

“The Spirit and the Flesh” February 27, 2022

Acts 4:23-33

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24** And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, **25** who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ““Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? **26** The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed”—

27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, **28** to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. **29** And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, **30** while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” **31** And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. **33** And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

So, we get a description here of what happens after God heals a man through Peter and John. They are arrested and brought before government leaders in Jerusalem. And, at first glance, it might not seem like there is much here. It’s just describing what all of the disciples of Jesus did after Peter and John were released. But, I actually think, if you know what to look for, there is a lot of encouragement we can take from this passage of scripture.

Here is what I mean. Several weeks ago at the beginning of our series on Acts, we mentioned how, when Jesus was on Earth with His disciples, He told them that it was actually better for Him to leave them and send the Holy Spirit. That it’s more advantageous to have the Holy Spirit inside you than to have Jesus beside you.

Our passage for today is actually proof that He was right. Here’s what I mean... the disciples were with Jesus, in the flesh. They literally apprenticed under Him. And yet, time and time again they fail.

And here in Acts 4, after the resurrection, we see them responding in some totally different ways than we’ve seen previously. Our passage for today almost reads like a case study of them finally getting it. So, let me point out some ways that the disciples failed while they were with Jesus, and then point out how we see the opposite here in Acts chapter 4. What we’re going to see is that Jesus was right: it really was better for Him to leave and send the Spirit to help them.

- **The disciples find the limits of their boldness | the disciples risk their lives**

Peter is a great case study for this one. Sitting together at the Passover meal the night Jesus would be betrayed, Jesus told his disciples that not only would one of them betray him, but they would all scatter. Peter made a show of saying that he would never betray Jesus and would willingly die for him.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed this or not, but men tend to reach the apex of their boldness when surrounded by other men. If we could count the number of stupid things men have done immediately after saying, “watch this” in front of other guys, it would be a high number.

Sociologists and anthropologists refer to this as the “hold my beer principle.” That’s a joke, and it’s at the expense of men, so it’s socially acceptable.

If you say you are going to do something around 12 other guys, you'd better do it. If you don't, the social risks are enormous.

A bit later that night, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter did swing his sword and cut one of the soldier's ears off. So, that definitely registers on the boldness meter. I mean, I've never cut anyone's ear off. I caught my uncle's ear with a fishing hook casting a rod once, but that's about as close as I've come.

So, in his own strength, Peter had a degree of boldness. But, it would quickly reach its limit and retract into humiliation later that night, when Peter did exactly as Jesus said he would and denied knowing Him three times, even cursed him – we're told because a servant girl noticed him and asked if he knew Jesus. Not exactly a high-standing official.

Even being around Jesus for that many years, being shaped by his teachings, literally apprenticing under Him – when it mattered the absolute most, it wasn't enough. Unaided human effort was simply not enough for Peter. In his own strength, he fell short.

And yet after the resurrection of Jesus, after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes, Peter is filled with the Spirit. His inability and lack, all of a sudden have power filling them. When brought before the rulers and threatened – a situation much more serious than a servant girl around a fire – here is what happened this time.

Acts 4

18 So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. **19** But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, **20** for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” **21** And when they had further threatened them, they let them go...

So, he finds himself in court. It's like he's testifying before Congress; the C-Span cameras are rolling. And they tell him to do what he's already done in much less extreme circumstances. Just say you don't know Jesus. But this time, He says, “Listen, y'all do what you gotta do, but I'm not gonna stop what I'm doing.” These are government leaders and he's no longer afraid to be associated with Jesus, even though they have the power to kill him. And it says they warn him and threaten him. “No more of this Jesus talk, from you or anyone else.”

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24** And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God... **29** “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, **30** while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” **31** And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

So, in spite of their very lives being threatened, Peter and the whole group, quote, “continued to speak the word of God with boldness.” It's a far cry from the group that ran away scared at Jesus' crucifixion, and from Peter being scared to admit he knew Jesus even to a servant girl. There is a Holy Spirit boldness that hadn't been there before. Let me show you another example.

- **The disciples forget | the disciples remember**

Continuing the same thought – the disciples' response to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion is to run and hide. They are scared and also confused. They were very dejected. I totally understand the way they reacted and am quite sure I would have done the exact same thing. But, there's also this part of me that's like,

“Yes, AND...He literally told you guys this was going to happen. All of it. Multiple times.” But, somehow it never registered with them.

It feels a bit like that time Jesus is with the disciples, AFTER he had turned a few loaves and fish into enough food to feed like 5,000 men; and, they get out their food, and they are like, “Man, we only have this much food; not nearly enough for what we need ... oh well.” And Jesus is like, “Do you guys not remember what I literally just did with the five loaves and two fish?!” The forgetfulness is a pattern.

