

Life in the Spirit

Last in series of Getting stuck in – what a real Christian faith/life looks like. Focused on Jesus, committed to using our gifts and money, one which prays, loves God's word and which seeks to spread the love of God to others. BUT we can do all that – and still be missing something. How does this kind of change happen? Is it just an act of will – we decide this is what we want, and then we go for it. Is it all about our effort? And maybe the support of other like-minded people?

I want to finish this series by saying that we need more than that. Hard work matters, choosing the right things matter – but if we could do all this stuff by ourselves we wouldn't have needed Jesus in the first place. We need more. We need God's help. We need to cultivate the life of the Spirit – or I should say, life IN the Spirit.

But before we think a bit about what that looks like, I think we need to establish some basic principles. Often these principles get forgotten, which is why this topic – which is so fundamental – gets neglected, and the tragic result is that people don't grow as Christians, they don't experience the fullness of life that God calls us to. So here's a couple of things we have to establish at the start:

God is Father Son and Holy Spirit (SLIDE) – (you might be thinking, yeah we know that, but let's follow the logic through). Trinity is mystery, we'll never fully understand it. But clear teaching of Scripture is that God has 3 natures within himself – he is Father in heaven; he is the Son, Jesus, God come to earth; and he is Spirit, God at work in the world, doing the work of Jesus now.

The importance of that – and this is the bit that is often missed – is that when God calls us to relationship to Him, he calls us to get to know him in all 3 dimensions (SLIDE). We learn to know God as Father, we grow to love Jesus the Son and walk in his ways, and we also get to know the God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a who not a what, and He is God too.

This is actually really important, and so often is neglected. A lot of churches keep God as 'God' and I have to say, that isn't really Christian at all. We're allowed to get much more personal than that. We can know God as Father, Son and Spirit. But let's say we've got beyond just calling God 'God', what you find in many churches is that we spend most of our time getting to know God as Father and Son. And that's hugely important. We do need to know God to be our true Father, our loving Father. So many Christians lack security in who they are because they don't know God as a strong, loving Father, who is for them and accepts them unconditionally.

We also need to focus on Jesus, because Jesus shows us what God is like. We can read the character of God in the OT, all his names – but Jesus shows us what that looks like in practice, and so we need to focus on getting to know Jesus as well. Jesus *is* the way to the Father, as he makes very clear in his own teaching, so we want to focus a lot of time on getting to know Jesus.

But God is 3 natures, there's a 3rd dimension which we often ignore. God is Spirit – that's what our reading in John says (v24) – so if we want to really know God, we also have to focus on getting to know God as Spirit. This is, in many ways, the most personal of all. God breathes his Spirit into us –

Jesus says that if we come to Jesus his Spirit will be in us (Jn 14) – i.e. God is so close, he's not just near, he's *in* us. We have God dwelling by his Spirit – and if we have that massive privilege, it's obvious really, isn't it – we need to get to know that Spirit better.

So that's the first principle – here's the other massively important one:

Only God really changes people (SLIDE). The problem is, we've been brought up to believe something different. Our whole culture is built on the idea that we can do it all by ourselves, we might need a bit of help from technology or medicine, but we make that ourselves anyway. And of course we spend years in work learning that you get what you earn. It's the way the world works.

But it's not the way that faith works. It's all built on grace – which is basically a religious word for 'gift', getting what you don't deserve. We can't earn God's love. We can't earn his salvation. And in the same way, we can't change ourselves all by our own efforts. Yes, we do need to make choices, and we do need to co-operate with God, it's not like we just sit there and it all happens. There is effort involved. But it's God who makes things grow. Think of the seed (SLIDE). We need to plant it, we need to water it, but how does it grow. We don't control that. And that's what Paul says elsewhere to the church in Corinth: 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it – but God has been making it grow.' Or think of Psalm 127: READ v1-2.

If we want a real Christian life, we have to give up our right to control it. To give up the little lie that sits right at the heart of human thinking that actually we are like God, we make everything happen, we can do it all by ourselves. Hard work in the Christian life is a good thing, but if we ever start to believe that it's all we need, it's so dangerous. If you think about it, it's the worst form of pride. We receive God's grace for salvation, and then decide that really we can do it all by ourselves after all. Or as Paul says to the church in Galatia: 'Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?'

