

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 11, 2012**

TIME TO “GET THE SPIRIT”

Galatians 5:16-26

Most of you know that before coming to Virginia, my family and I lived in Altoona, Pennsylvania, where for 11 years I was the pastor of Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church. John Beatty was one of the pillars of the church there, a man who truly loved God and people. He had retired some years earlier from the Pennsylvania Railroad. John and his wife Jean never had any children of their own, but they were surrogate grandparents for our children during the years we lived there. We were blessed to have them in our lives. They have since both been “promoted” to heaven.

John loved to tell this story about a man who was visiting a church for the first time. This was a church whose style of worship was very formal. Very dignified. Some might even call it stuffy. Well, this visitor found a seat near the back of the church and waited for the service to begin. When the very formal and dignified call to worship was given, the visitor jumped up out of his seat and shouted: ‘Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!’ Everybody in the church turned and looked at him. The people near him gave him the “Shhh!” sign and motioned for him to sit down. Which he did.

Moments later it happened again. During a prayer he suddenly called out in a loud voice: “Thank You, Lord! Praise You, Jesus!” Again, he got some disapproving looks.

Then, sure enough, a few minutes later, it happened again! This time, having had enough of these spontaneous outbursts, one of the ushers walked over to the newcomer and said: “I’m sorry, sir, but if you do that again, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

The visitor said: “I can’t help it. I’ve got the Spirit!”

To which the usher replied: “Well, you didn’t get it here!”

Isn’t that a great story? I can still picture John Beatty telling it with a twinkle in his eye. In one sense, of course, it is a sad story, and it is not just about the proprieties of worship. The truth is that you cannot live the Christian life as God intends it if you don’t have the Spirit. It is impossible to live the way God wants you to live without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work in your life. The Christian life, as I always emphasize in our Church Membership Class, is a supernatural life, and we can live it only through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. To take it even further, if you have given your life to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith, if you have turned from the sin in your life and put your trust in Christ and Christ alone for your salvation, if you are a sincere follower of Christ, then you’ve got the Spirit – because the Spirit comes not only to show us our sin and our need for a Savior, and not only to draw us to Christ in repentance and faith, the Holy Spirit also comes to make His dwelling, His home, in our hearts. The Holy Spirit comes not only to be *with* us. He comes to live *in* us. He comes to sanctify us – which means, to make us holy. He comes to make us new

creatures in Christ. He comes to change us from the inside out. He comes to make us more and more like Christ.

If you truly belong to Christ, you've got the Spirit. If you haven't got the Spirit, it is a sign that you have not yet put your trust in the saving power and love of Christ.

It is also possible that you do believe in Christ and you do have the Spirit, but you are trying to keep the Spirit bottled up. You've put the Holy Spirit in a box and you're doing your best to keep Him there, because if the Holy Spirit gets loose, if the Spirit gets out of the bottle or the box, well, there is just no telling what the Spirit may do. There is no telling what the Holy Spirit may do in your life. There is no telling what the Holy Spirit may want you to do.

Sometimes the Spirit does things that make us uncomfortable – like prompting someone to shout praises to the Lord during Worship. Sometimes the Spirit wants *us – you or me* – to do things that make us uncomfortable. Some of us – all of us at times, I suspect – want to keep the Holy Spirit in the bottle so we can control Him, because if we let Him loose, the Spirit will take control, and the bottom line truth is that *we* want to be the ones in control.

John Piper puts it this way. He says that when God acts in a dramatic, unexpected, out-of-the-box kind of way, as He did, for example, when He gave the Holy Spirit to the church at Pentecost, not everybody “gets” it. Not everybody understands what God is doing. And not everybody approves of it. Some people don't like it. Including, we have to say, some church people. When the Holy Spirit begins to work in a way to which we are not accustomed, some church people – even some pastors, sometimes – object. If the Holy Spirit violates the hallowed principle of “We've never done it that way before,” some people will immediately cry “Foul!” Please don't misunderstand. I'm not talking about anything specifically. I'm just speaking in general about the way lots of people react when God chooses to act in a demonstrative or dramatic way, and it shakes us up a bit. I think you get the idea.

