're all making it what's the bowl stays shallow with me. Those are on the journey together to tell their stories as a transcendent drama. Where we present ourselves as pilgrims and the pole is walk with me as together we seek God.

Peter, tell me your story, what's happening between you and this guy that you're struggling with? And so we talk about that. I call that reframing. There's other ways to use that term, but I call that reframing. But the frame not around the immediate emotional concern of the journeying reality, but reframe put the focus around the relational story and then listen to how they tell it. And as Peter begins to tell his story, well, after and a half this person said this and I said that and they said this and here's what happened. Then he went on for 10 minutes or so and told a story.

And what does it mean to spiritually listen? Not only are you listening to see how they tell their story, to get a feel for how they're seeing themselves as a survivor and you're supposed to be there to help them or as a hero and you're going to applaud or as a cynic and you'll sneer with them at life or as a clown and you'll just laugh superficially. You're thinking about all that. But you're you're also thinking about two basic biblical categories as you go into the depths of the person's soul. And this is what I mean by depth psychology.

You're thinking about the deep dynamics of the flesh. And the deep dynamics of the spirit, let me talk about that number three, the third thing I want to tell you is about flesh dynamics. And let me introduce it this way. What's really wrong is I'm talking to Peter. As you're talking to your Peter, what's really wrong does not lie on the surface. And when the fella tells you he's having an affair, what's really wrong includes the affair, that's wrong, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. What's really wrong does not lie on the surface. What's really wrong cannot be solved at the level of behavior change. The passions of the new heart within the believer must be released and can only be richly released in brokenness over facing the control of our old heart passions.

Let me say it again, the passions of the new heart that is promised to us in the new covenant, the passions of the heart and dwelt by the spirit, the heart that has an appetite for God. The passions of the new heart within every believer can only be fully released in brokenness over facing how we're controlled by old heart passions. So we want to listen for the flesh dynamics. How was the energy of the flesh operating in Peter in the middle of this circumstance? And I begin to wonder how has the world and the devil shaped my friend's interior world? And I want to think about that category. Flesh Dynamics as I listened to Peter talk.

Now, let me give you a very simple basic principle straight from Matthew seven. You will not be able to see what's wrong in the other until you recognize what's wrong in yourself. Therefore, it's wise, I believe, to become a self-confessed mess, because that's what we are a part of the spirit.

That's all we are with the spirit. We're more than that. But there's still a mess. Let me illustrate what I mean by being a mess. If I'm going to be able to spiritually direct Peter, if I'm going to be

able to be an instrument of God and moving in Peter's life and and joining Peter, not helping him, but becoming a part of his life and maybe exercising some some wisdom, some discernment and having having a passion within me, that is the spirit releasing himself through me into Peter's heart and stirring the appetite for God in him. If all that's going to happen and I'm going to be able to see what's blocking the work of God in his heart. I've got to see it first in me.

Illustration: about six, eight months ago, and I mentioned earlier your audience this week that whenever I give a time and say six months ago, I have no idea when it was. And I also mentioned before that there's only one reason I'm glad my wife is not with me on this trip. She always knows exactly when it was and. I've been speaking to large groups where I have said three years ago something happened and my wife has let me know, Larry, four and a half years ago, February 12th, you know, [audience laughs] Ephesians 5, of course, pops into my mind immediately about loving my wife is Christ of the church.

And I exercise that by saying something like, honey, nobody cares. Because my wife is not here without fear of contradiction, I can say three years ago, no, three months ago, I don't know when it was, I really don't. But it was within the last year, I think. I came home from a long day and I was tired, a little discouraged and not feeling all that peppy and I greeted my wife perfunctorily and I thought, well, I'll just lie down. I deserve a break. And I saw the latest issue of Christianity today lying in the coffee table. It has come the mail that day. And I thought, good, now I'll read something that'll stir me up. So I did what all of you do when you pick up, what do you do? First thing to do is backpage is a trucker, Philip right? Chuck Colson or Philip Yancey. This time it was Philip Yancey turn to write. Philip's a close friend. He lives in Evergreen, a couple of miles

from where we live. We spent six years together in a small group. I know Philip well. I don't want to name drop, but Billy Graham told me never to do that. [audience laughs]

