

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S WORK IS CONSTANT GOOD NEWS

By Paul Penno, Jr.
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Does that seem surprising to you? That the Holy Spirit's work is more good news? Most people believe that God seems to be a kind of celestial Killjoy who prohibits everything enjoyable. If you keep on doing what you like to do, you'll be lost; so the only way to be saved is to do what you don't like to do, which is uphill climbing and hard work all the way. Worse yet, trying to keep from doing what you like to do is sheer torture. And that is supposed to be the "faith of Jesus." There is nothing "good" in news like that! The Bible gives a totally different idea:

1. The Holy Spirit does all the hard work. Like my African friend, we are aware of the tremendous pressure that our sinful human nature puts on us continually. But the "good news" is that we are not left to battle alone with these forces that would drag us down to ruin and death. The Holy Spirit does the battling, and our part is to choose to "let" Him do so. The astounding truth in Paul's message here deserves more of our attention: "What I say is this: let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of the human nature. For what our human nature wants is opposed to what the Spirit wants, and what the Spirit wants is opposed to what our human nature wants. These two are enemies, and this means that you cannot do what you want to do." Galatians 5:16, 17, TEV.

"What you want to do" is obviously what your sinful human nature prompts you to do, for Paul goes on to say that "human nature. . . shows itself in immoral, filthy, and indecent actions. . . . People. . . are envious, get drunk, have orgies, and do other things like these." Galatians 5:19-21. These things are what you as a Spirit-filled Christian "cannot do" even though your sinful nature "wants to do" them, because Someone stronger than your sinful nature—the Holy Spirit—has won the battle.

It's like a guarantee: "You will not satisfy the desires of the human nature." The Holy Spirit is an enemy to sin, and He does the fighting. It's like injecting medicine into your bloodstream to fight malarial parasites that cause illness. Once you "let" the anti-malarial drug into your veins, it immediately goes to work, for it is the enemy of the parasites. You don't fight the malaria; in fact, there is nothing you can do to oppose it. The strongest man gets laid low by the disease unless he has help of some kind from outside. The medicine does all the work.

So, says Paul, "let the Spirit direct your lives," like you "let" that powerful anti-disease medicine into your veins. Your consent is what is necessary; then He goes to work.

On the other hand, if you believe the "flesh" (one's sinful nature) is stronger than the Holy Spirit, then you see this passage as terribly bad news. (Of course, needless to say, if there were no Holy Spirit to help us, we would be hopelessly in captivity to the clamors of the "flesh.") But it says that the Spirit works, striving against the clamors of the sinful nature. Now, if it were true that the Holy Spirit can

be beaten in the struggle and the flesh wins out, then of course you “cannot do” the good things you would like to do. This is the common idea many people have—the Holy Spirit can be beaten. And there couldn’t be worse news than that.

If you believe that the Holy Spirit is stronger than the flesh, then this emerges as fabulously good news. We are all aware of those constant “desires of the flesh and of the mind” that keep surfacing and seeking to win our consent. And since we have already fulfilled them, putting up resistance to them is that much more difficult. See Ephesians 2:2, 3. But since the Holy Spirit is at work to strive against the flesh, striving “contrary” to it, He wins the battle, and we “cannot do” the evil things that we are prompted to do, so long as we choose to let Him fight our battles for us. There is a sort of noblesse oblige operating in us now, and we are actually kept from yielding to sin.

This is indeed the dynamic good news that Paul is trying to give us. Paul absolutely will not give us any bad news! The New English Bible points up his message more directly: “I mean this: if you are guided by the Spirit you will not fulfil the desires of your lower nature. That nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it. They are in conflict with one another so that what you will to do you cannot do.” Galatians 5:16, 17, NEB.

The Revised Standard Version is even more explicit: “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to

prevent you from doing what you would [that is, gratify the desires of the flesh].”

Christ through the Holy Spirit does the striving! As Christ says in His prayer to the Father in John 17:1, 2, He has authority or power “over all flesh.” His Vicar on earth, the Holy Spirit, is always stronger than the desires of our selfish, sinful nature. The first step for us, therefore, is to simply believe this truth.

