

Sermon to the saints of God which are at Topeka – Sunday, December 21, 2014

Quench not the Spirit. – 1Thes. 5:19

Beloved, as part of our reasonable service unto God, and feeling each word down to our toes, as our blessed sister Margie sometimes puts it, we say, out of Mark 16:15, that we are duty-bound to preach this word of God to every creature alive – and that our job is to say the words, get them in front of peoples' eyes – and that how they land on someone's heart is God's sole prerogative. And it's true! We have no such power to lead a sinner to Christ – it's the pinnacle of arrogance and pride to claim such a mission for ourselves. No man can lead a sinner to Christ. It's a great insult to God's authority and sovereignty, a fool's errand, and satanic folly.

We also say that our preaching duty stems from our obedience to the Lord's commandment to 'Love our neighbors as ourselves,' citing the meaning of such a commandment as outlined in Lev. 19:17-18, where a clear definition of neighborly love is given – that we warn our neighbors when their sins are taking them to hell – and that if we would fail to do so, it would be a manifestation of our hatred for our neighbors; this in blatant contradiction to the commandment. And it's true. God said it – we believe it – and the world rejects it.

So I'm standing out on the street, preaching this blessed word of God to a rag-tag little mob of rebels – and I look into their eyes and see a palpable contempt for these blessed doctrines – a hatred of God – a resentment for Christ. Not Christmas Christ – not baby Jesus Christ – not rum pa pum pum Christ. They love that. I mean Bible Christ. Christ as presented by His word. They hate that Christ. So I got my signs – check. Got my verses – check. Got my zeal – check. Got my vexation – check. Got my eyes peeled for trouble – check. And I'm looking out at these people, and they have absolutely NO possible way of understanding, from a spiritual standpoint, the truth of what we are saying, outside of the Lord granting them that understanding. There is simply no capacity in them to reason through, or compare, spiritual things with spiritual. Their default reasoning is fleshly, worldly – sure, they may be able to understand, from an intellectual standpoint, where we are coming from. But they have no capacity – NONE – zero, zip, zilch, as Elder Charles says, for spiritual reasoning, or discernment. This capacity for spiritual discernment is given through the grace and spirit of God to His elect, through the ages, and it is solely theirs – no men other than those who God has bestowed this gift upon may aspire to it. The capacity is spiritual reasoning, spiritual discernment, and it is given by way of the earnest of our inheritance, or the Holy Spirit of God dwelling in us. I'll get back to the street preaching story in a few minutes. Now, consider the scripture:

Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit. - 1Jo 4:13

In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. - Eph. 1:13-14

For the young people out there – the word translated there ‘earnest,’ means in this context, a sort of ‘down payment.’ The word earnest does mean showing sincere or intense conviction. It means serious, sober, grave – but it also means proof of intent. So, if you were going to buy a house, and maybe you didn’t have all your financing in order yet, but you wanted the owner to understand that you were serious about buying his house (and so that he wouldn’t show it to any other potential buyers), you might give that owner ‘earnest’ monies – or proof of your sincerity beyond your mere word. Enough money that you wouldn’t just walk away from.

The Holy Spirit of God, or the Comforter, is the earnest, or proof beyond words, and therefore a portion of, of our inheritance. And by the Holy Spirit of God, we are blessed with a capacity that carnal man doesn’t have and can’t hope for. It is spiritual reasoning – or spiritual thinking – in our conversation – in our daily lives. There has literally never been a person born on this earth who has this capacity outside of being given of God’s Spirit, and there has never been a person alive on earth who HAS been given of God’s Spirit who does not have the capacity that I now refer to. Mutually exclusive stuff. No reprobate has it. There is not an unregenerate man alive who has the capacity to reason or discern spiritually. The default is the flesh – and there are no options for him to change to. And no elect doesn’t have it. But we have options there, at least in the way that we think through things and operate day to day – and that is the rub – for all of us. Just because we have been given of God’s Spirit, the earnest of our inheritance, and therefore a capacity for thinking about, acting upon and viewing things aright, doesn’t mean that we are going to, as a pure matter of course, do that. We are not programmed to do right. And we don’t have to work too hard at knowing that this is the case, because we have plenty of scripture to show us:

This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. - Gal. 5:16-17

If it were a matter of course that, because we have been blessed with that capacity, we would necessarily use it at all times and in the right ways, there would be no need for God to also bless us with this admonition and exhortation. We have the capacity to spiritual reasoning – or sowing to the spirit – this is bestowed upon us by our merciful God – He, Himself providing it. We also have the capacity for carnal reasoning – or sowing to the flesh – and this is the default state bestowed upon us as a member of the Adamic race, complete with an abundance of energy and capacity for folly. Consider the scripture:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? - Jer. 17:9

