

## **The Tension of Being and Doing**

**Psalm 139:1-18; John 1:43-51**

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Christian faith is a balancing act. It requires that we hold in tension two important dimensions of our faith: being and doing. Some people are naturally “doing” oriented. They build houses, teach English as a Second Language, provide respite care, tutor students, serve meals at the Downtown Rescue Mission, and other action-oriented activities. These folks are careful, as my grandmother used to say, to not be so heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good. They are active, action oriented.

Others people are naturally “being” oriented. They are the contemplatives who are at home with the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and study. They are comfortable with silence and long, thoughtful walks in the woods. Their life is built upon fellowship with God. These folks are inwardly oriented.

In most of us, one of these two dimensions of our faith tends to be dominant. You tend to be either a doing person or a being person. That doesn’t mean that the other dimension is not present at all, but one will tend to be dominant. In my earlier adulthood, I so wanted to be more being oriented. I would read the contemplative writers like Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and others and long to have that kind of deep, inner connectedness with the world and the world beyond. And while I may have a smidgen of that, I have accepted that my dominant nature is doing, not being. Some of you know that I’m a gardener. But I actually spend very little time soaking in the beauty and wonder of my garden. That is a being activity. I’m usually busy planning the next bed or digging the next hole because I’m a doing person.

The Bible even has texts that emphasize one of these dimensions over the other. The little letter of James, for example, is highly doing oriented. Here is what James says,

*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.... Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this: to care for*

*orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

See how action oriented that is. Then he says this,

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say that you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

That's pretty strong! And the whole letter of James is like that. It is so doing oriented that the reformer, Martin Luther, didn't even want it in the Bible. He called it a "right strawy epistle" because it diminished the role of faith.

Likewise, some texts in the Bible are being oriented. After feeding the 5,000, do you remember where Jesus went? "After saying farewell to [the people], he went up on the mountain to pray," Mark tells us. And Paul, who considered his greatest works to be filthy rags, acknowledged, "If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." A favorite "being" text for many is the beautiful, majestic psalm I read earlier, Psalm 139. This psalm may be the most intimate and personal of all the psalms. It's as if a curtain is drawn back, and we are permitted to peek into the spiritual life of a mature saint of old. This psalm is for you who are being oriented and those of us who wish to be more so. Here's one person's experience.

*The writer lived with awareness that he was marvelously and mysteriously known by God. In every way. At every moment. And it was good!* He believed that his life was completely enveloped by divine reality, and it was completely good. The psalm begins, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me." That word for "know" ("you have known me") is used seven times in this psalm, four times in the first six verses. The number seven in the Bible represents completeness. Seven times the psalmist says that God knew him. Completely, fully, with nothing concealed, deep into the core of his being, the psalmist believed that he was known by God. And this was not something he feared. It did not cause him to be anxious. It was

reason for praise. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,” he seems to have shouted.

Consider this. Some theologians think that the writer of this psalm may have been accused of some inner wrongdoing, perhaps idolatry. He faced the difficulty then of proving his innocence of a crime of the heart. This psalm then appears to have been his prayer where he affirmed his innocence before God, saying,

*God, you know the charges against me. And no one knows me more fully than you. You know when I sit down and when I rise. You know my thoughts. You know all my ways, even my words before I speak them. Therefore, you know my innocence. Yes, you know my full devotion to you alone.*

That is a healthy way to think of our lives. We are fully known by God: the good and the bad. We are fully known by God and loved. I put it in the passive because it is God who does the knowing. We are known. That shapes one’s *being*, doesn’t it? If we could discipline ourselves to live out of that awareness, what a difference it would make! We would revel in the joy of forgiveness. We would sing the wonders of God’s grace. We would bask in the beauty of God’s amazing love. If we could believe that we are marvelously and mysteriously known by God in every way and at every moment, it would shape the way we see ourselves, others, and the world around us.

*The psalmist was also aware that God’s presence is gloriously inescapable.* A part of being known is being accompanied—everywhere at all times. “Where can I go from your spirit?” he queried. “Or where can I flee from your presence?” He said that if he ascends to the heavens, God is there. If he makes a bed in the belly of Sheol, the place of the dead, God is even there. He said that if he takes “the wings of the morning” and settles at the bottom of the ocean, even there God is present. He knew that God’s presence is gloriously inescapable.

Think of how that impacts the way we speak of God. We don’t need to ask God to “be with us.” “Be with us as we worship today,” we may pray. Or, “Be with us as we travel.” It is likely habit for most of us. It is not wrong to do that, but it is a failure to recognize what the psalmist believed to be true. God is always with us. Every moment of every day God’s presence

is gloriously inescapable. What the psalmist might say to us is this: “Open yourself to God’s ever-presence. Rather than praying that God will be with you, pray instead that you will be with God, that you will be sensitive to God’s presence, attuned to the spiritual around you.”

Think of your life like that. You are accompanied—everywhere and at all times. The divine is pulsating in every nook and cranny of this universe. The British poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, once wrote, "Earth is crammed with heaven. Every bush is aflame with the fire of God, but only those who see take off their shoes. The rest just pick the berries." If we could believe that God’s presence is gloriously inescapable, it would shape the way we see ourselves, others, and the world around us.

So I want you to hear this psalm again. Imagine a person who has been accused of idolatry or some other violation of the heart. How would he prove his innocence? Imagine that person on bended knee pouring his heart out to God.

Dramatic reading of Psalm 139:1-18.

The world needs doers; there’s no doubt about that. The world needs those who build houses and serve meals to homeless men and women. But the world also needs “be-ers;” there’s no doubt about that either. The world needs the contemplatives who practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and study. And in reality, we are all some of each, holding in tension these two important dimensions of our faith. As we depart today, let us look for burning bushes.

### Closing Prayer

Lord, search us all and know us. And may that indeed shape the way we see ourselves, others, and the world. Amen.

## **Dramatic Reading of Psalm 139**

(From the New Revised Standard Version)

- Handy: O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
- David: You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
- Handy: Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.
- David: Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
- Handy: If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is as light to you.
- David: For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- Handy: I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
- David: Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
- Handy: My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.
- David: How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the some of them!

Handy: I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.