The Today’s English Version clarifies a detail in a previously quoted verse that is important: “What I say is this: let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of the [sinful] human nature.” Galatians 5:16.

Maybe this is totally different to what you’ve been taught. You may have never understood that the gospel is such good news. But I must convey to you what the Bible actually teaches. And I don’t know of anything elsewhere in the Bible that contradicts the good news Paul gives us here.

2. The Holy Spirit is sent to everyone who believes the “good news.” Jesus promised: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the [Holy] Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is in you.” John 14:16, 17, TEV.

This word Helper is Comforter in the King James Version. Neither word is an adequate translation of what Jesus said—*parakletos*, which was His way of introducing the Holy Spirit to us. The world “cannot see him or know him,” but still “he remains with you

and is in you.” The word *parakletos* means two things: (a) He stays with us all the way (*para*, as in parallel). Two railroad tracks that are parallel stay together all the way, and thus the Holy Spirit “will stay with you forever.” (b) He is called *kletos*, from *kaleo* to call. He is sent to us from the Father in place of Christ in our hour of need. Thus He is the true Vicar of the Son of God, or if you please, Christ’s Vice-president. He is “given” to us; He is ours.

Again, that’s “good news.”

But isn’t it a hard job to remember all you are supposed to remember and to stay on the right path? No, the Holy Spirit takes care of all these problems.

3. He constantly reminds you of what you need to know and shows you the right path. He is as patient and persistent with you as if you were the only person He had to take care of on earth. In fact, He is infinitely patient, for the simple reason that He is infinite. No teacher ever coached a pupil through his training as faithfully as the Spirit coaches you. Jesus said: “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you.” John 14:26, TEV.

How could you go wrong with help like that, unless, of course, you choose not to “let” Him help you? He makes us “remember all” that Christ taught us in His Word. The Old Testament also teaches this same “good news”: “The Lord is compassionate, and when you cry to him for help, he will answer you. . . . He himself will be there to

teach you, and you will not have to search for him any more. If you wander off the road to the right or the left, you will hear his voice behind you saying, ‘Here is the road. Follow it.’” Isaiah 30:19-21, TEV.

Of course, when you read “the Lord,” it means God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one. The “voice” we hear is that of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s Vicar. There is no possibility that we can lose the path, with Him staying beside us all the way like that.

If we fall into sin while we have help like that, it must be for one of two reasons: either we have rebelled against the Helper Himself, or we don’t understand and believe the “good news.” The latter is the problem with untold numbers of sincere people. They think they know and believe; and consequently when they fall, they think there is no power in the gospel or that the Lord has reneged on what He promised to do. Or, what may almost be worse, they think that they aren’t “cut out” to be Christians, that God has somehow predestined them to be lost. The real problem is they have never grasped how good the “good news” of the gospel is.

The only sensible thing is for us to be modest and humble in estimating our understanding of the gospel. Those who think they know it all are cautioned by the Lord, “You say, ‘I am rich and well off; I have all I need.’ But you do not know how miserable and pitiful you are! You are poor, naked, and blind.” Revelation 3:17, TEV. The Bible suggests a good prayer for us to pray: “Lord, I

believe; help thou mine unbelief.” Mark 9:24. That’s the safest prayer any of us can pray.

But suppose you make mistakes—does the Holy Spirit write you off? Many think so. Their idea is that His love and loyalty are as thin as their own, so that at the least mistake on our part He takes advantage of the opportunity to abandon us. This is why they think it is so easy to sin and so hard to follow Christ.

