

## Seeking a deeper relationship with God

In our walk with God, there are times when we know our spiritual life is not as deep and meaningful as it could or should be. Even harder are the times when we do not realize that we are in a rut or have been lulled into taking a spiritual nap. In this article we will discuss how keeping our spiritual responsibilities in the right way, actively striving to be conformed to the image of Christ, and not quenching the Holy Spirit, will help us overcome apathy and come into a closer, more fruitful union with our Heavenly Father.

Jesus told the women at the well that “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth” (JN 4:24). In this hour (JN 4:21 spiritual time), worshiping God is different from everything else we do. It is neither physical, like the ritual observances of the Jews were, nor is it intellectual, like the modern religion of science is. Rather, worshiping God in this hour must be spiritual. Even in our present physical bodies we have spiritual faculties which have been given to us by God, through which we are to know Him and worship Him. Think back to the first time you were called by God or the first time you felt peace and how that was qualitatively different than just an emotion. In Worship, our inward spirit is empowered by the Holy Spirit to come into the presence of God – who is a Spirit. The working of the Holy Spirit is essential in worship and any spiritual “increase” is only from God, but Paul’s letters are full of action words and we have very clear responsibilities for our spiritual health.

Where many go astray, and the occasion for much frustration, is equating these spiritual responsibilities to keeping church rules, traditions and having good attendance. Good rules, traditions and attendance are essential to the Christian, but just adhering to a rule will not necessarily deepen our relationship with God in the way we seek. It is all too easy to adhere to a rule while being completely, or at least partially, spiritually asleep. For example, when was the last time you ran through a rote prayer before lunch, or rambled off an empty “God Bless you” to someone at church? Or more seriously, what have you done differently this week as a result of the sermons preached on Sunday? Even particularly dull sermons have a point in them that we can apply. If, each week, we offer this point up to the Holy Spirit, and ask Him to show us the full measure of what that point practically means to our lives, then we will find that living out that particularly dull sermon will not be so particularly easy or dull.

The basic responsibilities laid out for us in scripture are what we would expect them to be: regular, quality<sup>1</sup> time spent in prayer, self-reflection, Bible study, tithing, worshipping in song, listening to sermons, fellowship and active service of our Lord. When the quality of our worship is good and we are spiritually awake, this time is easy; but, as we all know, some days will be harder than others. It is possibly these hard days, when the world pulls our desires away from our Lord, which matter the most. On these days, when we do not feel like it, we must realign our spirit by remembering who we are in Christ and cleansing ourselves with at least some small steps into scripture, prayer and worship. Past experience should tell us that doing this on the hard days will make all the difference in our walk with God. This difference may not always be felt immediately, but if we continue to make these small, seeking steps, the difference will soon be felt and it will open our spiritual eyes to God’s power and grace working in us.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be said that all of us, at times, legitimately need help improving the quality of our time in these areas. God did not intend for us to be mystics, worshipping in the desert; ideally we should all and at all times be learning and growing — especially if we are in leadership positions.

One of the results of being more consistent in fulfilling our Biblical responsibilities for spiritual health is that the Holy Spirit will have more opportunity to work on our character and conform us ever closer to God's image. For example, reading scripture will often convict us of areas of our life or heart that are 'stony ground' as far as God is concerned. However, chapters such as Colossians 3 take this even further and tell us to actively seek this transformation of character; to actively put off the old man and actively put on the new man by the power of grace. When stuck in a rut, Colossians 3 is an excellent chapter to turn to for direction on what area of our life God wants us to pay attention to. Most of us will need significant help in understanding many of the old English words and concepts in this chapter, but this extra work will be worth it. Pray over the chapter until God convicts you of which attribute He wants you to start either putting off or putting on. Then pray and ask God to reveal what this would practically mean in your life. Then, throughout the following days, consciously pray and lean on God's grace to live out this change. Continue to do this, day after day, until the Holy Spirit gives you peace and leads you to another attribute. There is always something in our character that God wants to change; so, if we are sensitive to the Holy Spirit, we will always have plenty of leading in this area. The sad truth, however, is that so many people believe that God is hiding himself behind a veil. In fact, perhaps the veils preventing us from the closer union with God we seek are of our own making — our quenching of the Holy Spirit.

In this life, we will never know God as He knows us (1 Cor 13:12). However, God, as a loving Father, is earnestly trying to shine His light, His presence, into our lives. Yet, our flesh recoils from this light because it is too revealing and leaves us feeling too exposed. No one likes being shown their unrighteousness. This is why no matter how many sermons we have on Gossip or Pride, people still gossip and let their pride go unchecked - we quench the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit tries to speak to us we erect veils of pride, hurt, anger, pain, fear, disbelief, lack of faith and every other sort of sin and grieving word. Stopping this is often very painful and our fleshly being will resist it. Thankfully we, as Christians, have already experienced what victory in this area feels like and can lean on that experience of letting God break through the walls around our heart when we first gave our lives to Him. Tearing down the veils we put up to quench the Holy Spirit now will feel much the same as it did then, except it should be far easier now, as we are more experienced with how God's grace works in our lives.

One less obvious implication of this exhortation, to not quench the Holy Spirit's leading, is that we should not compare ourselves to others, but rather always compare ourselves to scripture and Christ. A healthy, growing Christian should always feel that he needs a Savior. Only by comparing ourselves to God's perfect standard can we feel this in the way that bears maximum gratitude and love. Comparing ourselves to others is one of the easiest ways to quench the Holy Spirit. Any passage of scripture that convicts us or shows us to be lagging behind what God requires of us, can then easily be mitigated. We might not be so overt as to say "well at least I'm better than so and so", but we all, at times, distract ourselves by focusing on the faults of others and so quench what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us about our lives.

The hope of this article is that the lessons from scripture that we have discussed will help us come into a closer walk with God. There are many other teachings from scripture on this topic worthy of discussion (laid deeply on my heart are the great commission, sins of omission and the Biblical idea of the body of Christ). This article has tried to stress that we have responsibilities in our spiritual life that are demanding and that directly affect the quality of our relationship with God. Christ has already won the victory; let us take courage from this and be found faithful.

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