

“LIFE IN THE SPIRIT”

Romans 12:9-21

“*The Great Disturbance*” continues. Remember that was the phrase Karl Barth used as a title for his comments on these final chapters of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. After eleven chapters of closely argued argument about the condition of humankind, the grace of God, the power and work of the Holy Spirit, Paul springs on his readers the concept that this is all supposed to make a practical difference to their lives. The mighty, unassailable truths of the Christian Gospel, the great flights of rhetoric, the clever examples from the history of God’s people – it’s not just a subject for learned study and intense theological argument. It’s the bedrock for a whole new life – a lifestyle, an outlook on life that is radically different from anything that has ever gone before. Whereas in chapter 8 Paul set out his ideas about the work of the Holy Spirit, here in chapter he tells us what life lived in that Spirit should look like.

We’ve seen how this is something that is to involve the whole person – bodies given over to God as “*living sacrifices*” and wills submitted to him as they are transformed and redeemed. We’ve seen how this life lived in the Holy Spirit should lead to sharing our gifts with others in humility, mutuality and commonality – each person putting towards the good of others the gifts that the Holy Spirit has provided, for the good of all and for the good of the Kingdom of God. This is no clever philosophy to give some people the edge over others. This is no esoteric teaching to occupy our intellects and nothing else. This is the heart of our ethical Christianity, the foundation on which everything else practical is to be built. God has given you his Holy Spirit. You have that gift of the Spirit and the gifts the Spirit brings. The responsibility is on you to use those gifts and to live out what you believe about God and his ways. We are, properly speaking, when the word is shorn of the unhelpful layers of meaning that have built up around it like barnacles, a “charismatic community”.

Last week we looked at some of the ways in which that was to happen as Paul gave a few selected examples of the kinds of things the Spirit enables God’s people to do. And, as always, we can try to excuse ourselves, our lack of commitment and engagement, by saying, quite rightly, “Well, I don’t have any of those gifts.” It’s possible, of course, that you don’t feel that you have any of the gifts that are mentioned there in the way that the context implies they are to be found. Possible – but not probable. However, we’ll give you the benefit of the doubt on that score.

But, there’s no such excuse in vv9-21. It’s clear that Paul is here addressing all the believers, everyone whose life has been touched by the grace of God, everyone who has experienced in any way the moving of the Holy Spirit. Some of the phrases Paul uses here may sound familiar to you if you’ve read any of his other letters. That’s obviously because they are at the core of what he believes Christian behaviour should be like. And, as always, they are under the banner of love. Whatever else we may be called to live out as God’s people, however else the Holy Spirit makes himself manifest in our lives, it’s love that should be the overriding factor. Last week we said that there is no special “badge” of the Spirit’s presence, no particular gift that can be identified as the sign of the Spirit’s activity. But I suppose it’s true really that the badge of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the life of a believer is a sincere, sacrificial, selfless love – the love that is “*sincere*” (v9). The great chapter 13 of *1 Corinthians* is an extended exposition of that. And it’s not just a question of having love, but of **showing** love. So often Christians talk about loving each other when there is clearly no real love there – and it notices.

So what Paul outlines in these verses is a way of life that is powered by the Holy Spirit and which is intensely practical in the way that it relates to those around. We could take up a whole series of sermons on the stuff that’s in here, but this morning just note the kinds of things that are here – “*brotherly love*”, “*hospitality*”, “*living in harmony with one another*”. There’s an edge of realism in all of this – as Paul slips in in v18: “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you ...*” Sometimes our desire to get revenge (although we wouldn’t put it like that), our simmering resentments, our determination not to make the first move in case it’s taken advantage of – those things **do** depend on us, but we **choose** to sort things out in ways which are not calculated to make peace – often by leaving God out of the picture altogether.

And that choice is important. Remember we said a couple of weeks ago that our decision to offer our lives as “*living sacrifices*” was an act of will, an intellectual assent. This offering of ourselves is, says Paul, “*your spiritual [or reasonable, or logical] act of worship.*” The choice is re-presented in v9: “*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*” You’ve got to choose. Right or wrong? God’s way or the world’s? The life of the Spirit or the life of the flesh? What are you going to do about it? You see, you cannot just drift along, going with the flow, taking a bit of this here and a bit of that there. Because the flow will almost certainly take you where God does not want you to go. If you really do want to live the life of the Spirit, you have to be alert to the choices and the dilemmas; you have to be prepared to stand against the flow.