I don’t find in the Bible that the Holy Spirit is anxious at all to leave us. The Father sent Him on a job to “stay with you forever,” and He means to do just that. If you persistently and determinedly beat Him off, you can commit what Jesus called the sin against the Holy Spirit; but even then it’s not He who has forsaken you, but you who have forsaken Him. Suppose one has already made mistakes after he has decided to follow Christ. What does the Spirit do now? He shifts gears and has another work to do for us:

4. He gives the gift of repentance. There are three distinct things He does, and each is tremendous good news:

A. Jesus said, “It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove [convict] the world of sin.” John 16:7, 8.

At first thought, this may not seem to be such good news. Isn’t the conviction of sin a painful experience? Yes. This is the feeling of hurting, of pollution, of shame, of alienation from God. But on second thought, it’s the best good news one can

think of. Suppose your body had no nerves to feel the sense of pain. That’s what happens when one contracts leprosy. The nerves are deadened or destroyed so that the patient feels no pain, even if pricked with a pin or seared with a hot iron. Lepers have their fingers chewed off by rats while they sleep at night or lose them easily in accidents. Our sense of pain is a tremendous asset. If the Holy Spirit did not do His work of painfully convicting us of sin, we would be insensible to our own self-destruction, for sin always destroys.

How does He convict us of sin? Jesus explains how it happens: “He will reprove [convict] the world of sin, . . . because they believe not on me.” John 16:8, 9. The real problem with sin is not the doing of the bad things, but the root that produces it. Not believing is that root sin of “unbelief.” (Remember, in the New Testament, to have faith and to believe is the same word.) One of the clearest definitions of sin in the Bible is this: “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” Romans 14:23. No one has ever fallen into sin except when the real reason was unbelief. And if a person believes in Christ in the sense of appreciating His love and righteousness, the result in the life is automatic: righteousness, because “we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.” Galatians 5:5. All unrighteousness, therefore, is the fruit of unbelief. The Holy Spirit puts His finger on the sore spot.

B. “And when he is come, he will [convict] the world of . . . righteousness, . . . because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more.” John 16:8-10. Christ was glorified by the Father because He had

finished the work He was given to do—developing perfect righteousness in His humanity. In His absence, the Holy Spirit convicts the world of that finished work, for Christ has gone to the Father with that perfect righteousness.

We are by nature so vain that we imagine ourselves to be pretty good people. Our natural sinfulness has blinded us. Have you ever heard an unconverted person boast that he is as good as some people are who go to church?

Our laundered Linen hanging on the line looks white until a fresh snowfall shows up its ugly grayness by comparison. Christ's personal presence in this world nearly two thousand years ago reproved His contemporaries of righteousness, because for the first time in history, in contrast to themselves, human beings saw what a character of true love really is. When they saw the revelation of their own selfishness, many were so angered that they cried out, "Crucify Him!" But those who believed were transformed to be like Him in character.

But now Jesus is gone. We see Him no more. So the Holy Spirit does for us that which we could never do for ourselves: He convicts "every man" of an ideal of righteousness, a standard set for him personally by the character of the Son of God. "Every man" can in this way see the contrast between what he is and what he ought to be—and what he can be in Christ. This is a special work of the Holy Spirit! The conviction is more real and His work more efficient for us than if Jesus Himself were our neighbor living next door. And remember,

you don't get one four-billionth part of His attention, even though there are more than four billion people on earth. Being infinite, He gives us each one as much attention as if we were the only person He has to work with.

This conviction of sin is not to show us up, to make us feel condemned. Not at all: "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." John 3:17. Maybe this threefold look at what the Holy Spirit does to help us is new to you; but if so, consider the surpassing "good news" that the next item contains:

C. "And when he [the Holy Spirit] is come, he will reprove [convict] the world . . . of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged [condemned]." John 16:8-11. The one who is condemned is not you, but Satan! It's a delicious, exhilarating conviction that the Holy Spirit gives: your worst enemy is defeated. Jesus explained Himself further: "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out." John 12:37. The one who has tormented you all your life, dwarfed your spirit, made you feel inferior and hopeless is thrown out.

Everyone Needs the Thrill of Winning

I remember how once I saw a rattler, one of the deadliest snakes, heading straight for me. Fortunately I had a club, and I let him have it. The Lord promises, "You will trample down lions and snakes, fierce lions and poisonous snakes." Psalm 91:13. TEV. The sense of exhilaration I felt when I killed that snake was indescribable. Everyone who believes in the Saviour is to share the high spirits of

triumph over man's primeval enemy, Satan; and that joy is not "pie in the sky by and by," but something to be known now. Winning in sports is nothing compared to winning in this contest.

