

## Life in the Spirit

The Christian life is essentially 'life in the Spirit', one well-known Christian author has written, *that is to say, a life which is animated, sustained, directed, and enriched by the Holy Spirit of God.*

So, what does it mean in practise to *live* (or, more literally, *walk*) **according to the Spirit**, as Paul puts it in Romans 8.4? We explored this question at our Pentecost Sunday Evening Service last month.

First, from Romans 8.5-8, we saw that *living according to the Spirit* begins with us

### **1. CULTIVATING A NEW MINDSET**

– a whole new way of thinking about life, which in turn will lead us to adopt radical new desires.

Paul speaks about **what our minds are set on** (v5), a phrase that points to our primary preoccupation.

Many athletes currently have their minds set on gaining an Olympic medal next year. So, this is what they think about all the time. Their hope of an Olympic medal shapes their whole life. It determines all the choices they make, and the decisions they take. Everything is geared towards that overriding goal and burning ambition.

*It's a question of what absorbs us and preoccupies us. It's about what we concentrate on and give ourselves to. It's about the ambition that drives us, and the concerns that engross us. And so, it will dictate how we spend all our time and energies. [John Stott].*

So, Paul describes two possible ways of living. First, he tells us that our mind can be set on

#### **1.1 What our old self-centred sinful nature wants**

The nature we are born with is self-centred. It is preoccupied with itself. So, it is constantly asking questions like, "What will suit *me* best? What will satisfy *me* most? How can I increase *my* personal happiness, my sense of wellbeing, *my* wealth, and *my* standard of living? How can I make my life more comfortable, or fulfilling? Where can I find real fun and excitement? What will make *me* feel good? What's in this for *me*?" These are the preoccupations and overriding ambitions of our old self-centred nature, the one we are all born with. **Its thinking is dominated by self-interest.** It's all about me - my own self-advancement and personal advantage.

But, **those who are controlled by their sinful nature cannot please God**, Paul tells us in Romans 8.8. It's impossible! In fact, this kind of mindset is positively *hostile towards God*, Paul explains (v7). It resents the fact that there is a rival to its own personal ambitions –

someone else with a call on my time and talents, my wealth and sense of personal wellbeing, the standard of living I want for myself, or the level of health I think I deserve. And that 'rival' is Jesus Christ, the one who has earned the right to be our Lord and Master, because he died to be our Saviour.

So, the mindset produced by our sinful nature *refuses to submit itself to God's law* (v7). *It cannot do so* without losing its proud sense of independence; and so it doesn't. **It maintains its stubborn right to independent thinking and independent living.** It will submit itself to no one. "My life's my own to do with it whatever I want," is the motto of those with this kind of mindset. "No one is going to tell *me* how I should be living my life."

The upshot of those who adopt this kind of mindset is *death*, Paul tells us in Romans 8.6 - not physical death, but an awful **deadness towards God**.

Paul paints this very bleak picture for us to help us see how different our life will be when our mind is set on

#### **1.2 What the Spirit desires**

God's Holy Spirit always desires the greater honour and glory of Jesus. *When the Spirit comes ... he will bring glory to me*, Jesus told his disciples (John 16.13-14).

So, when our mind is set on what the Spirit desires, **we will constantly be seeking to bring glory and honour to Jesus.** This will be our primary preoccupation and our overriding ambition in life. It will shape all our thinking and speaking. It will determine the way we act and react, relate and respond, to all the people and the varied situations in which we find ourselves. *How can I bring more glory to Jesus*, we will constantly be asking ourselves. **We make it our goal to please *him*.** Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5.9. *Those who are controlled by their sinful nature cannot please God*, Paul tells us in verse 8. But those who are living according to the Spirit make it their **goal** to please him. The contrast couldn't be greater.

Those whose thinking is dominated by their own self-interest won't submit themselves to God's law, Paul tells us in Romans 8.7. But those whose minds are set on what the Spirit desires will actively seek to *find out what pleases the Lord* (Ephesians 5.10).

The upshot of us setting our mind on what the Spirit desires (the glory of Jesus) is **life and peace**, Paul tells us (Rom 8.6) – the life of God flowing freely through us, and a relationship with him that is all that it could and should be (*peace* indicates *wholeness*).

