

Focusing on the Holy Spirit

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Romans 8:1-17, (Acts 2:1-21)

The Holy Spirit is now here. Do you sense the fire of the Holy Spirit in your life? It might be easy to wonder when the Spirit will come and give us power in our lives, but it's already here, living in us. The problem is that we often let the fire of the Spirit turn into just a spark. In 1st Thessalonians the Apostle Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit." Today, I'd like to emphasise three aspects of living with the Holy Spirit. We need to pay attention to how God is working in our lives, through the Spirit. Where is our focus? Is it on ourselves or is it on God? We also need to learn to trust the Spirit to lead, rather than rely just on our own understanding, and we need to remember to work together with the Spirit. God does not just give us everything we need without expecting us to do our part.

Why is it that many people do not pay much attention to the Holy Spirit? We may be tempted to ignore the Spirit because we can't see it. Or, we may hesitate to give attention to the Spirit because of Christians who mainly emphasise the Spirit, yet focus only on an emotional experience, while lacking a deep understanding of actually following Christ. Some people argue that we aren't true Christians until we can "speak in tongues." The Holy Spirit is mysterious. We cannot predict or control how the Spirit will work. We might avoid the Spirit because we might be challenged to change our life in some way.

The Spirit lives inside us and gives us the peace of knowing we are part of God's family. The Spirit fills us with His presence, and give us the power to live as Jesus' followers, and witness to what God is doing. Through the Spirit we learn to understand the Bible, and we learn to recognise sin in ourselves. In the church, the Spirit gives various gifts to each believer, such as wisdom, faith, or the ability to teach. Through the Spirit, members of the church are empowered to work together, using their various gifts. Where do you see the Holy Spirit at work here at MJCF?

I often struggle to understand where the Spirit is at work around me. But, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit is present wherever we see any of the "fruits of the Spirit." In his letter to the Galatians, chapter 5, Paul describes these "fruits"; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Spirit is powerful. The power of the Almighty God who created the universe is in the Holy Spirit. In verse 11 of Romans 8, Paul says, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. The problem is, we limit the Spirit's power in us, or "quench the Spirit". I imagine it's like throwing water onto a small fire. Afterward, it may have trouble continuing to burn, or it may even be extinguished. How do we give attention to the Spirit?

Many people read today's passage and believe it is talking about our inner struggle between following God's law and living with the Spirit, by the grace of Christ. But, Paul's main point in this passage is more likely about what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. I'm reading from verse 3 of chapter 8, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do; by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." For Paul, God's law is good. We can delight in it because it shows us God's will, and is good for us. Though, because of the influence of sin in our lives, we cannot follow God's will perfectly. We often fall short. We easily become self-centred and fearful. But, Christ has set us free from the bondage of sin which leads to condemnation and spiritual death. Christ has given us the Holy Spirit which leads to life and peace. The Spirit now lives in our hearts and fulfills the law, and makes a difference in how we live. God has made all this possible through Jesus Christ. This is the present reality, not just some future time of peace and joy after we get to heaven. We've been set free. The Spirit works inside us right now. If we remember this, it will be life-changing for us.

Paul describes two different worldviews. One is a worldview of the Spirit. It's a worldview centred on God, and on things that serve God's mission in the world, such as sharing God's love and reconciliation. The other is a worldview centred on me, and my interests. Which of these worldviews do we follow? Paul encourages us to set our minds on the things of the Spirit. Do we often think about what we lack, about our worries and problems? Or, do we focus on what God has done, and continues to do through the Holy Spirit living within us? It takes a lot of trust! Paul's main point is probably not that we need to work hard to choose the Spirit rather than the selfish ways of the flesh. Instead, he is describing what God has already done. In verse 9 he says, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you..." One other key point that I'd like to highlight is that we are now part of God's family. Before God sent us Jesus and the Holy Spirit, there was pressure for us to earn our place in God's Kingdom of Heaven through working hard to keep God's laws. If we were "good enough" we could earn a place in God's Kingdom. The problem is that no one is good enough. We all fall short. That's why God had to send us Jesus and the Holy Spirit to make a new way for us. Paul says we are now "children of God." Through Jesus and the Spirit, we are now adopted into God's family. To be part of God's family is a privilege, not something earned. Children don't earn their way into a family. It's the parents who choose a child to be adopted. God has chosen us, through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

In the past, I've imagined the Spirit of God to be similar to a car navigation system. Last week, Rie and I rented a truck in order to dispose of piles of yard waste at the Anabaptist Center. We were a bit nervous about driving in Tokyo, but were somewhat relieved when we saw that the truck came equipped with a navigation system. We needed to trust the system to show us the correct roads to get to our destination. It was helpful to have a system that warned us which lane to stay in, since occasionally the road would split into upper and lower levels, going different places. When we made a wrong turn, I was glad that eventually the system would recalculate and show us a new route to get to our destination. The Holy Spirit works in a similar way. We are not perfect, and so we do make wrong turns in life. But, by the grace of God, we continue to have the Spirit to help us continue on a new path. We need to learn to trust that the Spirit knows best.

My experience with the car navigation system last week gave me something else to think about. We needed to learn how to correctly follow the navigation system. There were voice prompts so we could hear when we needed to turn, but sometimes we turned too soon, and sometimes we turned too late. Have you ever experienced that? In a similar way, we need practice to learn how to recognise and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. With our car navigation system, we also noticed that it did not help for everything. It guided us to the land-waste disposal site, but we ended up at the company office building rather than the underground waste collection garage where we needed to be. In order to get to that part of the complex, we needed to enter a tunnel that started on one of the main roads far from the buildings. In order to get there, we needed to include our thoughts and wisdom in order to find the correct route.

In my life I try to let God take control, but I also tend to sit back and not take enough initiative to work together with the Spirit. It's sometimes a real challenge for me. We need to learn to trust in the Spirit more deeply, but we also need to take our own responsibility to act. Some of our prayers may sound like we are asking God to take us out of this room, while we refuse to actually get up and go! God will not do for us what we can do on our own. We are co-workers with God.

Why do we hesitate to give the Holy Spirit full control of our lives? Does fear make us hesitate to open up to God to work in us? Often, a spiritual revival begins with repentance. Maybe we have been stuck with a worldview of the flesh. How often have our thoughts been centred on ourselves? Even if our worldview is of the Spirit, because we all have sin, we will have times when we slip away from God to more self-centred thinking. Are we so full of the Spirit that we have very few fears for our own well being? Are we growing in the passion of living for Christ? Do we realise how much power we carry with the Spirit within us? I must admit that my prayers are often quite general rather than bold and specific. Our prayers reflect our faith and they reveal the state of our

relationship with God, Jesus, and the Spirit. May our lives reflect the passion of trust in the Spirit of God, and may we have the courage to take initiative to act, as the Spirit leads us. Let's pray.

Almighty God, you are our Creator, you are the one who saves us in Jesus, and you are the Holy Spirit who works within us. We confess those times we easily slip into focusing only on ourselves rather than on the way your Spirit leads us. Forgive us for our lack of trust. Grant us the courage to work together with your Spirit. Thank-you that you have already done the main work through your Son, Jesus. Thank-you that once we accept what you have done for us, we have the privilege to work together with you by the power of your Spirit, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.