But I picked up and I saw an article by Phillip and I thought, well, I'll read an article by Phillip and recognize his hair, you know, and and began reading his article. And then in the course of reading his two columns, he mentioned this brief little back page article and he mentioned some of the thinking of Henry David Thoreau, the philosopher that I've heard of. I've never read Thoreau. And then he mentioned Walter Wink, theologian. I've barely heard of that. He mentioned the Dutch novelist whose name I never heard of and couldn't even pronounce. But the time I finished reading the article and I guess it was going through me. Think about class dynamics now, if you could listen to my mind working as I put the article down. Here's what I actually said to myself, this is close to what I said six months ago, two months ago, last week, whenever it was what I said was if I had time like Phillip has, I could read all those books. You know, he didn't speak. I'm a better speaker than he is. He's a better writer than me. His books sell more than mine. But that's because he reads a lot more. He has more time than I do. Dadgum it wasn't one of my so busy all the time. I'm so sick of this. Philip has a beautiful home up in the mountains where you sit down on his back porch and looks a deer and foxes and [audience laughs].

What I want to think like that? Can you help me? I make that jounrey my reality How are you going to spiritually directly me? What flesh dynamics are are you aware of? How's the flesh working in my life right now? I live in the spirit, because that attitude would mean that the next

group meeting I'm going to feel the tension with Phillip and our [inaudible 00:51:08] Trinitarian like relating is pretty much eliminated, on my side.

What's the deal? Well, I felt threatened and exposed as somebody that's not worthy of a certain kind of recognition. So recognition is what I want for life. So when Jesus said this is life that they might know God, I have changed that. This is life that I might get recognized. How did I learn that? I think back on my history and how the world, the devil in the flesh have combined to produce some pretty unsavory attitudes within me and think back to when I was 30 or graduate student University of Illinois and clinical psych program.

I think back to a moment then this will sound like a boast. It's really a confession when Dr. Altman, the professor of my course and psychopathology was turning back papers that he had received earlier and had just graded the papers and he wasn't a very personal type professor. He didn't know us as individual students. And he was just looking at the name and saying, Sally Brown and George Smith and Larry Crabb when he came over to me to give me my paper, he stopped and he said something. And what he said were these words, this will sound like a boast, but stay with me. Will end up not being one. He handed me my paper and he said, this is the finest paper I've ever read in my history as a professor in graduate school.

How do I feel? Maybe God's calling me to write that other people see it. You know, it'd be nice if more people than Dr. Altman said that. Oh, my. I know what life is taking whatever resources God has given me and parading them for my glory. Can I see the flesh in my own heart? As he hear somebody's story, can you begin to enter the depths of their struggle and realize what they're

battling against? I know Peter a little bit. I know that Peter's dad is a wealthy businessman who is not at all happy that Peter went into the ministry and is not making much money. And I have some understanding of Peter from knowing a little bit that he if you were to ask 10 people to know Peter well, give me an adjective. what's the first adjective to come into your mind about Peter? I know what a lot of people would say. They'd say, nicest guy in the world. I wonder why.

I'll do everything right relationally so that somebody will finally move toward me in ways that I long for because I know what life is. And as you listen to what's beneath the surface and get a hold of flesh dynamics and you start seeing all these things that are wrong and all the ways the world, the flesh of the devil have conspired to produce passions in the soul that are taking this person away from God. Something in you wants to fix all that. Now, let me tell you something that I believe is so basic to our work in spiritual direction. You never can fix the flesh. Too many times in therapy, we therapists try to repair the flesh. It cannot be fixed. It can only be replaced. And that's the new heart of the gospel.

Quick story to make the point, pastor friend of mine in Texas tells the story of a couple from his church, a couple of kids who went to Galveston for a weekend on the coast, the Gulf of Mexico, and just a vacation weekend with their little kids. And as they were playing on the beach, their little kid saw a stray dog and ugly little thing. And they noticed that nobody was taking care of this dog, just a stray. And the kids said to the mom and dad, can we take this dog home and give it a home? And the parents let us know. Maybe this is the spirit moving in them to have compassion. Maybe we should respond to it. So they said, yeah, take this stupid little thing home. And so they picked up this ugly little dog and took it home and they went to the pet store

and got a dog bath and gave it a bath and put a little ribbon around it in the collar and got some dog food. And dog went to bed with the kids that night. And the next day the family was out for a bit and the dog was home by itself with a cat. They came home and the cat was dead. And the father began to be a little concerned, took the dog to the veterinarian and said, We picked this dog up on the beach of Galveston and it killed our cat. And it just I'm just a little concerned. Maybe it's diseased or I just need you to check it out.

