



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“In the Spirit, All the Way” 1 Corinthians 12:1-31a

I did not announce this, but perhaps some of you have discerned that in these recent weeks we have been pursuing a mini-series of investigations of the Holy Spirit. Now, you know. And today we have an overview of some of what the Bible reveals to us about the Holy Spirit of God. Then, toward the end, we’ll wonder together about what this means for us.

Our guiding Scripture today is from Paul’s first letter to his friends at Corinth, to whom he writes because of reports he has received about them, after he himself had moved on to also lead people elsewhere to Jesus. We’ll join in with his letter in our chapter 12, so find First Corinthians, 12, and listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. I’m reading from the New Living Translation. *[text]*

If you know this letter, you know Paul loves these people, but the reports he has received trouble him, and at his distance, all he can do is write. But his letters have power, and he trusts God to use his letters to alert these folks to major problems they are having, and how to do better together.

In this chapter, Paul wants to straighten out some misunderstandings about the Holy Spirit of God. Apparently, God gave the Spirit to these people in Corinth, just as God had given it to the original Apostles, to the household of a Roman centurion, to Jews and Gentiles alike. The Spirit is the proof, or “down payment”, on the promise of eternal life. Not long after the Spirit came to these believers, Paul had moved on. In the interim, various distortions had grown up in the little churches there, and these are what Paul wants to correct, for the benefit of the whole congregation.

We’ll start with this text, and begin to list the works of the Spirit of God. Then I’ll bring in quick quotes from other parts of the New Testament to add to our list.

The Holy Spirit leads people to trust Jesus as Savior, and follow him as Lord. This two-part work of grace, to me, is the most important thing the Spirit does.

First, to trust Jesus as Savior, you’ve got to know you need to be saved. You’ve got to be made aware of your sin, and the fatal consequences of that sin. You’ve got to understand your helplessness. The Twelve-Step movement states this in non-religious language this way: “Admitted I was powerless over _____ (alcohol, sex, emotions, drugs—whatever) and that a power greater than myself could restore me.” Until you can declare that as true for you, you’re a visitor to an AA meeting, not a member. Same with the Church. When we join the church we say, in some sort of words, that “I am powerless over my sin, and I need God’s power to save me.”

One of the dangers of both the Twelve-Step groups and the Church is when people fall into the false assurance that once they “say the magic words”, then the danger, and their need, have passed. They don’t have that problem anymore. But as any Twelve-Stepper will tell you, this is an ongoing struggle—some have it easier than others, but none are immune from a relapse. That’s why they have that slogan, “One day at a time.” For alcoholics, to refocus the challenge down to today keeps them more in control of their choices; they only have to not take a drink today. Monday, they’ll only have to avoid alcohol that day. Jesus said, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matthew 6:34, RSV)

The need is serious. It’s life and death, and most addicts have learned this because their lives have become unmanageable. They have to be breaking or broken—like most of us—before they will focus their attention on this crucial issue, and devote the time and energy to recovery. Just like anyone who is led to Christ. That’s the Savior part.

OK, now we’re taken step one. But there’s more. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Salvation is a process, not just an event. Or, as I like to say, it’s a relationship with God, not a transaction.

The Holy Spirit helps us here, also. Jesus taught some important things about the Spirit God was about to give his disciples. In John’s record, chapter 14, Jesus says, “[The Father] will give you another Counselor to 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. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” (John 14:16-21, RSV) God’s Spirit lives in us, but that does not mean we “own” the Spirit. The Spirit is our Counselor, our Guide, to the daily work of salvation. We have to listen to that Spirit, or we don’t make much progress.

For Twelve-Steppers, the Big Book is the source of that spiritual wisdom and guidance.

If you’re keeping track—and I hope you are—we’ve got these things straight about the Holy Spirit. One: The Holy Spirit leads people to Jesus for salvation—this helps explain why two people hear the same message, one turns to the invisible God, the other does not. Faith-as-relationship with the Invisible is irrational. And true.

Two: The Holy Spirit can help us—he’s in us once we’ve taken “Step One”—and if we consult the Spirit and listen, we get help to work out our salvation, to develop this new life into which God has led us.

Here’s Number Three: The Spirit gives gifts—abilities with God-sized power—to serve, or minister—to others. That’s a major part of Paul’s First Corinthian letter—chapters 12-14, for sure.