Another Gift of the Holy Spirit

Repentance is not something that we can generate within ourselves at will: "Him [Christ] hath God exalteth with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." Acts 5:31.

As a gift, repentance is worth more than any money could be, for it provides the only avenue of escape from our inward prison, which we detest. It is a supernaturally endowed hatred of sin and a corresponding love for righteousness. Automatically, this produces a change in the life. Again, it is not a work that you perform. The Holy Spirit does it in you. Your job again is to "let" Him do it, to "let" Him give His gift. Don't push Him away.

The original New Testament word for forgiveness does not mean a mere pardon, as though God blinks His eye at our sin and excuses it the way you excuse someone for stepping on your toe. The word means "taking away" the sin. God's forgiveness is powerful.

This is why repentance and forgiveness are so closely tied together. A truly repenting person can be freely forgiven by God because the repenting person now hates the sin itself, and therefore the sin is actually gone. Because Christ "gave himself for our sin" (Galatians 1:4), they are rightfully His, and we have no right to hang on to them. Anyone

who clings to his sins is robbing Christ of what He bought with His blood.

And where does Christ put those sins He takes away? "You will trample our sins underfoot and send them to the bottom of the sea!" Micah 7:19, TEV.

Any brand of justification by faith that does not include genuine forgiveness as remission of sins and salvation from sin is a counterfeit. It is not the New Testament kind.

But New Testament justification by faith never produces pride or fanaticism. He who remembers Christ's cross can have no "holier-than-thou" spirit. He is always aware that he has not one iota of righteousness himself. He knows his weakness, how prone he is to respond to temptation, how easily he can fall. His loyalty to Christ is not a self-centered desire for a reward in heaven but a heartfelt longing to live to the honor and glory of His crucified Redeemer. He has found something to be concerned about that is vastly greater than his own personal security or "acceptance" with God. Like a bride who is concerned for her husband's honor, the believer is caught up in the most thrilling motivation human hearts can ever know—sympathy with Christ in His closing work of atonement.

Where the Reformation Failed

The Protestant Reformers were mightily used of God. But like men chained in dungeon darkness, some could not emerge into the full glory of noonday sunshine all at once. Their extreme view of justification by faith as a purely legal declaration with no change in the life had begun to produce bad

fruit by the eighteenth century. Count Zinzendorf explained this belief to John Wesley: “We spit out all self-denial; we tread it underfoot. As believers, we do everything that we wish, and nothing beyond. We laugh at all mortification. No purification precedes perfect love.”--John Wesley, *Journal*, vol. 2, p. 490.

Wesley, as a true Protestant, protested against the idea that there is no purification in justification by faith. This brought him into conflict with some who had brought disgrace on the Reformation. One of his assistants, John Nelson, tells of a clash he had: “I met one of them, the other day, so drunk that he could not keep the cart-road. I asked him what he thought of himself now, if death were to seize him in that wretched condition. He said that ‘he was not afraid to die, for he was as his Saviour would have him to be; and if He would have him to be holy, He would make him so; but he was a poor sinner, and he hoped to be so to eternity.’ He said, ‘You and John Wesley are enemies of the Lamb; for you want people to be holy here. I will not offer to save myself, like you Pharisees.’”--Thomas Jackson, *The Lines of Early Methodists* (1870 ed.), vol. 1, p. 140. Quoted in W. E. Sangster in *The Path to Perfection* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury 1943), p. 101, 102.

The drunk was wrong! “Without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Hebrews 12:14, NIV. It is not that we are to seek holiness selfishly, fearing that the Lord is reluctant to grant it to us. Rather, He is eager to confer it upon us, and we only need to “let” the Holy Spirit impart His gift to us. What He starts

He will finish as we continue to consent. He will persevere until He has a people of whom He can say, “They are without fault before the throne of God.” “Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.” Revelation 14:5, 12.