And in here, amongst all the other signs and markers of a life lived in the Spirit, Paul has put some crucial directions for us. Last week, as we looked at the gifts he mentioned in vv6-8 we saw that they all needed to be done **to** someone else. And that’s the case with most of what we read in these verses this week. These are things that need an object – someone to be hospitable to, someone to bless, to live in peace with, to associate with, and so on. But in vv11,12 there are some things which are not necessarily done to others, but which should still have an effect in our lives – an obvious effect. They’re to do with our relationship with God, our response to the power of the Holy Spirit within us. If we want that power to remain and to grow, then we need to take this all very carefully. And if we do, then other people should notice that we are those who live the life of the Spirit.

1. **KEEP YOUR SPIRITUAL FERVOUR**

I have to say, I sometimes wonder about Paul. Obviously Luke, in his descriptions of him in *Acts* has a particular point to make. And when Paul himself is writing to the various Christian communities around the Mediterranean he is wanting to exhort them to greater things. But did he never get fed up? Were there never times when his own zeal started to flag, when his own spiritual fervour drooped a bit? Surely there were. But the point he is making here is that we should nevertheless try to keep that zeal going all the time, even – or especially – when we find it hard. One translation has here “*keep aglow in the Spirit*”. In a sense that is calling us to allow the Holy Spirit to shine through, even when we might be feeling less than our best. James Dunn, in his comments on these verses, paraphrases it as “*keep bubbling with the Spirit*”.

It’s to do with allowing the Holy Spirit room to work in our lives. Of course there are times when we feel totally at our wits’ end, when we feel physically wrecked, emotionally wrung out, intellectually unable to cope – just plain hacked off with life! But it’s important that we remember that the Spirit can still work in us. It’s not up to us. It doesn’t mean we need to be bounding with energy, that we need to be singing choruses and mouthing platitudes (often the same thing!), that we need to be preaching from every street corner. But it does mean that we learn to rely on the Holy Spirit, to hand things over to him, to let him cope for a bit while we regain our strength and our equilibrium. That takes practice. It means developing habits of prayer and reflection. It means remembering the God **is** there even when somehow it seems as if he’s not. It means hanging on to that first love that we had for him.

In *Revelation 2:4,5*, the Risen Lord Jesus Christ calls on the Christians in Ephesus to start getting back to what they used to do, to remember their first love, to repent of their own self-centred and self-absorbed attitudes. Maybe that’s what you need. Maybe that’s the way you’re going to rekindle that spiritual fervour, that’s the way you’re going to rediscover the bubbling of the Spirit. It’s important that we do this, because it’s clearly crucial to what Paul has to say. No spiritual fervour, no real fruit. I know it’s hard, but once again, there’s an effort of will involved. Think of the Psalmist. He was lower than a snake’s belly a lot of the time – crushed, trampled, hung out to dry. He had no physical energy, no emotional resources, no enthusiasm at all, other than to save his life. And yet he always knew that God was there to watch over him, that God’s purposes were somehow being fulfilled, that the Spirit was still at work. He had to tell himself that. And so do you. Tell yourself that God’s Spirit **is** still at work. You

might not always feel yourself “bubbling with the Spirit”, but you might still get the odd gloop! And the more you do that, the more you set your mind to it, the less difficult it will get. (I almost wrote “easier”, but it’s never really easy!) And once you’re staring to get that into place in your life, the other things here follow fairly naturally.

2. SERVE THE LORD

Of course, there may sometimes be occasions when you’re bubbling away like some kind of geological feature. And then it can be easy to lose direction, to lose a sense of what it’s all about. James Dunn, again, writes, “‘*bubbling with the Spirit*’ always needs to be checked by and channelled into the service of the Lord Christ.”¹ As we have said time and time again, the Holy Spirit’s activity in our lives is not an end in itself. We are not given the power of the Spirit for some kind of personal, or even group, bless-up. The Spirit, above all else, is given us for mission, to enable us to fulfil the call of God in our world.

And so life in the Spirit is a life of service. Properly speaking, charismatic Christians are those whose lives are devoted to the service of their God. They live a life of worship and sacrifice, a life that is so full of the Holy Spirit that they cannot help but allow it to overflow into the kinds of things that we talked about last week in vv6-8 and the things that are found in vv9-21. Bob Dylan sang a song in the wake of his much-hyped conversion, entitled *You gotta serve somebody*. And that’s true. If you’re not serving the Lord, you’re serving Mammon, or Eros, or Bacchus, or your own selfish Ego. There’s a choice again. God has given you his Holy Spirit. What difference is he going to make? What are you going to do about it? The choice is yours.