Personally, I think we all need to be shaken up by the Holy Spirit. I think we need to be shaken here at Faith. I think the church as a whole in the greater Washington metro area needs to be shaken up by the Holy Spirit. I think the church all across America needs to be shaken and stirred. I think the church on every continent, all around the world, needs a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a fresh infusion of the Spirit, to shake us up, to wake us up, to rev us up, to inspire us and empower us, to propel us and compel us to be what God wants us to be and to do what God wants us to do. It is not just “the church” that needs this. Each of us needs it. I need it. We all need it.

Little more than a century ago the Holy Spirit shook up a young man in Wales named Evan Roberts. Roberts was a coal miner, the son of a coal miner. Then he worked for a short time as a blacksmith. All the while, he was praying that God would use him to bring spiritual revival in Wales. Over and over Roberts prayed: “Send the Holy Spirit now, send the Holy Spirit now, for the sake of Jesus Christ.” In His mercy and grace, the Lord would do that very thing. The Spirit moved in a dramatic way. Within a year, an estimated 100,000 new believers came to faith in Christ. The effect on Welsh society was undeniable. Collin Hansen and John Woodbridge note that output from the coal mines slowed dramatically because the

horses used to transport the coal wouldn't move. Why? It seems that the miners converted or brought back to Christ in the revival no longer kicked or swore at the horses, and the horses were so confused by the change in the miners' behavior that they didn't know what to do! Courtrooms were closed, because there weren't enough criminal cases to be heard. (From *A God-Sized Vision*, pp. 100-104).

"Send the Holy Spirit now, Lord. Send the Holy Spirit now, for the sake of Jesus Christ!" Evan Roberts' prayer might well be our prayer today, for our land. For our area. For northern Virginia and the entire metro D. C. area. For our nation in these troubled and troubling times. For a world in danger of imploding. "Send the Holy Spirit now." Yes, Lord, let it be so. Send the Spirit as you did at Pentecost in the church's beginning. Send the Spirit in power as You did in Wales a century ago. Send the Holy Spirit as You have many times in places throughout the history of Your church. Send the Spirit, Lord.

Yes. But. You and I received the Holy Spirit when we trusted in Christ for salvation. The Holy Spirit is both *with* us and *in* us. So Paul tells us to live by the Spirit. Live by the Spirit who is within you and no longer gratify desires of your sinful nature. No longer chase after the kinds of things that have seemed to attractive, so appealing to you but take you down a road that leads to death. Live by the Spirit.

If we live by the Spirit or, as Paul says near the end of the chapter, *since* we live by the Spirit, let us then keep in step with the Spirit. I have never served in any branch of the United States military. But when I was a teenager, when I was in junior high and high school I had a phys. ed. instructor at Cranberry Area Junior-Senior High School who had been a drill sergeant in the Marines. So there were days when it was like being in the military even if we weren't. One of the things we did routinely in our physical education program at Cranberry Area Junior-Senior High School was, we marched. Our phys. ed. teacher who was known affectionately as "Coach Johnston" drilled us. He taught us how to march. He taught us about-face and right and left face and all those things. He taught us to march in step with one another. Paul is saying since the Holy Spirit is in you, since the Holy Spirit lives in you, keep in step. March in step with the Spirit. Let the Holy Spirit be your drill sergeant. He is an affectionate, loving, not harsh or mean drill sergeant. Let the Holy Spirit lead you. Follow the instructions, follow the orders the Holy Spirit gives you. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit, following His guidance and His promptings, even when those promptings may lead us to take a step outside of our comfort zone. Even when the Holy Spirit may lead us to do something that feels uncomfortable or something that we're not so accustomed to. But the Holy Spirit leads you.

