

Back to Basics: God the Spirit

John 14:15-18 ¹

I invite you to take your Bibles and open them again to this morning's text so that we may look at it more closely. Please turn again to John 14:15-18: "*If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*"

There are six important things to notice in these five sentences, the **first** of which is that Jesus defined our love for Him as chiefly characterized by obedience to His commands. **Second**, Jesus referred here to all three members of what we have come to call the Trinity or the Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit. **Third**, Jesus referred to the Spirit as "he," as a person, not as an impersonal force of some sort.

Fourth, Jesus characterized this Spirit as "*the Spirit of truth*" and as our "*advocate*" who will be with us forever. ² **Fifth**, Jesus pointed out that the Spirit is unknown and unavailable to those who do not know Him. And **sixth**, Jesus identified Himself with this Spirit, saying "*I will come to you.*" While every one of those affirmations is extremely important and worthy of much study, our focus this morning will take us in a slightly different direction.

Jesus mentioned all three Persons of the Trinity again in John 14:26, in 15:26, and in 16:15.³ In 14:26 He told His disciples that the Father would send the Spirit; and in 15:26 He said that He himself would send the Spirit (also 16:7). Both of these statements remind us that Jesus had just told them that "***Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father***" (John 14:9), and of His earlier affirmation that "***I and the Father are one***" (John 10:30).

In many churches, God's Spirit is the least attended and least understood Member of the Trinity, so much so that well-known pastor Francis Chan has written a book about the Spirit with the title, *Forgotten God*.⁴ As we make our way through these "Back to Basics" sermons, it is the Holy Spirit who is our subject this morning.

As I've reminded you these last two weeks, the word, "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible. The idea of the Trinity developed as the early Christians tried to describe the various ways in which they experienced personal relationship with God. The process of discovery went something like this: The Jews already knew something about "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," when suddenly along came a man who claimed to be that God. He was not the sort of man you could dismiss as crazy or as an impostor, and He convinced many of the people who heard Him that He was telling the truth.

Those who believed in Him were astounded to meet Him again soon after they had seen Him killed; and then, not long after they had watched Him ascend into the sky and had formed themselves into a little society of His followers, they discovered that He was now somehow inside them, directing them and making them able to do things they could never

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 28, 2012.

² Some versions translate the Greek "Paraclete" (παρακλητος) as "Comforter," "Counselor," or "Helper."

³ See also Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14, among many other New Testament examples.

⁴ Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009).

have done before. And when they worked it all out, they found that they had arrived at the idea of a Three-Personal God.

Those early Christians described a God who is Three Persons while remaining One Person, somewhat as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube. Of course, we can't really conceive a Being like that, just as, if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space, we could not properly imagine a cube. But we could get sort of a faint notion about it. And the most important thing about the Trinity is not that we fully understand this Three-Personal God, but that we be drawn into personal relationship with Him.

Of course, the Holy Spirit Jesus promised did not come into existence on Pentecost Sunday. As the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit exists from everlasting to everlasting, with the Father and the Son. What happened on Pentecost morning was that the Spirit was given to every believer, rather than being given only to particular persons at particular times, as had always been the case before.

Pentecost morning was noteworthy because the Spirit was given to every believer; but equally remarkable was the awareness these Christians had of a new and amazing sense of **power**. Those first believers received the power to live, not just "somehow," but triumphantly. They received the **courage** to meet dangerous and deadly situations bravely and boldly.

They received an unlearned **eloquence** when the time came to give testimony about their faith. And they received an unstoppable **joy** that was independent of their circumstances.⁵ I want to concentrate our thought this morning on the *power* that is available to us right now—*today!*—through the work of God's Spirit in our lives.

