

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series through 1 Thessalonians, which was a letter written by a leader in the early church named Paul to a church in Thessalonica that he had been instrumental in starting around the year 49 AD. Paul and his fellow missionaries had been driven out of Thessalonica by a mob of angry Jews who found his message about Jesus being Lord to be blasphemous. And 2-3 years later, Paul has not been able to return to Thessalonica, so he sends Timothy, one of his fellow missionaries, who brings back a report about how the Thessalonians are doing and what issues they are facing. In response to Timothy's report, Paul sends this letter. We are nearing the end of 1 Thessalonians, and the short passage we will be reading today as the power to dramatically change your life for the better if you would only put these words into practice.

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 - Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil.

This is a short passage with a lot of power, and it raises a few questions that we need to answer:

Who is the Spirit?

What is the Spirit's fire, and how do we avoid putting it out?

What are prophecies?

How do we test prophecy to see if it's genuine or not?

Who is the Spirit?

The Bible teaches us that God is a Trinity, three-in-one, same in nature but distinct in persons. Followers of God interacted with God the Father in the Old Testament, while the Holy Spirit would empower specific individuals at different times. Then Jesus shows up, and it is clear to His followers that while He is distinct from God the Father, He is also divine – He receives worship, He forgives sins, He is eternal, He is without sin. And then, as his death was getting closer, Jesus told his disciples about another who would come after him, the Holy Spirit:

John 14:15-17,26 - If you love me, you will obey what I command. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you... the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

Now, after Jesus' death and resurrection, God the Holy Spirit will be given to every believer to be God's presence in them. It begins on the day of Pentecost, around 50 days after Jesus' death and resurrection, when the Holy Spirit descended like tongues of fire and filled the believers. And the Holy Spirit still inhabits believers today.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 - Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

There is much that I could say about the Holy Spirit – how he is the firstfruits of the harvest, how he points to Jesus, how he unites people, how he comforts, how he writes God's law on our hearts – but for the sake of this passage, **Paul refers to the Spirit's fire, exhorting the Thessalonians to not quench the Spirit's fire.**

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 - Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil.

Fire is an apt metaphor, not only because at Pentecost the Spirit descended like tongues of fire. The Spirit fulfills two main roles in the lives of believers – he empowers and he purifies. He empowers like fire and he purifies like fire.

The Spirit empowers

Remember **Acts 1:8 - *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.***

What would have happened if the disciples had gone ahead to preach without waiting? If they had gone ahead without waiting, they would have been able to do nothing of eternal significance. **You may think it's different today, but truly it is not.** If the enemy can keep you busy believing that the answer to your problems is found in trying harder, and not in accessing the power of the Holy Spirit, he's won. If the enemy can get us believing as a church that the way to reach the world is through better programs and plans and not through prayerfully depending on the Spirit and walking according to the Spirit, we're sunk. Our power comes from the Spirit:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 - When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power; ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Or consider **Acts 4:13** - *When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*

Part of the empowering of the Spirit is that He gives us gifts with spiritual power to transform lives. Here is just one example:

*1 Corinthians 12:4-11 - There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. ⁷ **Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good...** All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.*

Why do you want the power of the Spirit? Why do you want spiritual gifts? Not so that you can be like some kind of superhero; God empowers His people for the common good, so that you can make an actual eternal difference in the lives of other people. The Spirit gives a supernatural gifting that is beyond any physical gifts. One great modern example is of DL Moody:

In the summer of 1871 two women of Dwight L. Moody's congregation felt an unusual burden to pray for Moody "that the Lord would give him the baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire." Moody would see them praying in the front row of his church and he was irritated. But soon he gave in and in September began to pray with them every Friday afternoon. He felt like his ministry was becoming a sounding brass with little power. On November 24, 1871, Moody's church building was destroyed in the great Chicago fire. He went to New York to seek financial help. Day and night he would walk the streets desperate for the touch of God's power in his life. Then suddenly,

One day, in the city of New York—oh, what a day!—I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name . . . I can only say that God revealed himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to

*ask him to stay his hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world—it would be small dust in the balance. (W. R. Moody, *The Life of D. L. Moody*, New York: 1900, p. 149)*

The Spirit empowers for ministry. He gives gifts for the edification of the body. Should we not look different with the power of God within us? Pray and beg God for greater power for service. With the Holy Spirit empowering you, your life should look different, unexplainable apart from the power of God.

