

SAINTS ON FIRE

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11).

There are words in Romans 12:11 that seem incredibly out of reach for me, and my guess is that I'm not alone. I love Jesus and I am a pastor, and yet things like “zeal” and “spiritual fervor” seem somehow beyond me. They seem even more so when I read how Douglas Moo, a seminary professor, Greek scholar and respected author, translates this: “In zeal, do not be lazy. Be set on fire by the Spirit; serve the Lord.”

It seems like those kinds of things are reserved for the luminaries of our faith. I think of the Bible's stories about the Apostle Paul, the writer of this verse, and how he survived so many trials-being stoned, being shipwrecked, being chased out of one town after another-and succeeded in planting churches all over the Roman Empire. I think of George Whitefield, the English preacher who traveled through the American colonies in the 1700s and helped to ignite the First Great Awakening on this continent. I think of Billy Graham, evangelist extraordinaire, who spoke to stadiums filled with people and saw many of them stream forward to the foot of the stage at his invitation to receive Christ. I even think of my mentor, Chuck Ver Straten, who told me stories of how farmers, so moved by the power of God, would abandon their tractors in the middle of huge parcels of land to walk to his little church in a little town in the middle of Nebraska on a Sunday morning and surrender their lives to Christ. But I don't ever think of me in relationship to those words.

Yet, there those words are, staring at us. And despite the fact that we might think they should be reserved for only a select few Christians, they are intended for all of us. Let's see if we can figure out why.

Let's start with the instruction that we should keep our spiritual fervor, or as Moo puts it, “Be set on fire by the Spirit.” What does that mean? Well, without trying to make more or less of it than this verse communicates, I believe what Paul is saying here is that we need to be open to the influence and leading of the Holy Spirit. We need to be open to hearing what the Spirit has to say to us because, if we can be honest here, too often we try to drown his voice out. He speaks, doesn't he? And no, you don't need to call the men with the straightjacket for me because I know you have heard him too. His is the voice that tells you to stop just before you yell at your spouse. It's his voice telling you to forgive when you desperately want to hold onto that grudge. He's the one prodding you to go over and make time to listen to somebody when time seems like the last thing you have available to give.

Moreover, we need to be open to the Spirit because of the role he is meant to play in our lives. In describing the Spirit to his disciples, Jesus referred to the Spirit in the Book of John with the Greek word “parakletos,” which some of you may have heard transliterated as “paraclete.” The NIV translates this word as counselor, but its range of meaning also includes helper, intercessor, encourager and comforter. Which one of us couldn't use a counselor when we're facing a situation where we don't know what to do? Which one of us couldn't use a helper when it feels like we can't do it on our own? Which one of us doesn't need an intercessor, for the times when we're tired or upset and our prayers are a jumble of words that don't even make sense to us? Which one of us wouldn't benefit from a word of encouragement? Which one of us doesn't need a comforter when things aren't going right even though we're trying as hard as we can? As I think about it, it's no wonder that Paul tells us to maintain our spiritual fervor and be

open to the influence of the Spirit. These five titles cover virtually every waking moment, don't they? And even some of our sleeping moments too.

The point is that we really do need the Spirit in our lives. But when we seek to quench the fire he wants to set to us, we end up eliminating the very light we need to guide us, to make sense of things, to ward off the darkness. When we fail to be open to the Spirit, we only succeed in shutting the door on God being active in our lives.

The question now is, for what purpose should we be open to the Spirit? For what purpose is it that we should be “set on fire”? This is the part that scares us, isn't it, because when we think of this whole area of being “filled by the Spirit,” we often think of the more charismatic and vocal elements of Christianity. We're not without cause here because the Bible seems to point us in that direction as well. For example, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit and are able to speak in a number of languages, amazing Jews visiting Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire. Or there's Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who is filled by the Holy Spirit and sees Jesus at the right hand of God in heaven. And we read these things and other examples in the New Testament and think, “Is God calling me to do something like that?”

Well, maybe. Don't look to me to let you off the hook if you're feeling nudged to do something like that. That's between you and God. But in the context of this passage, Paul seems to be indicating that being open to the Spirit is necessary so that we do not lack “zeal,” and for “serving the Lord.”

Uh-oh. There's another one of those scary Bible words: *zeal*. After all, didn't Paul write that it was out of his zealotry for the law that he spearheaded an effort to persecute, jail and murder some of the first Christians? Wasn't Jesus fulfilling the prophecy that the Messiah would have zeal for the house of God when he took a whip and cleared out the crooked money changers and animal sellers from the Temple? If that's what it means to have zeal, does that mean I'm going to need to end up perched on a cardboard box somewhere with my Bible in one hand and a megaphone in another?

Well, that's not what Paul is talking about here. I learned that when Paul's use of this word is focused on a pretty specific context: the community of believers. When Paul writes *spouday*, which is translated in our verse as zeal, what he's talking about is a full dedication to serving the rest of the family of God, our brothers and sisters in Christ. The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology puts it this way: [*Spouday* is] the necessary expression of the life of the Christian community.” Now, I have to admit that when I read that, I thought to myself, “What?” But when I did the further research this resource pointed me toward, I saw that it was true.