3. BE JOYFUL IN HOPE

One of the ways to help keep yourself from becoming discouraged when things are not going well is to remind yourself of what’s ahead. You’ve got a hope – a hope that has been put in your heart by the Holy Spirit. Have a look at some of the things Paul has already written here – 5:5; 8:16-25. Peter says similar things in *1 Peter 1:3-9*. Again, it’s a question of getting into the habit of reminding yourself of these things when times are tough. But God has a great future prepared for you – and you can start to experience some of the benefits of it here and now through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, we need to be sensible about what our expectations of “*joyful*” are. We cannot expect to live constantly on Cloud Nine. We should not be training ourselves to wear a Blairite grin at all times. The constant singing of religious ditties can grate a bit after a while. But we should gradually notice a serenity, a calm which comes over us when we realise that the situations we dread, the people we would like to avoid, the experiences we find challenging are not the final reality. The Holy Spirit is within us as a guarantee of better things to come – infinitely better things. And the joy, the peace, the serenity that we sense is once again something that helps us to demonstrate to others that we are living the life of the Spirit.

4. BE PATIENT IN AFFLICTION

And, of course, that helps us with this next phrase. (As we build up the ideas here, we have to say less and less about each.) The word Paul uses here for “*affliction*” is *thlipsis* (θλιψις), which has the idea of great pressure being steadily applied. Does life ever feel like that to you? The Spirit is there to help you, to give you the patience (part of the fruit of the Spirit in *Galatians 5:22*), the ability to bear that pressure and eventually to triumph over it. Paul had to cope with that all his life in so many different ways, but none more so, I suspect, than in the hassles he had from other Christians. It’s not the same Greek word,

¹ Word Biblical Commentary *Romans 9-16* p742

but look at 2 *Corinthians* 11:28. After all the other difficulties that he has had to cope with, what's the constant pressure that he faces? – “*the pressure of my concern for all the churches.*” But God's there. God's with you in all that. The Spirit is there to give you that patience, to help you bear up under the strain. Which leads us into the final phrase that we'll look at this morning ...

5. **BE FAITHFUL IN PRAYER**

Stick at it. Don't give up – either when everything seems to be going so well that you don't think you need to pray, or when life's just such a pain that you don't think prayer will do any good anyway. Keep talking to God. There is no life in the Spirit without it. And it is intensely practical. Let me quote a few lines from Karl Barth's commentary (in which he uses the translation “*continue instant in prayer*”):

“Placed as we are and grievously oppressed, how can we avoid calling upon God? How can we avoid being in the company of those who, like the Psalmists, saw things as they really are and in their misery called out to God? ... Only when it is persisted in does prayer become an ethical action. To ‘continue instant in prayer’ does not mean to pile up a greater quantity of prayers or to refine their quality, but to hold fast to their direction and to retain proper continuity. To ‘continue instant’ means that God is sought and intended in prayer, that it is God's will that we should pray. Thus directed, prayer is the groaning within us of the Spirit which is not our spirit.”²

It's been obvious in various ways over the past few months that we need to keep praying the same thing persistently for a period of time and God will respond. We need in faith to stick to what God has laid on our hearts and persist in prayer for it – be it healing, direction, transformation or whatever. But the Spirit is there to help us even when we feel that our own resources in prayer are drained dry. Keep at it. The more you use it, the better it gets.

Now then, are you ready to live in the Spirit? Ready to serve and pray and endure and believe? You have the Holy Spirit within you if you are a follower of Christ. You are, properly speaking, a charismatic Christian – don't be afraid of the label. God has great things to do in your life and through your life – and he has great things to do through this church here. He'll do that if we take seriously our responsibility to use what he has given us, and as we do so we will see his purposes being fulfilled here in us. You can talk and discuss and argue and read and listen and study what Paul has to say about the Holy Spirit in the earlier chapters of *Romans* and elsewhere as much as you like, but if you don't grasp the fact that it has to be put into practice, then the whole thing will be waste of time. Your own Christian life will be stunted and your contribution to the spread of God's Kingdom will be totally inadequate. As Pindar said, four centuries before Christ, “*Become what you are.*” You have the Spirit of God within you. Now live like it!

² *Epistle to the Romans* ET from 6th Edition (OUP 1933/68)