But, look what happens in Acts 4. When Peter and John came back with their story of being threatened by the religious leaders, everyone knew what was at stake. They knew this meant there was likely more trouble to be had for all of them if they continued the ministry. This could have been cause for great discouragement. But, watch what they do:

23 When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. **24** And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, **25** who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ““Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? **26** The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed?—

They are quoting the Psalms here, in an act of remembrance. They are saying, “God you’ve been telling us this was coming all along! We see it. You are doing what you said you were gonna do...”

27 for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, **28** to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

They are like, “God, you told us this was gonna happen! We see it now! You've been saying this for hundreds of years to get us ready. I see you, God. It happened exactly as you said!”

This sudden ability to realize and remember isn’t random. It’s exactly what Jesus said his Spirit would help them do.

John 14

26 “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

So, previously slow-to-understand, forgetful people now understand and remember Scriptures that have the words of life for what they’re facing.

- **The disciples slept | the disciples prayed**

After leaving the Passover dinner, Jesus leads his disciples into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. This is one of the most agonizing moments for Jesus as he wrestles with what is about to come.

And he asks his disciples to watch and pray. He asks them to support Him in His darkest hour. If you know the story, you know that they just kept falling asleep.

Matthew 26:40-41

40 And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? **41** Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

After seeing the resurrected Christ and being given the Holy Spirit, they find themselves in a similar situation. Facing serious persecution. And this time they have no problem giving the full weight of themselves to asking God for what they need:

29 “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, **30** while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” **31** And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Quite a different picture than falling asleep.

And then lastly:

- **The disciples scatter | the disciples come together with one heart/soul**

Again – when Jesus is arrested and tried, the disciples do exactly what Jesus said they would: they scatter. They run away, hide, in fear for their lives. They proved that in their own strength they did not have what it would take to back up their mouths as their bodies fled the risk of being associated with Jesus.

Quite the opposite happened in Acts 4:

32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. **33** And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

This is a perfect experiment because the control group is exactly the same. Jesus was right after all because, although the same people, the group we see in the second picture is far more compelling. They have the Spirit now, and it appears that Jesus was right after all. It was better for Him to go because they needed supernatural, indwelling help from the Spirit to help them do what they were previously unable to do.

So, let’s try to zoom out and talk about what is actually happening in these different pictures. Throughout the New Testament there is a recurring theological concept that is summed up in two ideas: the flesh and the Spirit. The Greek word for “flesh” is where we get the English word “carnal.” Previously, we’ve defined it as the “disordered desires” inherent in the human heart.

You might more naturally think of the more rebellious disordered desires we have, like greed or jealousy. The things that feel sinful. But, these disordered desires can also have a more religious expression. Our flesh can appear good and put together and competent apart from needing Christ’s righteousness.

In Jesus’ day, the extremes of these two groups were the “tax collectors and sinners” on one side and the religious zealots on the other side. And Jesus called both of them to repent because they were both relying on their flesh. Operating in their own strength. Their lives were directed by the desires they found in their fractured souls; one just looked like stealing and the other looked like self-righteousness. So, operating in your flesh can look like a gang member or an unregenerate Sunday School teacher – the root is the same. I don’t need Jesus; I’m good on my own.

Dallas Willard talks about the flesh as operating from “unaided human effort.” Before Pentecost, the disciples who walked with and followed Jesus were not filled with the Holy Spirit, so they only had their own strength. Their own unaided human effort. And, as we have seen, they needed more help than that.

The New Testament teaches that humans, having lost communion with God in our rebellion against Him, can only be made right with God by repenting, or refusing to trust in our flesh. We trust in God's unmerited grace and are filled with the Spirit of God at conversion. God's Spirit comes to live inside of us and enlivens us to God from the inside. He gives us new desires. He gives help and resources we need to follow Jesus. And pretty soon, we are able to follow and obey Jesus in ways we never imagined before. Just like we see in the lives of the disciples.

There are some practical things I want to talk through, but it's necessary to start with a necessary realization:

Realization: Face the inability of your flesh.

This was a necessary part of the journey for the disciples. They got to do actual life with Jesus; they got a more up close and personal tutelage than any of us ever will. And yet, when the heat was turned up, their ability to do what they wanted and intended to do failed. They fell asleep, they forgot, they denied, they scattered. Though they had the best of intentions, their unaided human effort was simply not enough.

Many of us who are in Christ also have the best of intentions. We've been saved by Jesus, regenerated, and given the Holy Spirit. We have a new heart, new desires. But, we're still stuck in so many patterns of our flesh.

