

What We See When the Spirit Reigns: Love

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in producing love as the fulfillment of the law and the essence of the Christian life.

Scripture: Matthew 12:36, Romans 5:1, Romans 8:1, Romans 12:19, Romans 13:8, Galatians 3:1, Galatians 5:4, Hebrews 11:1

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Sanctification"

Description

John Piper delves into the importance of faith, ongoing sanctification, and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. He emphasizes that justification is both an instantaneous event at the beginning of the Christian life and a future acquittal at the final judgment, dependent on a life of faith and the transforming work of the Spirit. Piper highlights that the Spirit enables believers to fulfill the just requirement of the law, which is to love one another, showcasing that a life empowered by the Spirit is characterized by love. He provides practical guidance on how to experience this life of love, emphasizing that faith is the key to plugging into the power of God and becoming a loving person.

Transcript

The response to last week's message was mixed. The more I thought about the responses the more I knew I had to expand on the things I said. So I am postponing the message I had planned to give on Christ's second coming to further unfold life in the Spirit.

One lady called me, who was not a Baptist and had visited; and she said she was mad and glad at what she heard. Once a man had said to her: "If you become a Baptist you can do anything you want and you won't lose your salvation." She knew that was an unbiblical view of eternal security because it says in Romans 8:13, "If you live according to the flesh you will die." So she was surprised and glad to hear in a Baptist church a message which argued that we are not saved if we do not continue in faith and experience the power of the Holy Spirit overcoming sin in our lives. But she did not like my saying that justification is dependent on a life of faith, because she believed justification is instantaneous at the beginning of the Christian life. I told her I agreed but that I didn't think the two truths ruled each other out. That needs a further word of explanation.

A second response came from a student who said as he walked out, "I wish you would describe that life now where the Spirit has the upper hand and is overcoming the law of sin and death." And a third response was, "Could you give us some more practical help as to how to experience life empowered by

the Spirit?" So this morning I want to do a little bit to satisfy these three responses: clarify the way we become justified, describe the life that results when the law of the Spirit of life has liberated us from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2) and give some practical guidelines for how to experience this life.

The text last week was Romans 8:1,2 and I argued from this text that the reason that those who are in Christ Jesus have "no condemnation" is that the Spirit has freed them from the power of sin and death. In other words, freedom from condemnation depends on the work of the Spirit in our lives freeing us from sin.

Then we compared Romans 5:1 with this where Paul says, "We have been justified by faith." I tried to show, first, from Romans 4 and James 2 that the faith which justifies is not merely a single act of faith but an ongoing life of faith.

And second, I tried to show from Galatians 3:1-5 that wherever faith in the promises of the gospel is being exercised, there the Holy Spirit is at work overcoming sin. The point of these observations was to show, in turn, that making freedom from condemnation dependent on the sanctifying work of the Spirit and making it dependent on a life of faith were not two different conditions but only one, since it is always by faith that the Spirit works. Therefore, Romans 5:1 and 8:1,2 really are saying the same thing seen from two different angles.

But what I did not sufficiently clarify was how Romans 5:1 can treat justification as a past event, if in fact it depends on a process of sanctification. Paul says, "Having been justified by faith let us have peace with God." I believe that the woman who called me is right. God does justify instantaneously everyone who puts his faith in Jesus. Romans 5:9 says, "Since therefore we are now justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God." And 1 Corinthians 6:11 says, "You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus."

It might seem strange then if Paul in Romans 8:1,2 made justification depend on the ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives. It would seem strange, that is, if justification were only a past event. But Jesus says in Matthew 12:36,37, "I tell you, on the day of judgment, men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified or by your words you will be condemned." According to this text "justification" is the acquittal we receive at the final judgment, in the future. The apostle Paul himself also understands justification this way. He says, for example, in Galatians 5:4,5: "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace. For through the Spirit by faith we wait for the hope of righteousness." In other words, don't try to be justified by works of the law but through the Spirit by faith wait to receive your justification as a free gift of grace. It is a gift to be waited for in the future.