THE HEART (here singular put for the plural of all men's hearts) – babies' hearts, old men's hearts, really, really smart peoples' hearts, large, clunky bearded men's hearts – they are desperately wicked. But the spirit of God has now given this poor, depraved soul a capacity to cast off those deeds and to go another way. To have the eyes of his understanding opened. Greater and greater light possible and forthcoming. But that capacity can also become dimmed, or lessened. Consider the scripture:

Quench not the Spirit. - 1Th. 5:19

We are admonished in this way by the word of God, because the quenching of the Spirit is so dreadfully easy to do – quenching the Spirit is really no work at all. The real work is in NOT quenching the spirit. The word translated quench is, in the Greek 'sbennumi' – and it means: to extinguish, as a fire or things on fire; to go out, to suppress or stifle, as of divine influence. What follows is an attempt to unpack, at least partially, a right construal of what it means to 'quench the spirit,' so that we can keep from doing it, by all means.

Although there are several different takes on the nuanced detail of the meaning of this verse, the expositors seem to mostly agree on a few points. First, and most importantly, is that the danger of 'quenching the spirit' is always a live option, both in the individual believer and in the church body – hence, the strong admonition against it. Second, 'quenching the spirit' is something that a person can do to him/herself as well as to others. Here are some words from a few expositors on the concept of quenching the spirit.

Gill: By which is meant, not the person of the Spirit, but either the graces of the spirit, which may be compared to light, and fire, and heat, to which the allusion is in the text; such as faith, which is a light in the soul, a seeing of the Son, and an evidence of things not seen; and love, which gives a vehement flame, which many waters cannot quench; and zeal, which is the boiling up of love, the fervency of it; and spiritual knowledge, which is also light, and of an increasing nature, and are all graces of the spirit: and though these cannot be totally extinguished, and utterly put out and lost, yet they may be greatly damped; the light of faith may become dim; and the flame of love be abated, and that wax cold; the heat of zeal may pass into lukewarmness, and an indifference of spirit; and the light of knowledge seem to decline instead of increasing; and all through indulging some sin or sins, by keeping ill company, and by neglecting the ordinances of God, prayer, preaching, and other institutions of the Gospel; wherefore such an exhortation is necessary to quicken saints, and stir them up to the use of those means, whereby those graces are cherished and preserved in their lively exercise; though rather the gifts of the Spirit are intended. The extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, bestowed on the apostles at the day of Pentecost, are represented under the symbol of fire, to which perhaps the apostle may here have respect; and the more ordinary gifts of the Spirit are such as are to be stirred up, as coals of fire are stirred up, in order that they may burn, and shine the brighter, and give both light and heat, #2Ti 1:6 and which may be said to be quenched, when they are neglected, and lie by as useless; when they are wrapped up in a napkin, or hid in the earth; or when men are restrained

from the use of them; or when the use of them is not attended to, or is brought into contempt, and the exercise of them rendered useless and unprofitable, as much as in them lies. And even private persons may quench the Spirit of God, his gifts of light and knowledge, when they hold the truth in unrighteousness, imprison it, and conceal it, and do not publicly profess it as they ought.

I'm swingin' right along to Gill's rhythm, as Elder Jon might say, but there is something about that exposition that kind of lacks a bit of detail in terms of personal outlook that I'm looking for. So let's keep going.

Barnes: This language is taken from the way of putting out a fire; and the sense is, we are not to extinguish the influences of the Holy Spirit in our hearts; Possibly there may be an allusion here to fire on an altar, which was to be kept constantly burning. This fire may have been regarded as emblematic of devotion, and as denoting that that devotion was never to become extinct. The Holy Spirit is the source of true devotion, and hence the enkindlings of piety in the heart, by the Spirit, are never to be quenched. Fire may be put out by pouring on water; or by covering it with any incombustible substance; or by neglecting to supply fuel. If it is to be made to burn, it must be nourished with proper care and attention. The Holy Spirit, in his influences on the soul, is here compared with fire that might be made to burn more intensely, or that might be extinguished. In a similar manner the apostle gives this direction to Timothy, "I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up (or to kindle up, or cause to burn) the gift of God." - 2Ti 1:6 Anything that will tend to damp the ardour of piety in the soul; to chill our feelings; to render us cold and lifeless in the service of God, may be regarded as "quenching the Spirit." Neglect of cultivating the Christian graces, or of prayer, of the Bible, of the sanctuary, of a careful watchfulness over the heart, will do it. Worldliness, vanity, levity, ambition, pride, the love of dress, or indulgence in an improper train of thought, will do it. It is a great rule in religion that all the piety which there is in the soul is the fair result of culture. A man has no more religion than he intends to have; he has no graces of the Spirit which he does not seek; he has no deadness to the world which is not the object of his sincere desire, and which he does not aim to have. Any one, if he will, may make elevated attainments in the divine life; or he may make his religion merely a religion of form, and know little of its power and its consolations.

