

A few years ago Robert Duvall wanted to make a movie about the Holy Spirit because he felt the movie industry had ignored the work of the Holy Spirit in American religion. Duvall was raised in a Christian home, believed in Jesus, but never knew much about the Holy Spirit.

So he made this movie called *The Apostle*. He wanted to portray a preacher who was fully human, but captivated by the Holy Spirit. When he started out, the big movie studios didn't want anything to do with it. He put off making the movie for nearly 15 years, until he finally financed the movie with his own money.

While he was doing research for the movie, he tried not to pass judgment so he could understand how the Holy Spirit moves. During his research, as he sat in a church in Harlem, the Spirit touched his life in a way he'll never forget. And the movie ended up being a huge success, earning him an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of preacher Sonny Dewey.

In some ways *The Apostle* made the Holy Spirit mainstream to the public. *Newsweek* even devoted an article to the resurgence of the Holy Spirit in churches. In a *Newsweek* survey, 47% of Americans claimed to have experienced the Holy Spirit in their lives. That may be true, but I wonder what that means.

Today I want to answer the question, What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives? To answer that question we'll be looking at Galatians 5:16–26.

Who is the Holy Spirit?

But before we look at that passage, let me remind you who the Holy Spirit is. A lot of confusion exists about this. A. W. Tozer once wrote when the average Christian thinks about the Holy Spirit, "He is likely to imagine a nebulous substance like a wisp of invisible smoke which is said to be present in churches and to hover over good people when they die." Let me remind you the Holy Spirit is not a thing or a force or a ghost. The Holy Spirit is a divine person. Christians have always believed in one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit still remains kind of a mystery to us. We understand the idea of what a Father is and what he does. God the Father is our Creator, Provider and Protector. That's what Fathers do. We understand what a Son is and what a Son does. We see in Jesus a perfect Son who reflects the Father's nature and carries out his Father's will. But then we come to the Holy Spirit and we sort of draw a blank; nothing concrete comes to mind.

The most prevailing image the Bible uses for the Holy Spirit is that of wind. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach*, which means wind.

- Like wind, the Spirit broods over the waters in the creation story in Genesis 1.
- In Exodus, the Spirit blows with enough force to divide the Red Sea.
- In Ezekiel's vision, he gives life and breath to dry bones.
- Jesus even said to Nicodemus, "*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit*" (John 3:8).
- Luke writes on the day of Pentecost the Spirit came on the disciples with such force it felt like a mighty wind.

Don't get me wrong, the Spirit is not wind, but he functions like wind. We don't see him but we know his presence by the effect he has and the work he does. One of my professors used to call the Holy Spirit the Blue-Collar Deity because he's God at work in our lives. In his work he doesn't draw attention to himself but to Jesus. Whatever effect he has, it's about taking what Jesus did and making it real in our experience.

That's the question we're asking today: What effect does the Spirit have in our lives? What does it look like when he blows on us? Not all believers are on the same page about this. You can visit churches where the Spirit is said to cause people to laugh hysterically or fall on the ground and bark like dogs. Let's turn to Galatians 5 to answer that question. I want to read this entire passage and then make several observations about the Spirit's role in our lives.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Gal. 5:16-26).

Those who belong to Christ have been given new life by the Spirit

The first thing to understand from this passage is the Holy Spirit is given to all who believe. The apostle Paul is writing here to believers. He's talking about the new life we have in Christ. Earlier in Galatians he asked them, *"Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?"* (Gal 3:2). He's reminding them that the Spirit filled them through trusting Christ, not keeping the law. Down in verse 25 he said, *"we live by the Spirit..."* The Spirit gives us new life in Christ. Again, Jesus told Nicodemus, an expert in the law, "You must be born again," and that happens through the Spirit.

Let me illustrate this by pouring some water into this jar. When you trust in Christ as Savior he fills you with his Spirit and gives you new life. What's great about this is once you have the Spirit he won't leave you. It says in Ephesians 1, *"When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance..."* So the Spirit is like an unbreakable seal that marks us, and a deposit or down payment from God that guarantees our future inheritance.