Some of us had the best intentions to "get back on track" spiritually this year. You know your disciplines have grown lackadaisical, moving towards nonexistent. You know your participation in healthy rhythms like Gatherings and LG have waned substantially. But, your efforts to turn this around on your own power have thus far failed.

Maybe you have decided to kick that addiction. The one that some people know about, but no one really knows how bad it is. But, right now it is still gripping you rather than the other way around.

Maybe you have realized how unhealthy your preoccupation with your appearance is. How utterly crushing and joy-destroying it is. How this obsession makes you less able to enjoy relationship with the people that very much love you and the body God has given you to steward. So, you've decided to stop this, and radically accept with joy that God knit you together in your mother's womb and that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. But, none of that truth has made its way to your brain yet, and you are just as obsessed as you've ever been.

Maybe you have that person, or people, in your life that you just absolutely cannot deal with. Maybe you've tried and tried to muster the patience, forbearance, and love you need for them. You've decided over and over that you are going to change how you respond to them. But, every time you are near them your soul feels like a gas gauge that just repeatedly slams against the E, blinking red, alarms blaring. And you just have absolutely nothing of spiritual value to offer.

The best of intentions will not produce the outcome you want because we simply need more help than that. In all of these things and more, we need something far more powerful than "unaided human effort." Depending on the flesh simply won't cut it.

You cannot effort yourself into becoming the kind of person God intends for you to be. You need more help than that.

To grow spiritually, we have to come face to face with the inability of our flesh. We need a power and a source that doesn't and cannot come from ourselves. That has to be the foundation.

But, this does not mean we are passive. Rather, this realization drives us to the very actions we see the disciples doing in Acts 4.

Feed the Spirit

V.31 gives us an interesting word picture. The disciples had already been given the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The New Testament talks about the Holy Spirit as a seal of our redemption, given to us once and forever to claim us as children of God. So, in the most important sense, they already *had* the Holy Spirit. But, then we see in v.31:

31 And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

So, they already had the Holy Spirit, but as they went to God in desperation, clung to His promises, and poured their hearts out in prayer, they were filled even more with the same Spirit that they already had. They were more enlivened, more empowered with a power that did not come from themselves. And this produced an outcome that was far above what they could have mustered themselves.

There is possibility for theological confusion here, but I think that's unnecessary. The most simple and faithful framework to understand what is happening here is exactly the framework that Paul repeatedly uses: as regenerate Christians, we now have two natures. The flesh and the Spirit. We will lean into and be led more and more so by one or the other. It's as simple as that. And when we walk in the Spirit rather than the flesh, there is the possibility for us to be enlivened and empowered more than we previously were. To increasingly produce the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

And what I would argue is that in this passage we see examples of what these disciples were doing to, quote, "feed the Spirit." Or "keep in step with the Spirit." We see certain practices they were doing in order to stop relying on their flesh and depend more on the Spirit's power they knew they needed.

These are all disciplines that will be familiar to you. They serve as a means of distrusting your own ability and power, and turning to God to do what you can't.

4 Ways to Feed the Spirit

1. Honest Prayer

Peter and John had just been threatened for healing someone. Literally, they did the nicest thing you could do to someone, and their safety is threatened. The only reason they didn't get a worse outcome here is because of political will—it would not have been popular. They know what this means. The context told them that there was likely more trouble ahead for any disciple of Jesus. Church tradition also tells us this was true with the alleged martyrdom of both Peter and John at a later time for their faith in Jesus.

They do the most sane thing anyone would do when they realize they are in way over their head—they get on their face before God. They cry out for God to continue to give them boldness and continue to work. And we don't know if the room shaking was a literal earthquake-like thing, or if it was a spiritual experience; but, God answered their prayer. He gave what they needed.

Prayer is a direct reflection of your understanding of a situation. If you believe yourself to have things pretty much under control, you won't find yourself praying very often. If you sense great needs that you can't meet on your own strength, prayer will come as naturally as breath.

I believe the realization of helplessness is the most conducive thing to becoming a praying person. But, I don't want to create a false dichotomy either because intentionally praying can actually teach you how much you need to pray. How helpless you really are.

So, whether it arises out of felt necessity or out of discipline, prayer is a way that we empty out our trust in our own unaided effort. It's an act of rebellion against the hubris we often walk through life with. Every time you ask God for help it is a bit like pouring lighter fluid on a fire. It's a way of feeding the Spirit.

2. Minds full of Scripture

When they are pressed, they go to God's Word to make sense of what is happening. To find something solid to hold onto. They find solace in God's sovereignty over their circumstances, and even that God promised this would happen hundreds of years earlier through the writing of King David.