And the vet said, well, your problem here is this isn't the dog. This is an Alaskan rat. I don't need to tell you something, no matter how much dog food you give it, you'll never make this thing into a dog. The point of the story is a rat is a rat is a rat, the flesh is the flesh is the flesh, and you're not going to make a rat into a dog and you're not going to make the flesh into the spirit.

So you got to depend on God giving us a new spirit because the flesh will stay in the flesh until the day we die. That's the third thing. Pay attention to flesh dynamics, the last thing as my time is coming to an end is no. For the fourth thing I want to tell you is this is as you begin to understand flesh Dynamics and the person you're chatting with, you begin to discern some of that because you've discerned it in your own heart and you realize you're up against a Gillett's. There's nothing you can do to socialize this rat into a dog and you can't domesticate and the flesh will always be ugly and rotten and miserable and narcissistic. And and the fourth thing is you realize there's something deeper than the flesh in the heart of every Christian. That's the fourth thing you realize there's something deeper than the flesh. There's a new heart, Ezekiel 36 enlivened by the Spirit, Romans 8, aroused by the community, Hebrews 10:24 and fed by the

word. 2 Timothy 3:16, there's a new heart. Ezekiel 36 that's enlivened by the spirit all through Romans 8 aroused by the community. Hebrews 10: 24 and fed by the word 2 Timothy 3:16 there.

I spent some time at Ground Zero a couple of months after 9/11, and a friend of mine who spent far more time than I did there told me of an encounter that he had when he was there, and he said that he was walking the area. He got permission to function as a chaplain, and he spent 11 days at Ground Zero and he was talking with one exhausted fireman. And he noticed as he spent several days there that the firemen hardly ever took a break.

He had gone days without getting a night's sleep. He would take a catnap for maybe half an hour and then fill himself with coffee and smoke another pack of cigarettes and then just go back to the battle again. And my friend said to this fireman, wouldn't it be wiser if you got a good night's sleep? And the answer, the fireman, was this. He looked at the guy with intensity and he said, if my friend is alive in there, he knows I'm coming. I won't let him down. Is that the attitude of a spiritual director, is there life in Peter beneath the rubble? Am I so anxious to move into the depths of the soul to find that life and mind the pains of childbirth while Christ is forming? And Peter, you're alive and I'm entering the battle for your soul, and I want to see what the battle really is. And by God's grace, I will touch the life of Christ in you.

My simple model for spiritual direction. Enter, see and touch. How do you touch it? Face your own interior world and see what's happening inside of you, you. Courage, the story to be told, you know, what's wrong is beneath the surface, so you pay attention to the story and you listen to flesh dynamics by faith. You believe the spirit is at work and you just long to see any evidence of

the spirit. Can you see can you hear any noise? Can you see any movement beneath the rubble? And when you see it, you scramble through it and touch the reality of that. And that's sticking through the rubble and clear it away. What does it mean to touch? Let me put it to a very simply, and all I'm doing in this brief presentation, of course, is giving you a bare bones outline of the process, the spiritual direction. But how do you touch it? I would suggest this. You touch another soul by pouring into them whatever is most alive in you. You touch another soul by pouring into them, whatever is most alive in you.

And that's where a supernatural reality begins to be experienced. One story to make the point and I'll sit down and we'll take a break. We have two sons. A younger son went through the biggest crisis of his life and of our family. Now, two, three years ago, it was a very difficult time for the grand family and and our son came close to losing it in the middle of this crisis. And as he was beginning to move through the debris in his life and I was doing my best as a dad to journey with him, he made arrangements to take some money he had saved up.

And he said, Dad, I'm going halfway across the world for about 10 days and I'm going to get away and I'm going to a nice place. I intend to have some fun over there. But he said, Dad, the real reason I'm going I want to tell you this, he said, I'm going in because I I've got to know God better. I'm not going to make it. He told me that I found myself disturbed to pray, and so I committed to my son. I said, here's what I'm going to do while you're gone for that 10 days, I'm going to pray for you every day. And my commitment not to be mechanistic or legalistic, but my passion and commitment, it'll be no less than 15 minutes every day. You're going to know your pope is interceding before you for the throne on your behalf. Thanks to him, he left. I prayed

every day more than 15 minutes, about the seventh or eighth day when he while he was gone, I was driving somewhere and I had about an hour in the car and I thought, will this be a good time to pray?