This truth lays the groundwork for everything else in this passage. If you know Christ, you have new life through the indwelling of his Spirit and that can't be taken away from you.

The presence of the Spirit in our life means we are in for a fight

The second thing to understand is the presence of the Spirit in our life will mean we're in for a fight. The fight is between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit. What is the flesh? The flesh is what we are in our fallen condition as sinners. The flesh is the sin nature within us. Paul says, *"The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want."* That means your inner life is the scene of a battle, a civil war, we might call it. So we can't always do whatever we want because what our flesh wants is contrary to what the Spirit wants.

It's very important to understand this is the normal Christian life. Occasionally I talk to new believers who are surprised and discouraged this battle in going on within them. And sometimes the flesh rages so intensely within them and the battle is so fierce they wonder if maybe they're not a Christian at all. John Stott says, "We do not deny that there is such a thing as moral

conflict in non-Christian people, but we assert that it is fiercer in Christians because they possess two natures, flesh and Spirit, in irreconcilable antagonism."

Let me illustrate this by taking this glass full of water, which is like you filled with the Holy Spirit. But you still live in this world, which is full of sin and temptation. The world tells us we're in charge of our own lives and whatever we need to do to make ourselves happy is okay. Many of our old relationships are still in place. None of our circumstances have really changed. Our sinful desires are still something we must deal with. And what happens is sin begins to creep back into our lives. So I'll pour some lemon juice in this glass to represent you dealing with bitterness. Or maybe you begin to deal with self-righteousness, hypocrisy and legalism, so I'll pour some vinegar in, which looks like water but it really stinks. Or maybe you deal with anger, so let me pour some red hot sauce into the glass because some of you are really angry. Or maybe you're green with envy and jealousy so I'll add a little green lime juice into the mix. Or how about this beer? I'm fairly certain this is the first time a beer has been opened up on this stage! This represents all the addictions in our lives; things that we use to medicate our pain. Then there's the really dark stuff—adultery, pornography, hatred for others, which is represented by this dark coffee I'll pour in. You can see how this glass is now filled with a really ugly concoction. This is what happens to our lives and this is what people begin to see when we allow our lives to be controlled by the flesh.

We can experience victory over the desires of the flesh

But there's something we can do about this. This is the third thing to understand from this passage: We can experience victory over the desires of the flesh. There are several phrases Paul uses in this passage to describe how this takes place, and I want us to look at each of these.

Notice down in verse 24 he says, *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."* Paul uses the past tense here to describe something that's already happened. As a Christian you've crucified or put to death the flesh. Remember what Jesus said, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"* (Mark 8:34). So every follower of Christ has taken their flesh—their sinful desires—and nailed it to the cross. This is a graphic way of talking about repentance — turning our back on our old life of sin and selfishness, repudiating it completely. That's what happens when we become a Christian. When we come to Christ, we repent. We "crucify" all we knew to be wrong. We take our self-centered nature, with all its passions and desires, and nail it to the cross. Like crucifixion, it's hard and painful, but it's also decisive. So here Paul is just reminding us of that: You crucified the flesh; now leave it there to die!

He not only talks about our attitude towards the flesh but also towards the Spirit within us. This is described in several ways. In verse 18 he talks about being *“led by the Spirit.”* It’s like when I take my dog, Daisy, for a walk. She gets so excited and for at least the first mile or so she’s out front leading me along, even pulling me. As our “leader,” the Spirit pulls us in a certain direction; he asserts his desires against those of the flesh. He puts pressure on us to follow. Paul says if we’re led by the Spirit, we’re not under the condemnation and control of the law. If the Spirit leads you to forgive your sister who wronged you instead of nursing your resentment towards her, you’re actually fulfilling the law which says love your neighbor as yourself. When you’re under the Spirit’s leadership, you’re not under the law; you don’t need the law to tell you what to do.

Now with the Spirit doing the leading, you might think your job is just to be passive and submissive to him. But notice there are two commands in this passage that are active. In verse 16 he says, *“Walk by (in) the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”* So we ourselves are to walk actively and purposefully in the path of the Holy Spirit. Then in verse 25 he says something similar: *“keep in step with the Spirit.”* This means to get in line with him. Like a marching band watches and follows the drum major out in front, keep in step with him.