Secondly, living according to the Spirit is about us

## **2. EXPERIENCING A NEW CONTROLLING INFLUENCE** in our lives (Romans 8.8-9).

The environment in which we live out our days on earth will be a *'flesh'* one or a *Spirit* one, Paul tells us (*You are not in flesh, but in spirit, since God's Spirit lives in you*, v8). In other words, ***whatever it is that we're 'in' will determine how we live out our lives.***

A fish lives in water, and so it swims. A bird lives in the air, and so it flies. So, if our life is being lived out in the atmosphere of our old self-centred nature, the result will be a terrible spiritual deadness towards God. But if God's Spirit lives within us, the result will be spiritual life and peace. What we're 'in' determines how we live.

So, it's good for all of us to ask ourselves honestly, *"What is the controlling influence in my life right now? Who is really in control of my life? Is it me, through my old self-centred nature; or is it God, by his indwelling Spirit? Is my life being shaped by self-interest or by a desire for the greater glory of Jesus?"*

With that in mind, Paul makes a somewhat startling, but perfectly reasonable, assertion in verse 9. ***If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, he doesn't belong to Christ.*** In other words, if there is no evidence of God's Holy Spirit controlling a person's life, that person isn't a real Christian. They may be religious; they may attend church, read their Bible, and pray to God. But if the Spirit of Christ isn't present, they don't belong to him – not at all! ***It is the controlling Spirit of God within a person's life that marks that person out as a true Christian.***

Following on from this, we see next from Romans 8.10-11 that when we live according to the Spirit, we

## **3. ENJOY A NEW LIVELINESS in our relationship with God**

These rather complicated verses require a little unpacking. Paul writes, *if Christ is in you* (by his Spirit), even though *your body is dead* (that is mortal, subject to death) *because of sin* (Adam's original sin), *your (human) spirit is alive* (to God) *because of righteousness* (the righteousness of Christ that has been credited to us and which we now live out through his indwelling Spirit). So, *if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you* (that is to say, the Spirit of God the Father, who raised Jesus, his Son, to new life on the first Easter Day morning), *he who raised Christ from the dead* (God the Father) *will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who currently lives within you.* In other words, the Holy Spirit is not only the source of our spiritual life in the here and now; he is also the Father's guarantee of our bodily

resurrection, in the future!

But the crucial phrase to pick out from these verses is this: ***your spirit is alive!*** Paul is speaking here about our human spirit being alive to God, through God's own indwelling Holy Spirit. We may be living out our lives in a dying body, one that is mortal and subject to death. But within that dying body, our spirit can be very much alive!

*Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day*, Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4.16. The weaker we get physically, the more alive we can become spiritually, through God's indwelling Spirit! ***A supernatural liveliness is given to our human spirit when it is coupled up to God's Spirit.***

If we are not experiencing this liveliness in our human spirit towards God, we need to ask God to fill us afresh with his own Holy Spirit! We must ask him to reveal any blockages to us enjoying the liveliness he wants us to know. There may be hidden pride in our life, or some area of stubborn resistance to his will. There may be unconfessed bitterness from something that happened to us in the past, or a deep-seated resentment about something in the present. Whatever it is, it needs to go! Otherwise, we cannot experience the liveliness of spirit that God intends us to know in our relationship with him, through his Spirit.

God doesn't want us to live out our lives on earth in a dull 'simply going through the motions' kind of existence. ***God wants our human spirits to be animated by his own indwelling Holy Spirit!***

To that end, there needs to be (Romans 8.12-13)

## **4. A NEW RUTHLESSNESS TOWARDS SIN**

*We have an obligation*, Paul writes – but it's not to our old self-centred nature. We owe it nothing. We have sent it off to be executed, to receive the fate it deserves, Paul tells us in Galatians 5.24. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.*

No, our obligation is to the new nature that God has given us. Our obligation is to his Holy Spirit, who now forms the core of our being. We are under an obligation to be ruthless when it comes to sin, so that we don't grieve him and hamper his work in us now that our mind is set on what the Spirit desires, the greater glory of Jesus. ***We must kill off all the things that our old self-centred nature urges us to do, in order for us to be as alive to God as we can be in our human spirits*** (to be continued). David Hunt