

Re-receiving the Spirit
Galatians 5:16–25; Colossians 3:1–17
Sunday, January 19, 2025

I love it when a sermon generates so many questions and so much positive conversation during the week that I have to do a follow-up! Last Sunday we heard the story of Jesus' baptism, and how the Holy Spirit descended upon him. And then we heard two other stories from Acts about people being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit. So we talked about what it means to receive the Holy Spirit. We said that it is not about *getting* something that we *do not have*, because the Holy Spirit is *already with you*. The Spirit has *been* with you throughout your whole life, you just might not have been *aware* of it.

But also, the Holy Spirit is not a *thing* that we *get*, the Spirit is a *person* with whom we are in *relationship*. The Holy Spirit is God living with us in the world today. Receiving the Holy Spirit is not like receiving a *gift*, it is more like when you receive a *guest* at your home; you are welcoming them in. Receiving the Holy Spirit is about waking up to the fact that God's Spirit has *always* been *in* us; opening our hearts and minds and lives to God's presence *with* us and love *for* us and saying, "You are *welcome* here, Lord! You are *welcome* in my life!"

In the days that followed, I had great conversations with so many of you about what this *looks like*. And there were two main questions that I heard repeatedly. The first was, "Does this mean that the Holy Spirit is present in *everyone* (even *non-Christians*) but awakened only in *some*? Because that doesn't seem fair. And once *awakened*, can it be *extinguished*? Can we *lose* the Holy Spirit?"

The second question I kept hearing was somewhat related. I said last week that there is no *secret* to receiving the Holy Spirit, and that I can't give you a step-by-step on how to do it, because it's going to look different in *your* life than it has in *mine* or anyone else's. But the question was, "How can I *open myself up* to the Spirit? How can I put myself in a place where I am *receptive* to the Holy Spirit?" And I

said that this question was somewhat *related* to the first question, because I talked to several people who said, “I used to have that feeling of closeness to God, that deep awareness of God’s presence and love, but I haven’t had that in a while. How can I get it back?”

So these questions, “Does *everyone* have the Holy Spirit? Can you *lose* the Spirit, and how can we get the Spirit *back* (or get it for the first time)?” This is what we’re going to think about today.

Before I directly answer those questions, I need to start with a reminder that the Holy Spirit is not a *thing* that we *get*; the Spirit is a *person* with whom we are in relationship. I know I said that just a minute ago, but *it is so easy for us to forget*. Jesus was a person who lived and breathed and walked and talked on the earth. It’s easy for us to visualize *Jesus* as a *person*. With God, that’s a little harder, but I think we *can* still visualize God as a *person*, as a *living being*. And scripture does have stories of God walking and talking with people on the earth, so to a degree, we can understand *God* as a *person* with whom we are in *relationship*. The Holy Spirit is harder. Because *spirits* are *invisible*. The Holy Spirit is not a person that we can see and touch. So it is harder for us to visualize the Holy Spirit as a person with whom we are in relationship.

But think about it this way. I have friends and family who I have not seen in *years*. We live too far away from each other, and with families and work and busy schedules, it’s just hard to find time to get together. *But* I still talk to them regularly (on phone calls or texts), and I still feel close to them. We know what’s going on in each other’s lives. We support and encourage one another when we need it. Even though I cannot *see* them or *touch* them, I am *in relationship* with them, and I feel *close* to them. I would bet that you have the same kind of relationships in your life. And it’s the same way with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is not a person that you can see or touch, but the Spirit is like that long-distance friend who you can talk to and feel close to.

And the reason that I bring this up is because when we start asking questions like, “Does everyone *have* the Spirit? Can you *lose* the Spirit? How can we get the Spirit *back*?” we very subtly shift into that mindset of the Spirit as a *thing* that we *get*. We have to be intentional about thinking of the Holy Spirit in ways that are *personal* and *relational*. We don’t refer to the Holy Spirit as *it*, anymore than you would refer to another person as *it*. Even as I was writing this sermon, I found myself saying things like, “Receiving the Holy Spirit is about waking up to the fact that *it* has *always* been with us.” And I have to stop myself and say, “Not *it*. Receiving the Holy Spirit is about waking up to the fact that *God’s Spirit* has *always* been with us.” So we have to be intentional about thinking of the Holy Spirit in ways that are *personal* and *relational*.