So we can experience victory over the flesh, not in the sense that the battle will go away or that we’ll reach perfection this side of heaven. It’s a process and sometimes it feels like we’re taking two steps forward and three steps back. But we can make progress.

It’s kind of like taking this pitcher full of water and pouring the clear water into the glass until the glass is filled with clear water again. If I realize I’ve crucified the flesh and begin to let the Spirit lead me; if I actively follow his leadership and keep in step with him, more and more of my life will begin to reflect his purity and character. In another letter Paul says we should be continually filled with the Spirit; being filled with the Holy Spirit to the point that you’re overflowing with him and everyone around you can see that.

It’s not hard to know if you’re walking in the Spirit or the flesh

There’s just one more thing to see in this passage. Sometimes we wonder, “How do I know if I’m walking in the flesh or if I’m filled with the Spirit?” Paul says here it’s not hard to know; just look at the fruit.

He talks first about the acts (works) of the flesh and gives us a long list of about 15 different things. He covers the whole range of sin, doesn’t he? He covers sexual sin (sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery). He covers religious sin (idolatry and witchcraft). He covers relational sin (hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy). And he

covers drunkenness and carousing, which was part pagan culture, and still is.

Paul wants us to know you can’t practice those things and inherit the kingdom of God. You can’t live like that and say you’re a Christian. Again, he’s not talking about being morally perfect. As followers of Christ, we struggle with these things and we sometimes succumb to the flesh. The Bible says we can grieve the Spirit of God who is in us. But we know that’s not who we are and we know we can’t live like that for long. Sooner or later we repent and get right with God.

But then he gives another list, which he calls “fruit of the Spirit.” Notice he doesn’t call these the “acts” or “works” of the Spirit as he did with the flesh, but rather it’s the “fruit” of the Spirit. The change to fruit evokes a different image: Fruit can’t grow unless it’s connected to a tree or a vine. Remember how Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I in you.” You see, as we abide in him, as we’re led by him and walk in him and keep in step with him, the Spirit of God will produce this fruit in our life. This fruit so wonderful and tasty it has nine flavors: love, joy, peace, forbearance (patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

We can’t examine each of these but don’t miss the fact that love is first on this list. Up in verse 14 Paul said, *“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”* This seems to be a particular issue with the church in Galatia because he adds, *“If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.”* Whereas the flesh destroys unity, fellowship and community, the Spirit nurtures it through love.

This past Tuesday night was our last elder meeting with our North Campus elders before they become New North Church. And of course there were all kinds of different emotions. But there were also some challenging decisions to make, and honestly some of it had to do with dividing up resources in a fair and honest way. Imagine three adult children trying to decide who gets what from their parent’s inheritance. It was hard and there were all kinds of opportunities for the works of the flesh to manifest themselves. But ultimately the Spirit prevailed and we found unity. It’s interesting the last thing Paul says in verse 26 is, *“Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”* That is the flesh. It’s the antithesis of love.

So you don’t have to guess as to whether you’re walking in the flesh or the Spirit — just look at what’s coming out of your life. Look at the fruit. In fact, you can taste it (drink from glass). Is it the acts of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit?

Do you know what’s great about this? This is also the secret of impact as a church. When we keep in step with the Spirit, he’ll produce his fruit in our lives, and others will see that, and they’ll

want to experience that fruit for themselves. Before Jesus ascended, he told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Spirit to come on them, which he did on the day of Pentecost. Remember he said, *"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). We usually think of that power in terms of boldly sharing the gospel with others, but I wonder if that power also has something to do with the Spirit helping us to overcome the flesh and bearing the fruit of love in our lives. That love is compelling and attractive.

I want to encourage you today to consider renewing your relationship with the Holy Spirit. He's the Blue-Collar Deity and if you know the father through the Son he's at work in your life. He's given you new life, and he's there to help you to subdue the flesh, bear the fruit of righteousness, and empower you to be his witness in a very dark world.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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