

**"Passionate Spirituality"**  
**Galatians 5:16-25**  
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## **Introduction**

As you know, Pastor John is in the middle of a series on *Natural Church Development*. It's a fine approach to church health and growth, and I'm glad to be able to preach one of the sermons in this series. The first sermon focused on "Empowering Leadership." In healthy churches, the leaders encourage and empower the members to be ministers of Jesus Christ. John's next sermon in the series explored "Gift-Oriented Ministry." In this message last week, John explained that each of us received the gift of the Holy Spirit when we became Christians. The Spirit empowers us to do the ministry of Christ, not in our own strength, but in the power of God.

Today's sermon is really an extension of last week's message. It's called "Passionate Spirituality." A healthy, growing church will be characterized not only by "Empowering Leadership" and "Gift-Oriented Ministry," but also by "Passionate Spirituality."

## **Passionate Spirituality**

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase *passionate spirituality*?

Perhaps you remember a time in your life when you were excited about being a Christian. Maybe it was when you were a new believer, when you just couldn't get over the fact that God loves you, when you just couldn't get enough Bible study.

Perhaps *passionate spirituality* makes you think of people you know who are still excited about their Christian faith. They're always talking about it, even though they have been believers for years. (Maybe you secretly feel a little envious of those people. Or maybe they drive you crazy.)

Perhaps, for you, the phrase *passionate spirituality* seems like a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron, to use the technical term. *Passionate spirituality* may be like *deafening silence*, or *working vacation*, or *jumbo shrimp*. Maybe you think of spirituality as something quiet and mysterious, something peaceful you'd rarely associate with excitement. Passion, on the other hand, is getting fired up about something. It's expressive and vibrant. It gets your blood pumping. You might think of *passionate sexuality* more than *passionate spirituality*. Or, given that we're in Texas, maybe you'd be inclined toward *passionate football*, or *passionate hunting*, or *passionate cheering for the Spurs*. So what are we to do with *passionate spirituality*?

## **Passionate Spirituality According to Natural Church Development**

Pastor John was good enough to give me some of what the Natural Church Development folks have written about passionate spirituality. What they mean by this phrase has less to do with strong emotions and more to do with (quote) "the degree to which faith is *actually lived out* with commitment, passion, and enthusiasm" (unquote). When it comes to passionate spirituality, the Natural Church Development people ask: "Are the Christians in this church 'on fire?' Do they *live committed lives* and *practice their faith* with joy and enthusiasm?"

It certainly makes sense that if church members are living out their faith with commitment and passion, their church would be growing. Faithful discipleship is contagious. But I wonder why the Natural Church Development folks call this sort of thing passionate spirituality? Why not "daily discipleship" or "active commitment"? *Why call enthusiastic living out of our faith passionate spirituality?*

### **Passionate Spirituality According to Galatians 5**

There's a good answer to this question. It comes to us from Paul's letter to the Galatians. In this letter, Paul was fighting a version of what we call legalism. The young churches in Galatia – central Turkey in today's world – had been hoodwinked by some theologically confused Christians who had taught them that faith in Jesus wasn't enough. *If you really want to experience God*, they said, *then you have to keep the whole Jewish law, especially the ceremonial parts*. Legalism was their path to passionate spirituality.

Legalism continues to lure many Christians today. It's a trap we easily fall into. People come to God through Christ, receiving his grace through faith. So far, so good. And they realize that God cares about what they do with their lives. That's right on. But then they're told that if they really want to have a relationship with God, they have to do all sorts of things to earn God's favor. The Christian life becomes a long list of things to do, and especially things *not* to do. Soon, people who began their life in Christ with a passion for him and his mission become weighed down with endless dos and don'ts, and the life of Christ gets sucked out of them. That's what was happening with the Galatians

In response, Paul pointed to a new way of living, something he might well have called passionate spirituality. "Live by the Spirit," he wrote in Galatians 5:16, "and do not gratify the desires of the flesh." The NRSV translation here misses a couple of important nuances in the original Greek of Galatians 5:16. First, the imperative "live" (literally, "walk") is actually a present imperative. It means, not just "live," but "live *and keep on living* in the Spirit." Paul is calling the Galatians to an ongoing experience of living in the Spirit of God.