There's a few filling in of the mindset gaps here that Gill doesn't really address – and I find it very helpful. Let's keep going.

Clarke: The Holy Spirit is represented as a fire, because it is his province to enlighten and quicken the soul; and to purge, purify, and refine it. This Spirit is represented as being quenched when any act is done, word spoken, or temper indulged, contrary to its dictates. It is the Spirit of love, and therefore anger, malice, revenge, or any unkind or unholy temper, will quench it so that it will withdraw its influences; and then the heart is left in a state of hardness and darkness. It has been observed that fire may be quenched as well by heaping earth on it as by throwing water on it; and so the love of the world will as effectually grieve and quench the Spirit as any ordinary act of transgression.

Ahh. A little more even of fleshing out of this concept. Praise God. There's a whole lot in our lives that can cause us to quench the spirit: how we think when we have hard stretches at our jobs - when we get sick - when our children get and stay sick - when those in authority abuse us in persecution of us - when we get asked the same ignorant question on the picket line for the 67,000th time - when we are called evil for what we do - when we get worn slick - when we get too wrapped up in our tv shows or video games or we're getting a little behind on our schedule or on our building project - when we don't have a proper outlook towards the crooks in our lots - when the thing that our loved one says or does really gets on our last nerve - when we discourage one another by not saying and doing things that comport with sound doctrine - when we sow to the flesh in all of those circumstances. That flesh and the spirit are at enmity with one another – constant warfare – constant contention. And when we don't purpose to sow to the spirit, we act to quench the spirit.

So back to the street preaching for a brief moment. So I'm looking out at these people – mean, hard, bitter people, and I'm asking the Lord to give me a proper spirit toward these men. Should I pray for them? How should I pray for them? They are obviously hardened at this time – but I have no idea who the Lord will call. Indeed, how the word of God lands on men's hearts is solely His prerogative, just as we say. Then I look over and see Betty – quiet, sober, unassuming, sweet, intelligent, Betty – very meekly, with a super-kind disposition, and with great efficiency and accuracy, speaking to a couple of people who had come up and had questions. Some of the questions were somewhat sincere, and all of them evidencing a severe lack of understanding about the nature of God and the absolute dung heap of a world we live in – which to them looks shiny and full of worldly hope – and God must certainly be a 'god' who is cool with everything THEY are doing. A kind, earnest, no-nonsense, patient, humble, meek, but learned spirit was where Betty was locked in – at that moment, and she faithfully gave an answer to (those people who asked her) a reason of the hope that is in her with meekness and fear – right out of 1Pet. 3:15.

And then I thought of our spiritual brother, Stephen – one of the first deacons in the New Testament church dispensation – (who, BTW, in lukewarm Presbyterian Bible ignorance, my father was named for, and me for him as a 'Jr.'). Stephen was chosen to take some of the non-preaching duties in hand in the church at Jerusalem – the Gentile widows complaining that the apostate Jewish widows were being given preferential treatment in the distribution of some of the necessities of life. And next thing you know, our dear brother Stephen, a humble servant of our Christ, is preaching the most vivid, accurate, thumbnail sketch of both the history of the Jews and the history of their dark hearts, imaginable. For his efforts, he was stoned to death immediately upon finishing his sermon. Consider the scripture:

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting unto his death. – Acts. 7:59 to 8:1

Nearly every expositor agrees that Stephen's prayer is both similar in nature, and points to Christ's blessed prayer at his crucifixion:

And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots. - Lk 23: 33-34.

But there are a few expositors and preachers who pretend that, by way of looking at Stephen's stoning through the lens of absolute predestination, that Stephen must be praying only for young Saul's forgiveness, who stood there holding the coats for the murderers – and not for the ones heaving the stones. But I see no scriptural reason to believe that Stephen had any foreknowledge of Saul's future salvation – Stephen was praying with a proper spirit for God's forgiveness upon these souls who had no idea that they were killing one of God's specific messengers simply for delivering that message. And he wasn't out of bounds there – he knew and preached the election of grace – of the limited design in the atonement. So he wasn't praying for God to forgive anyone who God had designed not to forgive. And a recent tweet by one of our loved ones who was manning the twitter account one day recently reminded me of some wonderful words from A.W. Pink on the subject of prayer. The tweet read:

#prayer

“Make petition grounded upon
Divine promise; commit case
into God's hands & be reconciled
to His will as to the outcome.” – A.W. Pink