So what we have in Scripture is a picture of justification as a past and future event. This is not so strange. When we stand back and look at the whole picture what we see is this. There is a judgment coming at the end of the age and what matters is whether we are condemned or acquitted in that judgment. So it is fitting to speak of justification as something future: it is the sentence of "not guilty" which believers will hear on that day. But the unique thing about the New Testament, the thing that separates Christianity from Judaism, is the teaching that the Messiah has already come and that in His death and resurrection God dealt with sin so decisively that all who are in Christ can be said already to be justified. We need not wait until the judgment day to find out how God is disposed toward us, for we have His word of promise now that if we trust Christ we are acquitted.

So then, when we look at the different ways Paul describes the conditions for justification, here is what becomes evident. When he is referring to the past, instantaneous act of justification, he describes the condition as that first act of saving faith. But when he is referring to the future or present experience of justification, he describes the condition as the ongoing life of faith or the transforming work of the Spirit. I think the reason Paul can do this without any inconsistency is that God only justifies people in whose initial act of faith He can see the seeds of all subsequent acts of faith. In other words, when a person has heard the gospel and bows his head to receive Christ as Lord and Savior by faith, God views that initial act of faith not simply for itself alone, but as it were, containing and implying the life of faith which will follow. The faith by which we are initially and instantaneously justified is our first act of saving faith, which then proves its attachment to Christ by a life indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Where this new life is not forthcoming, perhaps slowly and with setbacks, we can have little assurance that we have been justified. This will confirm itself further I think as we turn to our second question: what does this life look like?

I want to approach this by taking you with me two verses farther in last week's text, namely Romans 8:3,4. "For God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." Verse 4 makes plain that the reason God dealt with sin the way He did in the death of His Son was to enable people to fulfill the just requirement of the law. The main problem with the law, according to verse 3 was that it did not have the power to overcome the flesh--our old sinful nature. Its teachings and requirements were not bad, but they were in general ineffective. The law did not create the life it commanded. But now God has made a way for the just requirement of the law to be fulfilled by His people. He condemned sin, or paid the penalty for sin, and then poured out His Spirit into the lives of those who trust Christ so that when they walk according to the Spirit they fulfill the just requirement of the law.

Now what is the just requirement of the law which the Christian fulfills by walking according to the Spirit? Which is the same as asking: What does the life look like where, as verse 2 says, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed us from the law of sin and death? I find the answer in Romans 13:8-10. In Romans 13:8-10 Paul says:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does not wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Romans 8:4 says that those who walk according to the Spirit fulfill the just requirement of the law. Romans 13:8-10 says love is a fulfilling of the law. I conclude, therefore, that the just requirement of the law is that we love our neighbor, and that the life in which the Spirit has freed from the power of sin is a life of love.

Paul had no doubt learned this from Jesus. You recall, for example, in Matthew 22:36-40, when the Pharisees asked Jesus which is the great commandment in the law, he said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Love God and love your neighbor, everything else in the Old Testament is explanation. Jesus said the same thing a bit differently in Matthew 7:12, "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them

for this is the law and the prophets." We may be fairly sure, therefore, that when Paul said that those who walk according to the Spirit fulfill the just requirement of the law, he meant they love God and love their neighbor and that this is all the law was aiming to accomplish.

This fits perfectly with the picture we have in Galatians of how the law, the Holy Spirit and love are related, but in Galatians we get some help in answering our third question: What are some practical suggestions for how to experience this life where the Holy Spirit is reigning in love. Look at chapter 5.

First of all, we notice in verses 13 and 14 that love fulfills the law: "For you were called to freedom, brethren, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Then we read the very familiar verse 22, "The fruit of the Spirit is love ..." So, just as in Romans, it is by the Holy Spirit at work in us that we are enabled to love our neighbor and thus fulfill the requirement of the law.

The upshot of all this so far is that we can now be more specific about the lifestyle a Christian must have in order to be acquitted at the judgment. Paul has said that those who are in Christ will experience "no condemnation" because the power of the Spirit of life has freed them from the power of sin and death. Now we know from Romans 8:4 and 13:10 and Galatians 5:14 and 22 that what the Spirit produces by this liberation from sin is love. Therefore, the person who is not loving, who does not love the people in his path each day, unless he changes, is not going to be acquitted at the judgment day. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote in his letter, chapter 2 verse 12, "Speak and act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment." Which is just another way of saying what Jesus said in the parable of the unforgiving servant when the slave who owed the king ten million dollars had his debt canceled and then went out and wrung the neck of his friend who owed him two dollars. The king was enraged at how little his offer of forgiveness had transformed his slave and he threw him in prison. And Jesus says, "So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

If we are unmerciful, unforgiving people, if we hold grudges or cherish resentments, or plan revenge, then what we are saying in effect to God is, this is the way I prefer life to be. And so He will give us what we have preferred at the day of judgment; no mercy, no forgiveness, but only vengeance. If Christ has not changed us (and I don't mean perfection, but only significant change) then probably we have never known Him. As 1 John 2:3 says, "By this we may know that we have known Him, if we keep His commandments;" which are all summed up in the command "Love your neighbor as yourself."

