

Live by the Spirit...

Gal 5¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Message/John 3¹⁻²¹/ Psalm 133

The Spirit is at work in Creation; creating sustaining, bringing life and, indeed, creativity to we who are made in God's image. So the Spirit creates and redeems; it gives life and it sustains life and without the Spirit all things that are, would cease. The Spirit is in Creation. Creation is by virtue of the Spirit.

The Spirit is at work in the world, calling all people to return to the One who loves them unconditionally. When we speak of the world in this context we are speaking about all humans; the world of all people and all life and the Spirit is intimately involved in this world. How is the Spirit involved? This is what we came to last time.

In the Bible we find the Spirit's activity in the world associated with three things in general. The first is love. Where the Spirit is at work love abides. Where love is denied or rejected the Spirit is denied and rejected. The second is wisdom or knowledge. Whatever is wise and true illuminates something of God and stands in resonance with the Spirit of God. Where the Spirit is at work wisdom is respected and sought. Where is it not then, again, the Spirit is denied. The third is humility – expressed as either a fear of God or a due respect towards others or a deep knowledge of our need of God. Where the Spirit is at work, humility arises. Now let me be very clear here. Not all that is **called** love, not all that is **called** wisdom or knowledge and not all that is **considered** humble – is the work of the Spirit. But when look to identify the work of the Spirit these are the **marks** of the Spirit's work.

So the Spirit is at work in Creation; the Spirit is at work in the world and, furthermore, we may also say that the Spirit is at work in the individual, in us. How is the Spirit at work in us? The work of God's Spirit in the individual is essentially relational, that is, God's Spirit works to heal relationships beginning with the relationship between God and humankind and then extending to the relationships between we who believe. In Ephesians 4 Paul highlights this by appealing to the people to maintain what he calls, the unity of the spirit

¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4)

The calling of God begins and ends with this 'unity of the Spirit' – a unity which the Spirit both seeks and produces in those who will live **by** the Spirit. The question for us is, how might this happen? How does the Spirit work to bring us into unity?

1. **Born of the Spirit.**
2. **Receive** the Spirit
3. **Live by** the Spirit

What does it mean to be 'born of the Spirit?' This is what Jesus tells Nicodemus must happen...

⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. (John 3)

This is the great question Nicodemus asks and it may well appear that he doesn't receive an answer but Jesus does answer him. If we go further into John's Gospel we read these words...

⁶³It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴But among you there are some who do not believe." (John 6)

The key here is that last phrase – '**there are some here who do not believe.**' The words Christ speaks are both Spirit and life – that is – **the Word of Christ carries both Spirit and life.** But how does the Spirit come? Again Jesus answers that question by pointing to the reason why some who've heard Him have not received either Spirit or life... because they refuse to believe. The Spirit comes and life is imparted **as we believe!** Our part is to... **believe! When we believe Christ we receive the Spirit.** To be 'born of the Spirit' is to believe for the first time – to enter for the first time into this world of belief and faith for it is the life of faith that believing births within us. And Jesus does indicate this for poor old Nicodemus.

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? (John 3)

Jesus calls Nicodemus to believe and points out the doubt which Nicodemus struggles with. ‘**Yet you do not receive our testimony...**’ Nicodemus just can’t believe Jesus at this point. He can’t see how it can be true and Jesus points out this huge plug of unbelief in his heart. Why? **Because only by believing will Nicodemus be born again.**

We are ‘born again’ by believing Jesus’ and we receive the Spirit... **by believing. The life of faith is a life of continuing to believe.** So often we evangelicals have made the fatal mistake of implying some; the ignition point, if you like, of all faith. The truth is that **all of the Christian life is belief.** Every step forward must be a step in belief. Nothing is accomplished without believing something more of Jesus. **Believing leads to receiving. We live by believing and receiving, believing and receiving, believing and receiving.**

Receiving the Spirit brings with it immediate gains.

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16)

What is Christ’s is declared to us. We begin to **receive Christ** and to receive Christ is to receive His life, His truth, His passion, His compassion. In short we begin to change, to become like Christ, to take up the place of Christ here on earth.

⁵¹I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (John 6)

All this the Spirit produces **in those who will believe in Jesus.**

The Spirit brings us to belief if we will open our hearts, if we will allow the logic of the Spirit to enter our hearts and minds. The Spirit woos us; cajoles us; works with us to call us back to God – if only we will listen as did Nicodemus on that dark night. This is why the metaphor of birth is so appropriate in John 3. **[11]** We don’t bring ourselves to birth. Nicodemus is right. We cannot birth ourselves and neither can we enter a second time into our mother’s womb. The Spirit brings us to birth by the Spirit’s action. None of us will ever be able to stand before God and in any way take any credit for our conversion. Rather we will discover that all the time the Spirit was working to bring to birth a new Richard of Faith; Frances of faith; Jenny of faith... And when we are born again – we are born as children of the Spirit with the Spirit then able to work through us to continue this work of bringing the world back to God.

Finally receiving leads to life. The principle here is one ultimately of life and that principle is pronounced by Jesus at the very beginning of His ministry when he is tempted by Satan...

⁴But he answered, “It is written,
‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matt 4)

Life, true life, comes by the Word of God. But again, what does this mean? Is the act of simply reading God’s Word enough? No. Jesus spoke rather of consuming it, of making it a part of us, of turning it into the way we live.

¹¹Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”(Gal 3)

This life of faith is a life of communing with none other than the Spirit of God. It is ‘**life in the Spirit.**’

¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.
And...

²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. (Gal 5)

The Spirit comes into our life as we believe. Belief opens the door of our hearts to the Holy Spirit’s further work. By this act are we ‘born of the Spirit.’ Furthermore, however, as we continue to believe we begin to receive for the Spirit then is able to work in our lives to heal and reshape and mold us in the likeness of Christ. This

cycle of believing and receiving is 'life in the Spirit' and this constitutes the fundamental dynamic of the Christian life – a life we live **by faith**.

Can I ask you then today, have you continued to believe – have you continued to make steps of belief or was there a step many days, perhaps months, perhaps even years ago where you said – this far and no farther God. I will not believe this. Or perhaps it was more subtle than this. Perhaps it was just easier to live in the certainties of life – career, children, husband, wife. Perhaps these so-called certainties just seemed easier and believing seemed harder. Or perhaps you've simply not realized that belief is the way forward in Christ. We must walk in belief, walk in faith, not by sight. Sight constitutes the things we think we know. Belief constitutes the things we must trust God for. Pray with me now if you want to go forward in belief; if you want to **live by the Spirit**.

O God, forgive us for choosing not to believe though we know you are God and have received so much in the past from you. Forgive us for choosing the unbelieving way in small things or in great and help us now, as a community of Christ, to choose to believe again, to choose to listen again to your Spirit that we might know again the abundant life of Christ bubbling up from that unquenchable spring deep in our hearts where you have found a home. Forgive us Lord and lead us from this day forward into a life of belief. IN Jesus Name we pray. AMEN.