So with that in mind, let’s look at that first question, “Does *everyone* have the Holy Spirit,” and let’s reframe that in more personal terms, “Is God’s Spirit *in* everyone, including non-Christians?” The short, simple answer to that is, “Yes.” The Holy Spirit is not a person that Christians came up with. Judaism has been aware of the Holy Spirit for thousands of years. Muslims have an understanding of the Holy Spirit, although it is very different than the way Christians know the Spirit. There are a bunch of references to the Spirit of God being with people in the Old Testament. In the second verse of the whole Bible, Genesis talks about how the Spirit of God moved over the chaotic waters at the beginning of creation, bringing forth order and life.

We talked last week about how the Hebrew word for *spirit* is *ruach*, which means, “spirit, breath, and wind.” When the first human beings were created from the dust of the earth, Genesis says that God breathed into their nostrils the *ruach* of life – the *spirit, breath, wind* of life – and they became living beings. So from the beginning of creation, the Spirit of God has been *with* humanity and *in* humanity. Do all people *know that*? No. But that does not change the fact that every single one of us is created in the

very image of God, and God has breathed the Spirit of life into all of us. *Can* everyone awaken to that and come to an awareness of God's presence with them and love for them? Absolutely.

But what about people who have never *heard* about the Holy Spirit? That's not *their* fault, right? It doesn't seem fair that only *some* people get to know God's presence and love, while others *don't*. Well, that's *our* job, isn't it? It's like one of the stories we read from Acts last week, where Paul comes to a group of people and says, "Have you received the Holy Spirit," and they say, "We have not even heard that there *is* a Holy Spirit!" So Paul tells them about the Spirit and then lays his hands on them, and they *awaken* to the presence of the Spirit. Part of our calling as followers of Jesus is to share with people the good news of God's presence with them and love for them. We, who *are* aware of the Spirit, need to share that awareness with others who are *not*.

So, yes, God's *ruach*, God's *Spirit*, *breath* is present in *everyone*. Every single person is *created* by God in the very *image* of God. Some of us come to an awareness of that, others do not. But every single one of us has some kind of awareness deep within us that there is more to life than what we can *see* and *touch*. We all have a *longing* inside of us for *more*. For *connection*. In the book of Acts, Paul talks to people in Athens who are not Christians about how there is a desire in each one of us that leads us to *search* for God and *grope* for God and perhaps *find* God, though indeed, he says, God is not far from each one of us. Our job is to make sure *everyone* hears the good news, "God is *with* you and God *loves* you," so that they might awaken to the Spirit's presence in them and find new life.

Can those who *have* the Spirit *lose* the Spirit? Can the flame of the Spirit be *extinguished* in us? Again, let's think about this in *relational* terms. We all have friends or family with whom we have fallen out of touch. Or we don't feel as close to them as we used to. And it can be that way with the Holy Spirit. I

would be willing to bet that we all go through times in our lives when we feel *close* to God and times when we feel *far* from God; I know *I* do.

But just because *we* feel far from God does not mean that God is far from *us*; that God has *left* us or that we have *lost* God. God is *always* with us; that is the *promise* we have from Jesus. With every breath we take, we are breathing in and out God's *ruach*, God's *breath*, God's *Spirit*. It's just that sometimes life gets hard, and we lose sight of that. We can feel like God has *left* us, God has *given up* on us, or even that God is *punishing* us. So while we cannot *lose* the Spirit, we *can* lose our *awareness* of it and that feeling of closeness to God. And just like with friends or family, sometimes we need to be intentional about reaching out and reconnecting. So how can we do *that*? Or what can we do to open ourselves up to the Spirit's presence for the first time?

The first thing that I always tell people is *scripture* and *prayer*. We don't always *like* that answer, because we want there to be a shortcut. But there are no shortcuts to life with God, you just have to start *living* it. And the *primary* way that we come to know God is through scripture and prayer. If we want to be in relationship with God, then we have to *talk* to God and let God talk to *us*. That happens through reading scripture and praying.

And I'm not talking about devoting *hours* each day to scripture and prayer. Give God a *minute*, *five* minutes. Start at a manageable level. It takes five minutes *at most* to read a *chapter* of scripture. And prayer can be just sitting still and quiet after you read and reflecting on that scripture and saying, "God, what are you saying to me through this," and then just *listening*. You can say the Lord's Prayer or some other prayer that has already been written. Just don't *rush* through it. Take your time and reflect on the words.