So I'll start to pray for my son, who was halfway across the world. And as I began to pray, I've ever, ever prayed for people and gotten bored in the middle of your own prayer. And here's my son in the middle of a spiritual crisis and I'm in the car, and dear Lord, don't close your eyes when you drive in. But dear Lord, I want to pray for I want to pray for Kennedy. And I tell the story with this permission. And I've we've talked about this at length. And he said that if this will help anybody. And so I'm praying in the car. And dear Lord, I pray that God bless Kenny and see what's on the radio. Oh, dear Lord. I just ask that you'll you'll impose on your Lord to turn it off. Turn it off. Well, that's a good point, though, dear Lord. And I thought, what's wrong? I'm praying for my son, who I love with all my heart, who's in the middle of a spiritual crisis. And I'm fiddling with the radio. And I thought, is there anything to me that's a line toward him because of Jesus? And I thought about that. And I thought and I just drove along and stopped praying and just began exploring my own interior life. And I found myself thinking, you know, I really do love that boy. And I long for him to know God. Well, in the middle of this crisis and I long for the tribulations that God has brought into his life, are allowed to come into his life. I longed for him to welcome them as friends and to have those troubles drive him into a deeper relationship with God. I long for that. And and I found myself becoming very aware of my longings for Kenny and the pains of childbirth that Christ would be formed in him. And sometimes I get here and sometimes you do as well. The only thing which expresses your longings is music. And I begin to sing my prayer. And I began to sing three songs, just old songs that I know and you all know as well.

I began to sing great as I faithfulness and I raised in a Christian home. So I know all the verses. How much godly or can you get, you know, and I just saying great is I faithful this all the verses. And I was, I was weeping Lord. I long for my son to be able to look at you and say in the middle of what looks like a disaster great is the faithfulness. I longed for him to be able to sing that song from the depths of his heart. And then I sang the chorus. I love you, Lord, O God, may my son be able to lift his eyes to heaven and say, I love you. You've not failed me in the middle of these things that have happened that are so hard, I find a love for you even strengthened through the hard times. And then I finished up with what's become the Crabb family song. It is well with my soul, Lord. May my son sing that song from the depths of his heart that I was in tears singing that for probably forty five minutes. He got back from halfway across the world. My wife and I went to visit him. A week or two later we were sitting having lunch in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, where he lives and of course of our lunch together. I said, Ken, I've got to tell you about a little weird prayer time. I told you I'd pray every day. Fifteen minutes. Well, I think it was Saturday. Yeah, it was Saturday. That's right. It was Saturday. You've been gone eight or nine days. And and Saturday I was driving because it had to be someplace at two o'clock and that's at about twelve and had an hour or two in the road. And here's what happened. Kenny and I told my story and I said I was just I just began singing three songs that I sang were great as I faithfulness. And I love you, Lord, that as well with my soul. And when I said that, never forget it. Rachel is sitting here. Kenny was there, I was here and Kenny leaned forward. He said, When did you do that? It was Saturday. I know. What time was it? What did you say at the time? It was, I guess when I was singing that it probably was about maybe 12:30 maybe something like that. 12:30 to 1:30 thereabouts. And Ken starts to let me see, I was halfway across the world. That would be time

zones, let me think. And he said, Dad, where I was it was Sunday and that's the first day that I had the courage to go for a long walk on the beach by myself. And for three hours I walked the beach and I didn't stop for three hours singing three songs, Great is My Faithfulness. I love you, Lord. It is well with my soul.

Folks, supernatural reality is available to us if we're willing to enter the depths. Father, I pray that these servants of yours that serve so faithfully that in the middle of their own journey realities their own tensions, just like I am really all a bunch of self-confessed messes. But somehow at the core, we're no longer that awful mess. At the core is not a worm in this apparently bright, shiny apple. At the core is the life of God. At the core is the spirit of Christ. At the core is a new nature. And I pray that we'll have the courage to talk with people. To enter the battle for people's souls and to look at our own hearts as we do so and to envision what you're up to in people's lives and to enter the mystery of why you don't seem to be doing it sometimes and we don't seem to get much done and we go years without seeing much fruit and enter the mystery of all that. And to realize that in the middle of all of our shattered dreams, you're awakening our desire for you more than anything else. And and then to be able to go into other people's lives and to see the flesh and what's wrong and then by faith to believe that you're still at work and to discern deepest work of the spirit of God in people's hearts and to touch that with the deepest work in our heart. Nonetheless, these folks, for your purposes and pray in Jesus name.

Amen