The question of spiritual power is a matter of concern for many of us. In *Forgotten God*, Francis Chan noted that "While no evangelical would deny [the Holy Spirit's] existence, I'm willing to bet that there are millions of churchgoers across America who cannot confidently say they have experienced His presence or action in their lives over the past year. And many of them do not believe they can."⁶

I am convinced that Chan is right on this point. I've known many Christians who were active members of their churches—indeed, they were Deacons and pillars of their churches—who told me somewhat sadly that they not only had no idea about what such power might look like, but that they did not expect to ever know it. You might feel that way, too.

While you're wondering about that, think about this: most of you are familiar with the "fruit of the Spirit" Paul listed in Galatians: '*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*' (Galatians 5:22-23). You may even have the list memorized.

Now, as Chan suggests in his book, "Look over those traits right now and ask yourself if you possess each to a supernatural degree. Do you exhibit more kindness and faithfulness than the Mormons you know? Do you have more self-control than your Muslim friends? More peace than Buddhists? More joy than atheists? If *GOD* truly lives in you, shouldn't you expect to be different from everyone else?"⁷

⁵ These developments should really have been no surprise. After all, Jesus had told them, "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).

⁶ Chan, p. 15.

⁷ Chan, p. 146.

To say this another way, I've long defined "Great Commission Christians" as persons whose lives are prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, integrated (congruent), and spiritually powerful. Would people who know you well say that your life is prayer-filled? Would they say that your life is Bible-centered? Would they say that your life is virtuous and holy, no matter where you are or who you're with? Would they say that you demonstrate genuine compassion for the poor and downtrodden?

Would your friends say that your life is congruent, that what and who you are on Sunday morning is the same way you present at any other time in the week? And taking all this together, would people who know you well say that your life is filled with spiritual *power*? These are hard questions, are they not? And yet it is to such character that we are called, if we dare to say that we follow Jesus.

"Given our talent set, experience, and education," Chan wrote, "many of us are fairly capable of living rather successfully (according to the world's standards) without any strength from the Holy Spirit."⁸ "You don't need the Holy Spirit if you are merely seeking to live a semi-moral life and attend church regularly. You can find people of all sorts in many religions doing that quite nicely without Him. You only need the Holy Spirit's guidance and help if you truly want to follow the Way of Jesus Christ."⁹

"The world is not moved by love or actions that are of human creation," he continued. "But when believers live in the power of the Spirit, the evidence in their lives is *supernatural*. The church cannot help but be different, and the world cannot help but notice."¹⁰

So how do we get such power? Accessing such power is the point of this message, and **the key to living supernaturally powerful lives is found in what the New Testament calls "*being filled with the Spirit*"** (Ephesians 5:18).

The gift or "baptism" of the Holy Spirit is not some "second blessing," as some groups put it. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is God's gift of Himself to us at the moment of our conversion (Romans 8:9). God's Spirit takes up residence in our lives *at that very moment*. We are *immediately* adopted into God's family and granted citizenship in God's Eternal Kingdom. And we have access *right then* to all of the power and resources of heaven, although it will take most of our earthly lives to learn how to allow that power to flow through us into the world.

Here's the key to the "baptism of the Holy Spirit": **the Bible says that if you don't have the Holy Spirit in your life, then you don't belong to Christ. If you have Christ, then you have the Holy Spirit. It's that simple.** At the moment of our first faith in Jesus, we receive the inner Gift of God's Spirit and become citizens of heaven, with "all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto."

But there is indeed another experience with the Spirit, and it is this experience that is the key to spiritual power. The Bible calls this experience "being filled with" the Spirit. Unfortunately, many Christians go for years—and so go a lifetime—without knowing the difference between receiving the Holy Spirit and being filled with the Holy Spirit, and in that ignorance, they miss the Spirit's power.¹¹

⁸ Chan, p. 31.

⁹ Chan, p. 122.

¹⁰ Chan, p. 17.

¹¹ And neither of these experiences is the same thing as the Spiritual Gift of "glossolalia," or "speaking in tongues," which is an entirely different matter altogether.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit has to do with placing our lives at the Spirit's disposal and under the Spirit's full control. To be *filled* with the Holy Spirit is to live in constant dependence on Him and in complete surrender to Him. This filling is the result of an act of the will that has to be repeated many times every day, like breathing.