How else can we open ourselves to the Spirit's presence? Through music. Singing. Surrounding ourselves with music that draws us to God. For some, that could mean listening to contemporary Christian music in the car or around the house. For some it's listening to hymns. For some it's classical music, so much of which was written to glorify God. You just have to find what works for you. But I find that the more I am listening to spiritual or religious music, the more my mind dwells in that place.

Daily devotionals. Starting off each day with a brief devotion (or a *long* one). There are countless devotional books out there. I always direct people to *Jesus Calling* as a place to get started. I have devotional books by Dietrich Bonhoeffer that I read during Advent and Lent. There are devotional apps for your phone, podcasts and websites, daily emails that you can subscribe to. You just get out there and start looking and find something that works for you.

We have women's groups and men's groups that you can come to, where you can read and pray and talk and be in fellowship with other men or women. Just this past week, I heard someone coming out of the women's book group on Monday morning saying, "*That* is just what I needed. That is really going to work for me."

Or just getting together with *one* other person to read, talk, pray. I was talking to someone the other day who was saying, "I've been thinking about reaching out to this person to start reading scripture and praying with them." And I said, "Do it! I guarantee you that person will be receptive to it!" So they *did*, and the other person *was*, and here is part of the text I got from them afterward (they said I could share this), "Our focus is to reignite the power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts again. To feel the love and protection of Jesus in our hearts every day, not just when things are crumbling around us. To remember all the awful things that could have happened in our lives but didn't because God's love, wisdom, and protection was with us. We were saved from all the evils that could have happened and didn't, and we are

not even aware of them. But when I think about certain events and the outcome of them if I *didn't* have God's protection, I realize how God saved me. It wasn't *my* wisdom or good luck, it was *God!*" I don't know, it seems like they are *already* feeling the Spirit's presence, just from *asking* that other person to meet with them.

We can open ourselves to the Spirit's presence through acts of service. Helping at a food pantry or homeless shelter. Working with Habitat for Humanity. The TE Care organization that helps people who are in need in our community (you want to know more about *that*, talk to Nancy Higgins or Cammy Wagner). There are a number of English as a Second Language organizations around us, where you can help someone learn to speak and read English to make their life here easier. These aren't even primarily *Christian* organizations. It's just about *servicing*, helping someone else.

You can just go do a random act of kindness for someone who needs a little help. You know someone who has lost a job or is grieving or in some way struggling? Just go drop a card in their mailbox with a gift card in it. You don't need to sign it, just write, "I know things are hard right now, and there's not much I can do. But here's a little something to help you get by," or, "Enjoy a dinner on me. I just want you to know that someone loves you and cares about you." Just find a way to do something small and simple and kind for someone who needs it.

Go take a walk outside and look for what is beautiful and just let yourself be in awe of creation.

You want to open yourself up to the Spirit's presence? Forgive someone. Or *ask* for forgiveness if you need to. Reach out to someone and make amends. That is like a *jump start* to feel God's presence.

Look at what Paul says in the passages we heard earlier. “If you have been *raised* with Christ, seek the things that are *above*, where Christ is...Set your minds on things that are *above*.” In both of these readings, he gives us a list of things to avoid: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, evil desire, greed, slander and abusive language, and lying. It’s up to you to figure out what those things look like in your life. But we have to *avoid* those things and focus on the things that are *of the Spirit*: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Figure out what *those* things look like in your life and devote your time and energy *there*.

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love. Bear with one another. Forgive one another. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly (back to reading scripture). Sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God (back to music). And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.

You want to open yourself to the Spirit’s presence, connect with God, *reconnect* with God? There is no shortage of ways we can move in that direction. It doesn’t guarantee a spiritual transformation, but let me tell you, if you start doing *those* things regularly, your life is going to be transformed. It’s not about *doing more*, like you need to do more and more and more to experience God’s presence. Just pick one to start with, and that will begin the process of opening your heart and mind and life to God’s presence and love.

Whether you are just starting this process of opening yourself up or trying to *reconnect* with God, it can feel slow going sometimes. A month, six months, a year, “I’m not seeing any results, so why bother?” There was a French priest and scientist named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin back in the first half of the 20th century, and he said this:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability –
and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually – let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

If you take a step to open yourself to God, God will not let that go to waste. God's Spirit is *already* in you, with you, guiding you. So take a step and see where the Spirit can lead you. Amen.