Here is a fleshing out of this concept by Pink (from his letter 'Faith to Work Miracles' – 1940): *Christians in our day have no right or warrant—to ask for any favor, whether temporal or spiritual, private or public, absolutely and unsubmitively. True prayer is not an endeavoring to bring the Divine will into subjection to ours—but a seeking to yield up our wills to God's. What the Lord has predestined cannot be changed by any appeals of ours, for with Him there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17). God's eternal decrees were framed by perfect goodness and unerring wisdom—and therefore He has no need to forego the execution of any part of them: "But He is in one mind, and who can turn Him? and what His soul desires, even that He does" (Job 23:13). It is a most grotesque and God-dishonoring idea—to suppose that prayer has been appointed for the purpose of the creature's exercising his persuasive powers, so as to induce the Almighty to give something, which He does not wish to bestow.*

This is the confidence that we have in Him—that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). Ah, that is what we need to lay hold of and act upon in this blatant and presumptuous age. We come to the Throne of Grace, not as dictators—but suppliants. We approach the One seated thereon, not as equals—but as beggars. We go there not to demand our rights—but to beg favors. We do not stand on our dignity—but bow the knee in conscious unworthiness. We present not ultimatums—but make "requests." And those requests we do not make in a spirit of self-assertiveness—but in humble submissiveness. If we approach the Throne of Grace in a correct frame—we go there conscious of our ignorance and foolishness, fully

assured that the Lord knows far better than we what it would be good to bestow upon us and what would be best to withhold from us.

God has infallibly purposed when and where and upon whom He will bestow His favor, and Christians have no right, and when in their right mind—they have no desire to ask Him to alter any of His determinations respecting either themselves or others. Consequently, since they have no means of knowing beforehand what He has decreed concerning the granting of any specific favor, they are not justified in asking Him for anything absolutely—but rather must they offer each request with unreserved submission to His good pleasure. They may greatly desire to see the salvation of some particular person—but as they know not whether he is one of God's elect, they must not ask for it unconditionally—but subject to His Divine purpose. They may have a loved one who is seriously sick, and while it is both their duty and privilege to ask for his or her recovery—yet they must not pray for the same absolutely but in subjection to the will of God.

So back to the street preaching. I am watching Betty. And I've seen many others of our loved ones in this pocket. It's a spiritual groove she was right in, and I thanked God for it right then and there. Then I look over at these rebellious mutts again. Can I say that I am truly loving my neighbor as myself by holding signs, if my spirit isn't right about them? What is proper control of my spirit toward these men, who currently, at T1 (or today), sure look like my enemies? I mean hard, bitter, seemingly implacable souls!

But then I jump from Betty, to Stephen to our friend and brother Paul. I cannot think of any harder, more bitter and seemingly implacable actions that a person can undertake than to make it one's life business to publicly, and with abuse of legal and moral authority, persecute a humble servant of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Yet there he was. And he doubtless heard these doctrines that we love and preach – over and over again – mainly in attempting to compel believers to blaspheme God! He heard these truths, prior to the Lord knocking him on his you know what on the road to Damascus, many times – and they not only didn't mean a thing to him, but they made him mad – exceedingly mad! Murderously mad! And as mad as our dear brother Paul seemed prior to our Lord drawing him with everlasting cords of kindness, Stephen prayed for his forgiveness (in submission to God's will, not as counter to it). Stephen's right spirit, in death, toward his fellow man, and chiefly in obedience and love of God, was a great and enduring example for us. There sat Saul, mean-mugging the situation, filled with pride and self-worth, KNOWING that he was right, by God. Further emboldened by the stoning he witnessed, he went right on gathering flags and leather jackets and bear mace and military lawyers and smart, smarmy fag legislators and religious leaders and then BOOM! The sovereignty of God drops in and changes everything in an instant. To be sure, in dot-connecting mode Paul's God-hating road to Damascus turned Christ-loving Apostle to the Gentile world seems to validate Stephen's prayer. But it was the spirit that Stephen had (by God's grace), that he sowed to (by God's grace), that he had himself under (by God's grace), that validates the prayer, regardless of whether anyone from that Godless mob of rock chuckers ends up being saved. How would Stephen, who the scripture calls 'full of faith and power,' tweet? What would his parodies sound like? What might his conversation at a picket sound like?

We each get into the pocket, the spiritual groove that I saw Betty in, from time to time. I've seen it – over and over, and it's wonderful to witness – deeply refreshing to our bowels. And by contrast, we each let the flesh get the best of us – quenching our own spirits from time to time and even quenching the spirits of one another with our moods, words and deeds. The Holy Spirit, though Paul, knew of the importance of the exhortation to 'Quench not the Spirit,' given our feeble, frail, sinful nature, and placed it in close proximity to a cluster of exhortations that both shame me in my lack of consistently upholding them and in my simultaneous thrill that we are both exhorted to, and have the God-given capacity for, exercising that which we are exhorted to:

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. – 1Thes 5:14-23.

I thank God and you all for the privilege and duty to speak to you about these pressing matters for our souls in service to our King. I hope that you find something edifying here.

I love you all. Amen.