Second, the part of the verse I read as "do not gratify the desires of the flesh," is not an additional command, but a promise. Paul was saying this to the Galatians: "Keep on living by the Spirit, and *you will not* gratify the desires of the flesh." In other words, if you want to keep away from sin, don't focus on the sin you wish to avoid, but on the Spirit of God who helps you to yearn for what is right and to shun what is wrong. Keeping on living in the Spirit and the sinful desires of the flesh will lose their grip on you.

## **Genuine Spirituality**

These days, spirituality is in. People want to be spiritual, not religious. Spirituality means some sort of oozy transcendence, or mystical experience, or meaningful living. Spirituality can involve Eastern meditation, or happy self-talk, or wearing crystals, or burning incense, or whatever you'd like. *Spirituality* is rather like a Burger King Whopper: you can have it your way.

For the Christian, spirituality is much more specific than this. It is, quite literally, *Spirit*-uality. It is life lived in the Holy Spirit. It is living each day by the power of God's Spirit who dwells within us. It is experiencing God, not in whichever way you choose, but in the God's way through God's own Spirit. Genuine spirituality is fellowship with the Holy Spirit. It happens as you read the Spirit-inspired Word, or as you join the Spirit-filled gathering of God's people, or as you quiet yourself to hear the still, small voice of the Spirit. True spirituality is not merely some private, other-worldly experience. It is also a this-worldly encounter with the Spirit that we share with other believers. It includes, as Pastor John taught last week, ministering to others in the power of the Spirit.

Living in the Spirit is relying upon the Spirit. It is being open to the Spirit's guidance. It is being available for the Spirit's power. It is offering your whole self to God, so that you might be transformed by the Spirit into the very image of Christ. The more you live in the Spirit, the less you will engage in the so-called works of the flesh, including: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing" (vss. 19-21).

On the contrary, as you live in the Spirit of God, you'll find that your life is increasingly characterized by what Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (vss. 22-23). True spirituality, therefore, isn't something hidden away in our souls. It impacts how we live in relationship with others: offering love, seeking peace, treating folks with patience, kindness, generosity and the like.

## **How Do We Live in the Spirit?**

This sounds great, doesn't it? Which of us wouldn't like to be more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient, and so forth? This is spirituality we could be passionate about. *So, then, how do we live and keep on living in the Spirit?*

Paul gives us a couple of clues in Galatians 5. In verse 18 we read, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law." "If you are led by the Spirit . . ." Here we see that the Spirit of God leads us, giving us directions for living, pointing us in God's way.

In this sense, the Holy Spirit is a little like those newfangled GPS devices that are becoming so popular. How many of you have a GPS device? Maybe a Garmin or a Magellan or whatever came with your new car? When we went back to California last Christmas, a friend loaned me his car, and it had a GPS device. What a wonder! I could see exactly where I was located on a

little map in a screen on the dashboard. If I wanted to go somewhere, I could enter the address and, voilà, the GPS device would guide me. It would even tell me in words where to go: "In one-quarter mile, turn right. Go straight for three miles." I could touch a button and all the gas stations would miraculously appear on the little screen, or the McDonalds, or the Starbucks. (I don't think they had a button for the Presbyterian churches, however. They have to work on that.)

I found it quite entertaining to have that GPS device in the car . . . but also quite dangerous. I kept wanting to watch the little screen rather than the road. And, no matter how sophisticated a GPS device is, it isn't able to say, "Watch out! You're about to hit that man 50 feet in front of you!" I don't have my own GPS device yet, which is probably good news for those of you who live in Boerne.

When we become a Christian, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is a little like a GPS device. As we pay attention to the Spirit, we receive divine guidance for our actions. This happens in many ways. Maybe you read the Bible and are convicted to forgive somebody against whom you've held a grudge. Or you're listening to a sermon on generosity and are led to help out a friend who's struggling financially. Or perhaps you see somebody across the room at church and sense in your spirit that God wants you to reach out to that person. Or maybe the Holy Spirit puts a burden on your heart for starving children in Africa. Or . . . you name it.

### **Be Guided by the Spirit**

Another verse in Galatians 5 gives us further insight into how we can live in the Spirit each day. Verse 25 reads, "If we live by the Spirit, *let us also be guided by the Spirit.*" The phrase "be guided by the Spirit" suggests something similar to what we've already seen about being led by the Spirit. The verb translated here as "be guided" is used elsewhere in Paul's letters in the sense of "walking in the footsteps of" someone (Rom 4:12). The picture is of the Holy Spirit walking ahead of us, and our following close behind, imitating the Spirit's steps.