Ephesians 1:18-20 - *I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, ²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.*

The Spirit also purifies, like fire burning away the dross and leaving pure gold. The Spirit convicts you of your sin and lifts up Jesus so that you will desire Him more and become more like Him. Remember what Jesus said about the importance of purity:

Matthew 5:8 - *Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they will see God.*

Purity of heart is to desire one thing. The Holy Spirit purifies us so that we would desire Jesus above all other things, that we would not be captivated by those things which can never satisfy us. Jesus, I want to know you, follow you, be like you, and bring you glory – that is the cry of the heart that is pure. The pure in heart bear the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22-25 - *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

To be pure is not to become some self-righteous, uptight person. No – it is becoming a person of Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness.

Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. That should get you on your knees asking for more of the Spirit. That is what someone purified by the Spirit looks like.

2 Timothy 2:20-21 - *In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. ²¹ If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an **instrument** for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.*

The Spirit purifies you so that you might be an instrument for noble purposes, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. He wants to make you a vessel that He can use, an instrument for his purpose. He has good works for you to do, and do that, you need both the empowering and the purifying ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Do not put out the Spirit's fire. Do not quench the Spirit. Allow Him to do His empowering and purifying work in your life and in our church, that we might be more like Jesus!

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 - *Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰ do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹ Test everything. Hold on to the good. ²² Avoid every kind of evil.*

Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. Receive what is genuine, and shun that which is counterfeit.

What does Paul mean when he talks about prophecies?

Prophecies are words from God through His people. While there were prophets in the Old Testament, according to the prophet Joel, who Peter quotes at Pentecost, the Spirit will enable all people to prophesy.

Acts 2:16-18 - *No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*

The place where he discusses prophecies in the greatest detail is 1 Corinthians 14:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. ³ But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. ⁴ He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified...²⁴ But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, ²⁵ and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

²⁶ *What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.*

²⁹ *Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. ³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. ³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³² The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.*

³⁹ *Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.*

Tongues is prayer language from us to God. Prophecy is from God to us. It can include interpreting and proclaiming God’s Word and applying it to lives the way I am doing. But it can also include revelation from God for a particular person or church or circumstance.

Paul tells them not to treat prophecy with contempt. Whatever was going on in Thessalonica, there were some who were dismissing prophecy as not being from God. Paul tells them not to do that, but not to just swallow everything either just because someone says “thus says the Lord.” No, Paul tells them to test everything, to receive what is genuine and reject whatever is counterfeit or evil. We need to test, because not every “word from God” is truly from God, and not everyone who claims to speak prophetic words truly has the gift of prophecy:

Matthew 24:23-24 - At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. ²⁴ For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect-- if that were possible.

I've had a couple of experiences with people sharing words from God with me. I don't think either was from God. There was no confirmation in my spirit. Plenty of people have claimed to speak in the name of God and given rise to all kinds of heresy and cults. And some of you are rightly nervous about what would happen if you opened the door to prophesy and words from the Lord. But we don't want to be guilty of swinging the pendulum too far the other way and quenching the Spirit.

So how do we test prophecy or teaching to see if it's genuine or not?

1) Does it agree with Scripture?

Acts 17:10-11 - As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

If I or anyone else claims to be speaking the words of God to you, but those words do not line up with the written word, reject it as false.

2) Does it preach a different Jesus or gospel?

1 John 4:1-3 - Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world

Galatians 1:6-8 - I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- ⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

If the teaching or prophecy distorts the gospel or the person of Jesus, reject it. Think Islam or the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons.

3) Does the speaker have a godly character?

Matthew 7:15-20 - "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

1 Corinthians 13:2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If the speaker's life is not producing fruit, or if they do not love, their prophecy and teaching is meaningless.

4) Does it build up the church?

1 Corinthians 14:3-4 - But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. ⁴ He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

Let us ask the Lord for more of His Spirit

Luke 11:13 - If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"