Unlike being born, breathing is not a once-for-all event, but something that is experienced dozens of times every minute of our lives. Without breath, there is no life.

And unlike the baptism of the Spirit, which is a once-for-all experience, being filled with the Spirit is something that we must experience all day long, every day, for as long as we live on this earth. Without this filling, there is no power.

The baptism of the Spirit is a matter of salvation. Being filled with the Spirit is the secret of spiritual power; and this filling and this control are by invitation only. Neither in the matter of salvation nor in the matter of sanctification will God's Spirit force Himself on you. We must choose . . . and choose . . . and choose again.

Being filled with the Spirit is a moment-by-moment experience, repeated, renewed, and deepened throughout the remainder of our lives, because the Spirit's control of our lives is no more automatic because we have been born again than salvation is automatic because we have been born the first time.

When Paul wrote, "*Don't be drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you*" (Ephesians 5:18), his point was that the person who is filled with the Spirit will be controlled by the Spirit even as some persons are filled with and controlled by the desire for alcohol or other drugs. And the context of this verse makes it clear that this filling is an experience needed by every Christian, not some esoteric matter for the spiritually elite. **Being filled with and controlled by God's Spirit is absolutely essential for a normal Christian life.** Anything less is sub-normal.¹²

Let me briefly suggest six steps toward such filling. Each of these steps is achieved through intentional prayer that changes both our attitudes and our actions:

1. **ADMIT** that you need God's Spirit to fill and to control your life.
2. **ASK** God to do this.
3. **ABDICATE** all control of your life to God, asking God to lead and guide you through Scripture, spiritual promptings, circumstances, and fellow believers.
4. **ABANDON** any sin that you consciously tolerate in your life, asking God to reveal any sin of which you're not aware (Psalm 139:23-24).
5. **APPROPRIATE** God's powerful promises and life principles, found throughout the Bible.
6. **ABIDE** in Christ by continuing this process through all the days of your life, bearing eternal fruit through the Spirit's work in you (John 14-15).

As we sit here this morning, you and I need to be honest with ourselves about the degree to which our lives are or are not prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, congruent, and spiritually powerful. We need to identify things that we're allowing to continue in our lives that fall short of God's virtue and holiness. We need to identify ways in which we're being disobedient to what we know God intends for us to do, because it **is disobedience, more than anything else, that puts out the Spirit's fire.**

¹² See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Bombay, India: Gospel Literature Service, 1957).

As we sit here this morning, maybe you and I need to be asking ourselves where we've gotten too comfortable in our faith. The greatest problem in our spiritual lives frequently is that we live domesticated lives in the service of a domesticated God we've created in our own image. We become more interested in our own comfort and preferences than we are in serving a holy and redeeming God who is rebuilding creation and creating an eternal Kingdom right under Satan's nose.

Perhaps our lives have become too routine, too safe, too predictable, too domesticated to be of any use to God's Kingdom. Perhaps we should ask ourselves where we as a congregation are taking any real risks for God. Where are we attempting anything that will surely fail unless God causes it to succeed?

Prayer makes us able to sense and ready to follow God's Spirit; but there comes a time when it's time to move beyond prayer to action. There comes a time when it's time to set God-sized goals and to pursue God-fired passions. There comes a time when fear can no longer determine our decisions, when doing things as we've always done them becomes disobedience, a time when we stop trying to recreate the past and begin to create the future.

There comes a time when we need to quit praying and start acting:

- Fill out the application.
- Make the call.
- Pack the U-Haul.
- Write the check.
- Set up the appointment.
- Have the conversation.
- Make the move.¹³

For some of us, that time is *now*.

¹³ Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase: Reclaim the Adventure of Pursuing God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008), p. 27.