Look with me:

In Ephesians 4:3, we see that *spouday* is essential to maintaining our churches unity: “Have *spouday*” to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

In 2 Corinthians 8:16, we see that *spouday* is about caring for other Christians: I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same *spouday* that I have for you.

In 2 Corinthians 7:11, we see *spouday* as being important to making good of a wrong done: “See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what *spouday*, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done...”

In Romans 12:8, we see that *spouday* is important to leading the local church: “...if it is leadership, let him do it with *spouday*...”

Are you getting the picture of how important this is to us as a church? These verses tell

us that *spouday*, zeal, is essential for the everyday life of our church body. If we are lacking or lazy in the zeal that Paul speaks of, the most basic things do not happen among us. We invite division because there is nothing to keep us working at unity. We allow brothers and sisters who are hurting or in need to slip through the cracks, because there is nothing to compel us to care for them. We let sins against one another fester and keep wounds from healing because there is nothing that moves us to make right a wrong. We move about aimlessly without purpose or direction because there is nothing there to focus us or keep us on task.

Sort of sounds like trying to live the Christian life without God, doesn't it? If anybody here has tried it, you know exactly what I mean. We can start out with every good intention: I'm going to read my Bible every day! I'm going to serve others in my church and community! I'm going to share my faith with others! But we can't sustain it. We wear down over time. Reading the Bible every day becomes reading the Bible once a week, if I get around to it. Serving others gets swallowed up by serving myself. Sharing our faith becomes a nuisance, not a joy. We cannot do the Christian life on our own.

Being committed to one another, to the family of God, is no different. We can plan, we can program, we can write all kinds of fancy statements of purpose, but without the Spirit of God infused in us, giving us the gift of zeal, we will not be able to sustain the effort necessary to carry out the work of being the church, of being committed family members to one another day in and day out. We need to be open to the Spirit.

Which brings us to the second area that requires us to be set on fire by the Spirit: serving the Lord. In some ways, tacking this statement on here might seem a bit redundant. I mean, aren't we serving the Lord when we're serving each other? Yes, I think so. But I think the word is there not to repeat an earlier idea, but to remind us of a proper perspective: service.

If you'll remember, earlier in this passage Paul addresses spiritual giftedness. But there is another letter, 1 Corinthians, where Paul had to really dig into the subject. You see, the Corinthians were having a problem in that they all wanted the more outward gifts, like prophecy and speaking in tongues. Those gifts brought notoriety and prominence to the people who had them; those people got to stand up in the meetings, and all attention was focused on them. Others wanted those gifts as well so that they could get in on the action of being noticed and being up front.

The Corinthians were confused about the purpose of these gifts; the gifts are not bestowed in order to make one person in the church more prominent than another. The Holy Spirit invests each of us with particular spiritual gifts so that we can serve the Lord by serving the group. As Paul writes in Romans 12:5, we all belong to one another. The gifts that each one of us has have been given to us not so that we can hoard them or build ourselves up individually, but so that we can build the whole body up. As we like to say here at Bethel, "It's not about us." And it's not. It's about Jesus. We exist because of him, and we help to point the rest of the world to him as we come along side one another helping each other to follow what he has instructed and growing more like him every day.

Speaking of pointing the world to Jesus, let's again ask the question: What would Bethel look like if we living this instruction out? What would it look like if each one of us here allowed ourselves to be open to and filled by the Spirit so that we were truly committed to one another and understood that it's not about us?

I think the best answer I can give is just one word: consist.

That word, consistency, probably doesn't sound all that exciting, but it is incredibly attractive. Think about it: Would you prefer to eat at a restaurant where the food and service were consistently good, or where you really didn't know how it would be? Would you prefer to be in a relationship where your partner was consistently faithful, or with someone who could

only be faithful some of the time? Would you prefer to live in a state where the weather was... oh, never mind. I'll have you all moving.

The point is this: Being a Christian is more than making a one-time decision for Christ. It's an everyday decision to pick up my cross and follow him. It's a moment-by-moment choice to turn away from sin and turn toward God. It's not a short-term fondness, it's a long-haul commitment.

To a world filled with the temporary-of fads, flashes-in-the-pan, and one-hit wonders-consistency looks spectacular. But consistency needs to be consistent-if that makes any sense-so that who we are and what we believe does not get filed away with everything else that simply fades.

I remember before I came to Christ, I did not believe that anyone could genuinely follow Jesus. I had experienced too many people saying one thing and doing another for me to believe it could be done. Then, after Sara and I were married, we started attending a small church, and through that church, were invited to a small group. I was expecting more of what I had experienced before when I was shocked by encountering people who truly desired to follow Jesus with their lives. They weren't perfect, but they were determined and that caught my attention.

But it wasn't then that I gave my life to Jesus. No. I watched and I waited. I wanted to make sure this was real, and I knew that real lasts. Six months I came and went to the small group meetings looking for that one reason, that one excuse I could use to chuck Christianity once and for all... and I couldn't find it. And then I gave my life to Christ.

Friends, there is an entire world out there longing for something consistent, dying for something real that they can hold on to. Can we do anything other than allow the Spirit to set us on fire so that we can apply ourselves with all diligence to serving one another and the Lord? Let's be open to the Spirit so that he can empower us to live out our faith daily, consistently for the long haul.