There's another thing about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, in some circles among Christians, kind of controversial. There are different ideas, different notions, different theologies about the Holy Spirit. Some Christians act like the Holy Spirit is the only person of the Trinity who matters. And then for others, and probably most of us tend more in this direction, the Holy Spirit is what Frances Chan says, a forgotten god. But He's the person of the Trinity we pay no attention to or little attention to or not enough attention to. Some Christians are infatuated with the Holy Spirit and some are afraid of the Holy Spirit. Some Christians pay too much attention to the Holy Spirit, give too much emphasis to the Holy

Spirit, while other Christians ignore the Holy Spirit or discount the ministry of the Holy Spirit or the value of the Holy Spirit today. Some Christians tend to focus too much on certain particular gifts of the Holy Spirit which the New Testament describes. And others say that the Holy Spirit no longer does what He used to do. The Holy Spirit no longer gives those gifts that others think are the most important gifts. Some Christians tend to overemphasize the gifts of the Holy Spirit in general and undervalue the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Both gifts and fruit are important. But if you have great gifts and your life bears no fruit, no evidence of the life-changing gracious work of God in your life, if it's all gifts and no fruit or if it's mostly gifts and very little fruit, then your life is out of whack. That's not the way God wants it to be.

Paul is clear in his writings in 1 Corinthians, in particular, that as valuable and as important as the gifts of the Spirit are, the fruit of the Spirit is more important, is much more valuable. Because Paul says that the way of love, the primary fruit of the Holy Spirit, is a far better way, a more excellent way than the way of spiritual gifts without love.

I've used this equation before and I hope it sounds familiar. Really what the New Testament teaches is that gifts without love, gifts minus love, or you could say gifts without fruit in general equal zero. It's worth nothing. The gifts must be expressed, must be exercised in the context of a loving heart, of a heart that produces and displays the very fruit of the Holy Spirit.

I want to read part of this passage again from *The Message* because the language the Eugene Peterson uses in expressing the truth of God's Word here is pretty powerful. Here's part of what he says:

(Paul says) My council is this. Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with God's Spirit, just as God's Spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you can't live at times one way and at times another way, according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

And then he continues and he talks about the works of the flesh, the works of a sinful nature. It's obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time. And then he mentions a lot of those: the brutal temper and impotence to love or be loved, divided homes and divided lives, the vicious habit of de-personalizing everyone into a rival, uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions, ugly parodies of community. And he says "I could go on. This is not the first time I've warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way you will not inherit God's kingdom."

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard. Things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. He goes on and talks about the other particular kinds of fruit of the Holy Spirit. Then he says "Legalism is helpless in bringing this about. It only gets in the way. Among

those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way, mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities has been killed off for good, it's crucified. So since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let's make sure we don't just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out it's implications in every detail of our lives. Then we won't compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. God has far more interesting things to do with our lives than for us to get bogged down in petty disagreements and rivalries in our life. Those kinds of things – conceit and envy and jealousy – those are not gifts of the Holy Spirit, nor are they the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

You know this always happens. I always have more that I want to share with you than there is time. So some of the things that God has put on my heart today will have to wait till another time. But I want to leave you with a question or two as we think together about God's Word and about this passage in particular and more generally about the person and work of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives and whether or not we're guilty of trying to keep the Holy Spirit in a bottle, or locked up in a closet and we only let the Spirit out when we want for our purposes. You know the Christian life doesn't work that way.

So the question is this. The question is not "Have you got the Spirit?" The question is, if you're a believer, "Has the Spirit got you? Has the Spirit *really* got you? Does the Spirit have all of you? Are you willing to let the Holy Spirit have all of you, do things in your life that perhaps you don't really think you want to do, things that make you cringe and feel uncomfortable?" But if you live by the Spirit, if you keep in step with the Spirit, then the Holy Spirit will be with you, will be leading you, will be giving you directions at every step along the way. We might just see an explosion of the Holy Spirit, maybe a bunch of explosions of the Holy Spirit. They may start as small explosions and they may grow into something bigger if we allow God the Holy Spirit to do His work in us and through us to glorify God and serve His purposes.

Lord let it be so in us. Amen.