So the third and practical question how we go about becoming that kind of person becomes absolutely crucial. We have already seen that love is a fruit of the Spirit. When you are wronged and you forgive and return good for evil, when you are patient with the ornery and tender with the weak and helpful to the needy, when you welcome strangers, when you eliminate luxuries from your life and joyfully give what you don't need to Christ's mission in the world then the Holy Spirit is reigning in your life. But since it is God's work to produce this life in us, is there anything we can do?

Indeed there is. God has established it, that His sovereign work in our lives always accompanies faith. This is clear from two texts in Galatians. One we saw last week, Galatians 3:5: "Does He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, do so by works of the law or by the hearing of faith?" The Spirit comes and works through faith. And this implies that the love which the Spirit produces, He produces through faith. And this is just what the other verse from Galatians says, namely, Galatians 5:6,

"In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail but faith working through love."

If all we knew was that love was the fruit of the Holy Spirit we might be hard put to know how to plug into that spiritual power. But now we know that love is also the inevitable outworking of faith. So now we also know how to be plugged into the power of God and become loving people. It is by faith.

Let me close with two examples of how faith works itself out in love. Try to rid yourself of the idea that faith is merely the act of acknowledging Jesus as Savior and Lord. If that is how you see faith then you will never make sense of Galatians 5:6. Faith, according to Hebrews 11:1, is "the assurance of things hoped for." Faith has to do with the future. You have faith when you believe that what God promised for today will come true today and that what God promised for tomorrow and for eternity will come true. This is the kind of faith which will always work itself out in love.

The first example comes from Hebrews 10:32-36. The author reminds the readers of how they once loved each other and what it was that motivated them to do it. "But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property..." Make sure you have the picture here: some of the church had been imprisoned for their faith. What would the rest do? Abandon them, or align themselves with them and have compassion on them? They loved them. How? By what power or conviction did they have the impetus to do that when it cost them their property? The answer is there in the next phrase: "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property because you yourselves knew that you had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence which has great reward." Where did this sacrificed love come from? From faith. From the confidence in God's promise that He withholds no good thing from those who walk uprightly. Sure, they may lose their land, their furniture, they may go to jail, they may get their heads lopped off. But God has spoken and said no good thing would He withhold--from those who walk uprightly. He will supply all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus. And they believed God's promise, and were liberated for love, even unto death. Faith in the promises of God always works itself out in love.

One more example. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 that love does not keep an account of wrongs, love does not harbor resentments, love does not hold a grudge. Are you planning how to get back at somebody? Do you mull over in your mind day after day the insult somebody paid you recently? Do you feel bitterness toward an employer who wronged you? Do you respond to your husband's insensitivity in kind, tit for tat, jab for jab? If so you are walking in unbelief. You are not trusting God's promise. For the Scripture says in Romans 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord! No, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink." God has promised to handle the insults and abuses that you have endured far more justly and thoroughly than you ever could. And He has said, this implies that we should not consider vengeance our prerogative. It is God's. Whether we love and forgive or whether we keep an account of wrongs hangs on whether we trust this promise of God.

Do you believe God? Do you believe that He will withhold no good thing from you as you walk in faith? Do you believe He will meet all your needs? Do you believe He will right all wrongs and vindicate you before all your enemies? I tell you, if we believed this there would be unleashed a tidal wave of love in this church. No more grudges against anybody, no matter what they have done to you. No more running from service, but a stampede of volunteers. And no more miserly nit-picking about whether we can afford to

tithe, but an unleashing of the sluice gates of wealth through this church and into the fields white unto harvest. God only knows where this church could go, riding the tidal wave of love!

Faith is the victory that overcomes the world because faith is the power of God's Spirit at work through love.

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