The same thing I said about prayer applies here: a desperate man or woman will find deep wells of water in God's Word. He or she will immerse themselves in it, memorize passages, turn truths over and over in their mind. Meditate on God's Word. But, one who does not realize their inability will find little use for it. It will collect dust.

I don't know what the process was like for these disciples as the Holy Spirit guided them to the passage they needed in that moment; but, I know for me there are times where I've been struggling with something mightily, and the Holy Spirit brings a familiar verse to the forefront of my mind like it has spotlights on it. Or, shares a verse through a friend. Or, as I'm reading, just makes a light bulb come on, and I'm like, "That's it. That's exactly what I needed."

I find that the more you immerse yourself in Scripture, the more that tends to happen.

3. Turning to Community

There appears to be a correlation between a group of believers coming together and saying, "God we need you," and the Holy Spirit moving in a powerful way. Here in this story, the disciples get news that could have been very depressing, news that in the past could have made them scatter. But, instead of running away they came together with one heart and one soul.

It's no secret that our church from the beginning has heavily prioritized LifeGroup participation. And for that I would just like to go on record saying that we are not geniuses. We are not even creative. We are not entrepreneurs. We just read the Bible and we say, "Okay let's do that...and let's do that...and let's do that...the end."

So, when we call us as a church to practice all the communal commands we see in the New Testament like love one another, forgive one another, bear with one another, serve with one another, confess your sins to one another, pray for one another; we are simply aspiring to be what we see on the page here.

Turning to other Spirit-filled believers in humility and devotion is an act of refusing to trust in your own judgment, your own ability, your own flesh. It's an act of humility. Whereas isolating yourself and refusing the love, concern, and even the rebuke of those who love Jesus and you, is a foolproof way to be led by your flesh.

So, if you want to starve the flesh and feed the Spirit, you can start by making it a priority to come together with other believers. Here and in LifeGroup. And not just going, but going with an engaged mind and heart. Asking for prayer, confessing sin, listening for wisdom as the Holy Spirit speaks to you through others. Neglect this at your own peril. The data on removing yourself from the environments of community are not good. Community is a way that we fight reliance on the flesh.

4. Sacrificial Generosity

Lastly, we see what may be the most tangible way the disciples place full trust in God and not in their flesh: they give all their stuff away.

32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

Your possessions, your money, your stuff, is in a way an extension of you. They are resources you work for; resources that allow you to survive or be comfortable. So, along with the rest of the things we've mentioned, it makes perfect sense that the disciples would put less and less trust in these things as they walked in the Spirit. Their grip was loosened on the things that our flesh pines for, that bring us comfort and security.

I would hit the same refrain that this can be a fruit and a discipline. It can be a direct result of realizing your total trust in God and His ability to provide, and it can also be a proactive way to detach your hands from trusting in things. Generosity is a result of being led by the Spirit and a way you can starve the flesh.

Conclusion

To wrap up, I would like to end with the last verse in the passage; the culmination of this snapshot into their community:

33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

With these deep changes that had taken place in them, they continued to bear witness to the controversial, dangerous truth that Jesus got up out of his grave and conquered sin, death, and hell. They did this with great power as the Spirit gave them courage and strength and boldness, which they would most certainly need because many would go on to be put to death for their faith in Christ.

It's a beautiful picture. But, here is why it's encouraging. It's not just what happened...it's what can happen—all of this is available to you and I today. This is the type of community we can become. These are the types of people we can become. Because the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, the same Spirit that empowered these early followers of Jesus, now lives in us. Now empowers and enables us as followers of Jesus today.

We can become people who start to see real and meaningful victory over the things that have such a grip on us. The same Spirit who raised Christ Jesus now dwells inside of you. If death was no match for Him, what stand could addiction make? How could entrenched bitterness possibly defeat the Spirit of God? How could grief and sorrow win over the God who will one day make all things new?

By the power of the Spirit, as you forsake your flesh and walk in step with Him, you can start to not just tolerate that person you just can't stand, but you can see genuine love birthed for them.

You can see your unhealthy obsessions start to fade away because when you look in the mirror now, your ears are attuned to God's Spirit, and He tells a very different story than your inner voice.

And if you hear any of this and it sounds kind of fanciful to you; if you are thinking, "Man, that degree of change sounds awesome, but I just don't see it. That seems like a supernatural change..."

I know! It is supernatural. And that's exactly what's available to us, as we forsake our flesh and feed the Spirit. As we pursue this through practices and habits that empty us so that we can be filled.

The change that happened in the disciples is available to us all. The question is, to what extent will we take it?