Children do this sort of thing on the beach. You'll see a dad walking across the sand, leaving large footprints as he walks. Then, several feet behind, a little boy will be following along, stretching his legs in order to put his feet in the footprints of his daddy. Similarly, we can be led by the Holy Spirit, who shows us where to step, helping us to walk in God's ways each day.

If you want to experience this kind of genuine *Spirituality*, this life in the Spirit of God, you must begin by putting your faith in Jesus Christ. Trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and His Spirit comes to dwell within you.

Then, with the very Spirit of God resident in your heart, you can learn to attend to the Spirit's voice. The Spirit speaks to us primarily through the Spirit-inspired Scripture. That's why we study the Bible. That's why we use Scripture as a basis for preaching, for teaching, and for directing our life as a church. The Spirit also speaks in the community of God's people as we all use the gifts given to us by the Spirit. (If this is a new idea for you, I'd urge you to check out Pastor John's sermon from last week.) The Spirit also speaks in our hearts: urging, leading,

prompting, challenging. Sometimes the Spirit's guidance comes in the form of a thought. Sometimes it's a powerful emotion, perhaps compassion for someone in pain or concern for a friend who's facing difficult challenges at work.

### **Catching the Wave of the Spirit**

So far we've seen that genuine spirituality is *Spirit*-uality. It's life in the Holy Spirit. As Christians we're to live in the Spirit, being transformed by the Spirit, being guided by the Spirit, and ministering in the Spirit's power. This is what true spirituality is all about.

But what about the passionate part? How do we experience *passionate* spirituality? How can we be enthusiastic about living out our faith in the world?

This too, comes from the Holy Spirit. Remember, the fruit of the Spirit includes love and joy. The Holy Spirit moves our hearts, giving us a passion for that which enflames the heart of God. Similarly, the Spirit reawakens within us the joy we knew when we first put our faith in Christ.

In my experience, passionate spirituality comes when I experience the transforming presence and power of the Spirit. If I can see the Spirit at work in my life, I get excited about God. I remember an Easter morning a few years ago. I had just preached the second of four Easter services, and was greeting folks at the door. A woman from our church came up to me with tears in her eyes. "My eighty-five year old mother just became a Christian," she said. "Though I've been bringing her to church every Easter for years, today something you said broke through, and she gave her life to Christ. I am so happy!" And so was I. Thrilled, in fact. When I had some moments to myself, I thanked the Lord for the sheer privilege of being used by him. And as I preached those next two Easter services, I don't know if I ever felt more passionate about the gospel.

But this sort of experience is not just for preachers. It's available to each and every one of us as we begin to follow the Spirit's lead in our lives. Let the Spirit guide you. Step out in faith. Reach out with the love of Christ to others, and you'll find new excitement in your Christian life.

Many of you know exactly what I'm talking about. You've experienced the power of the Spirit in your life, over and over again. Perhaps it happened when you were sharing your faith with a friend. She asked a tough question, and all of a sudden, as if out of nowhere, you had a great answer. You realized the Spirit of God was at work in you. Or maybe you were teaching Sunday School and facing a tricky discipline challenge. In a flash, you knew how to deal with the situation. That was the power of the Spirit in you.

Living in the Spirit is a little like body surfing. Now you'll have to forgive a Californian illustration, but I haven't been around here long enough to pick up some good Texas ones. They'll come in time. Anyway, one of the things I liked to do in California was go bodysurfing at the beach. Have any of you every done this? You don't need a surfboard or anything, because your body becomes the board. Basically, you go out into the surf, bobbing around as you wait for just the right wave. When you see it coming, you start swimming toward the shore as fast as you

can. Soon, you feel the wave cresting around you. If you're lucky and if you've timed everything right, then all of a sudden you feel the wave sweeping you along. You stop swimming and get caught up in the flow of the wave's power. In the right conditions, you can ride along effortlessly for many yards. When the wave finally dies out, you feel pumped with excitement, and can't wait to get back out there for the next wave. You might call that *passionate bodysurfing*.

And so it is in our Christian life. When we're attentive to the Holy Spirit, when we're in place that the Spirit wants us, when we're available and ready to go, we get caught up in the flow of the Spirit's power. We realize that God is at work within us, producing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. And we see God at work through us, using us to minister to others by the Spirit's power. Then we feel pumped with excitement, and can't wait to get back out there for the next wave of the Holy Spirit. And that, sisters and brothers, is called *passionate spirituality*.

Amen.