But it's not just us or our culture. It's just being human, which is why this is so important, it's a challenge that faces every church in every generation. The history of the church shows us that we are always tempted to earn brownie points with God. The mediaeval Catholic church told people that they earned salvation by various religious obligations: do this, do that, earn yourself time off from purgatory. At its worst you could even pay for it. And the Reformation came along and seemed to overthrow all that. But look at what the Protestant churches replaced it with: the Protestant work ethic. It's obvious where it came from: that's why it's called the Protestant work ethic. In other words, we're still trying to earn brownie points with God, only this time not through religious rituals but through work as a form of achievement. In some ways it's far worse. A few Hail Mary's doesn't take a lot of time, but the work ethic consumes your whole life. *And* we pretend it's more spiritual, it's superior.

And for many of us it becomes our pride. What happens when we don't get an answer to prayer? We cry out to God: why haven't you heard us, we say: look at how *hard* we're working for you. And God says, I never called you to work hard for me, but to love me, to walk with me, to be my

friend. I want to walk with you in the garden in the cool of the day, but you're still ploughing the field, or chopping the wood. You want to earn my love, I want to give it to you as a gift.

I'm the worst of sinners by the way. I'm a recovering workaholic. Work is my addiction. And God showed me what I was 16 years ago, he showed how I was building my whole life earning my self-esteem by my achievements and then wondering why I felt so empty. And ever since, I've fought this deep desire to just work, work, work – or rather to make work into my idol, my source of pride, my credit line with God. I still work hard by the way, but God has shown me a better way. He's shown me that unless *He* builds the house, it's all for nothing. He's shown me that what I need, what we all need, is to live by the Spirit, to let God transform us from the inside out.

You see, when it's all work to change us, we're just changing the externals. We're *doing* stuff, but mostly we're not changing inside. That was the problem with the Pharisees. It's not that they didn't love God, or they weren't passionate about God's ways – is that they were directing all that energy in the wrong way. They were working working working, doing stuff: but their hearts were untouched. It's God who changes lives, it's God who changes our hearts, it's God who empowers our efforts to leave us truly changed people, people who experience joy and peace and compassion for others. We can't fabricate that. God gives it to us a gift – we can ask him for it, we can receive it, but we can't earn it.

This is life in the Spirit – to live as if life is a gift, and God is the giver (**SLIDE** – REPEAT). To depend on him as a loving Father, to believe in his goodness and to ask him for the Spirit, i.e. the strength, the capacity to love him and love others. It's a completely different way of approaching life. It's humbling because we surrender control. We also have to surrender the preposterous idea that our efforts will make us good enough for God, that we are what we earn: what we do, what achievements we can point to. We like to talk about being God's children, but we don't really think about what that means. What's the fundamental difference between being a child and a grown-up? We're not in charge, and we can't earn our survival. Our life is gift. It's also freedom, it's playtime, it's basically a lot more fun. So there's 2 sides to this coin: it involves giving away everything we built our fragile self-esteem on. But it also brings tremendous joy and life. A life built on gift and not effort is just a lot more fun.

I've basically used up all my time on the intro – I don't usually do that, but I felt this was so important, I needed to do that today. I've got 2 minutes left – so very briefly, what does life in the Spirit look like? Here's the key take-out from the passages – 3 things (always 3!!)

Worship (**SLIDE**) – John 4:24 – READ. To live life in the Spirit is to live a life of worship. Not just an hour on Sunday, but all through every day. By the Spirit we cry Abba, Father, the Spirit causes us to worship God naturally, spontaneously, all the time. If that's not you – ask God to give you a Spirit of worship.

Freedom (**SLIDE**) – turn to 2 Cor 3:17 – READ. You can tell if God's Spirit is at work in you if you start to feel a greater sense of freedom. Not freedom to do what you want, but that sense of being free. That the stuff which drags us all down isn't a prison to you, but somehow you retain

that sense of freedom. Think about the inspiring Christians you've met – most of them tend to have this real sense of freedom. If that's not you, ask God to give you a Spirit of freedom.

Change (**SLIDE**) – READ 2 Cor 3:18. When Spirit is at work, we get transformed. And not just in an ordinary sense – from 'glory to glory'. How about that?! Last hymn 'Love divine' – final verse READ. That's the point: we are being made ready for heaven. No egos, no earning power: we cast our crowns before God, lost in wonder, love and praise. And to take us back to where we started, we all need to ask for God to keep changing us, because none of us are there yet.

Radical change to our lives and also to our church. We're good at working. But what if we decided that actually life in the Spirit meant a lot more time worshipping, praying, and having fun, living with the sort of joyful freedom it talks about here? What would that kind of church look like? That's a question to think about over the summer. I'm serious by the way. I sense that if we really lived this kind of life both my own life and our church life would look radically different. I don't know what that looks like. But I'd like to find out. Are you coming?