But we can screw up anything, it seems. In the case of the Corinthians, they were distorting the gifts of God's Spirit, and ranking them in a way God never intended. It was just one more way they could try to make themselves look good, over others. And it was so stupid. If it's a "gift", Paul says, how can you brag about it? You didn't manufacture it, it came from God. And it's given you not as a possession for yourself but as a "trust" for you to use in ministry to others, as God directs. Paul really wants them to get this straight. The whole of his chapter 13, "The Love Chapter", in this context is aimed at re-setting their motive to love of others more than oneself, and spiritual gifts are ways God gives us to make love real. All the words about "tongues" and "interpretation" and "prophecy" here are to put things into a "decent order", as he says in Chapter 14, verse 40. Make love your aim," he says in chapter 14, verse 1. The desire to serve others is a chief hallmark of Christian faith, of the Spirit living in us.

Paul then launches into his metaphor of the human body and its coordinated parts, because these Greek Christians have misunderstood the corporate aspect of their life together. Greek culture, you probably know, emphasizes the individual; the Olympic game competition was a Greek invention. This compares to Hebrew culture, which is much more corporate, or family-focused. Greeks just didn't think that way; it wasn't their culture or mindset. And Paul has to correct this, which he does vividly, with this "body" metaphor. We are one body, and what I do affects you, and what you do affects me. Perhaps in our Life Groups, we get a better glimpse of this than we do here in this Sunday morning assembly, where we can stay more anonymous.

Now, let's take another tack here. How can we know the Spirit is at work? First, there are rich and loving relationships, that have the qualities Paul describes in Galatians 5:22 and 23—"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and the rest. He calls these the "fruits" of the Spirit.

Another powerful mark of the Spirit at work is, "people come to Jesus" for salvation and leadership in life.

Another mark of the Spirit at work is, spiritual gifts show up—more than human talents and ordinary effort. As a result, people are served—cared for and also raised up to spiritual maturity and fruitfulness. People saved, people served.

And a crowning mark of the Spirit is, there is "unity in the Body", because things are in order—Christ is the Head, we obey in a coordinated manner.

OK, this all-too-brief introduction to the Holy Spirit has to end here for today. Let's listen to how this might apply to us.

In Corinth, people had divided themselves up and were into some kind of "competitive spirituality contest". Is that our problem?

I don't think so. In this congregation, we don't have many who threaten to disrupt our meetings with speaking in tongues (though I and others could). I don't see competitive spirituality, or discrimination along social class lines (which they had in spades in the Corinthian church).

Instead, our problem is a lack of spirituality. We celebrate our conversions years ago, but not all that many of us experience God day by day now. THAT's more our problem—historic

conversion memories, as if our salvation was a transaction instead of a relationship. How many of us now listen to God and join God in what God is doing right around us, even if it requires a change in our agenda? How often does our church attempt something God-sized, “impossible” for us to do on our own power? Though we serve each other pretty well, it seems to me, how often are we bringing Christ to people beyond these walls? These are OUR problems touched by this text.

Finally, we cheat ourselves. God has so much more He wants to give us, so much more of a connection with Him that He wants to enjoy with us. But we don’t seem to believe it. So we miss it. How sad! God wants you to produce so much more

Fruit--not out of guilt, but out of joy and delight, a holy hunger that makes it a deep pleasure to be with God. Why do we cheat ourselves and then deprive others of all God wants to give us? When God plays back for us “the video of our lives”, how full of regret we will be when we see all that we could have enjoyed, could have done for others, with God living fully in us and through us by the Holy Spirit!

You could be a “gifted” person. Looking to God, watching where God is at work and tugging on your sleeve to jump in, you could receive gifts that are God-sized. Yes, you’ll also use your talents and your volunteer labor, and probably your money, too. But O what God wants to do through you! Why do you shrink back? Why do you reject God’s call?

O God, we focus our lives on our lives; we maintain our physical health, but not our spirit’s link with You. Forgive us, Lord. Give us an active desire for You, and new priorities based on that desire. As we turn toward ministry with each other, gift us for the work You are doing, so we may join You and produce fruit that lasts. We pray this in Jesus’ Name.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, CA,
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