

Are You a Friend of the Holy Spirit?

I grew up in a small Texas town. As a typical small community in America, my hometown had a variety of churches. We also had Christian television. As a kid, these two things gave me a good exposure to different streams of Christianity.

My admittedly shallow, somewhat skeptical observations led me to conclude early in life that Christians who talked a lot about the Holy Spirit generally fell into one of two groups: one in which the women didn't seem to wear any makeup at all, and the other in which they invariably wore way too much makeup. For a long time I figured that any woman who decided she wanted a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit faced a tough dilemma and had to ask herself, *Am I going to stop wearing makeup, or am I going to start wearing more?*

I'm joking, of course. But these stereotypes are indeed alive and thriving today among huge numbers of Jesus-loving people. Many are sincerely reluctant to embrace the opportunity of a life-transforming relationship with the Holy Spirit because of such stereotypes.

Who do you think is the author of these misconceptions? It is Satan—the one who wants you to think that inviting the Holy Spirit into your life has little to do with friendship. Think about it: If the coming of the Helper, the Holy Spirit, is indeed a wonderful thing for believers, doesn't it make sense that the devil would want to keep us from experiencing that help? I am convinced that one of Satan's primary strategies for keeping people from experiencing all the amazing help and benefits that come from a relationship with the Holy Spirit is to convince us that doing so will make us weird—*really weird!*

Of course, Satan has a lot of help in reinforcing that lie.

The world has its share of truly eccentric people, and some of them are “Spirit-filled” Christians. People sometimes do bizarre things and then claim that the Holy Spirit made them do it. He didn’t. The Holy Spirit isn’t weird. I know this is true because I know Him well. He’s a good friend of mine.

However, this particular lie of the enemy harms us more than we realize. On one hand we see all the biblical evidence that the Holy Spirit is a blessing and a helper. On the other hand the enemy shows us goofy people doing goofy things in the name of the Spirit. As a result, we think, *This Holy Spirit stuff is probably good, but only in small doses. You just don’t want to get too carried away with it.*

In essence we tell the Holy Spirit, “OK, I’ll open the door of my life a few inches so You can stick Your foot in. But I’m not letting You come all the way in, because there’s no telling what You’ll do. I don’t trust You to behave Yourself.”

How insulting is that?

No! The Holy Spirit isn’t strange. He is a wonderful, kind, and sensitive person. And a real friendship with Him can change your life.

Amazing Benefits

When the Holy Spirit becomes your friend, He brings four amazing benefits into your life. Let’s look at these briefly.

1) Power. Acts 1:8 says, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” Sadly, many Christians struggle all their days to live the Christian life, and they experience all kinds of failure, precisely because they try to live it in their own strength. They are saved, yet live lives of defeat and ineffectiveness, die and go to heaven. But they spend their entire lives without ever using the only power that makes victorious living possible.

2) Love. The Bible's famous "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13, is sandwiched between two chapters that deal with the gifts of the Spirit. According to Romans 5:5, the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to walk in the love of God toward others: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Perhaps the reason many Christians struggle and fail to walk in love is that they never open their hearts to the Holy Spirit, who holds the role of pouring out God's love within them.

3) Fruit. According to Galatians 5:22, when we allow the Holy Spirit to fully dwell in our lives, He produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and a whole host of other good things. In fact, Paul opens this particular discussion about the Holy Spirit with the words, "I say then: Walk in the Spirit" (v. 16). And he closes it the same way with the words, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (v. 25).

As a pastor, I frequently encounter people who ask me the secret to being a person of greater peace or patience or gentleness or kindness. I tell them it's no secret. All those qualities and more are the natural byproducts of enjoying the Holy Spirit's presence and fellowship. This is what Paul means by walking "in the Spirit."

4) Gifts. The fruit of the Spirit is a gift. The qualities He produces in our lives are like packages from heaven itself, filled with blessings, miracles and power. The earliest New Testament believers (see Acts 2) who threw the door open to the Holy Spirit turned the world upside down! Thousands came into the kingdom, miracles happened and lives were transformed everywhere they went. Is it any wonder Satan is terrified by the thought of God's people becoming fully open to the help of the Holy Spirit? We shouldn't be surprised that the devil has done his best to make all this controversial.

However, abuse or misuse of any of the Spirit's gifts should never cause you to shy away from a full experience and a daily walk with the Holy Spirit, because you can't live a fully productive Christian life without Him.

The Friendship of the Spirit

Missing out on the gifts the Spirit brings is unfortunate. However, missing out on His friendship is tragic. I discovered this truth in an unusual way early in my Christian life.

I wasn't born again when Debbie and I first got married. Nine months after I made Debbie my wife, I made Jesus my Lord and experienced Him as Savior. While this was a powerful and transforming event, I still had a lot of emotional issues for which I needed healing and restoration. For one, I was insecure and even afraid of other people. I usually put on an outer show of confidence, but it was always a thin facade of cockiness covering a large amount of low self-esteem.

When we were first married, I used to dread Debbie's dragging me to Christmas parties. She naturally has a happy and outgoing personality, and she would invariably run off to chat with a friend while I was left to fend for myself.

At the end of the night, when we got in the car to go home, I'd be upset with her. She couldn't understand why. She didn't know she had done anything wrong because, of course, she hadn't. But I would get a pathetic tone in my voice and say, "You left me!"

"What do you mean, Robert? I was there all night!"

"You left me. And I was all alone. And ... and people came up to me ... and talked to me. It was horrible."

We're talking about a grown man here!

However, something remarkable happened when I entered into a real, personal and dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit.

I remember the first time we went to one of those dreaded social gatherings after my friendship with the Holy Spirit began. There I was, standing alone with a glass of punch in my hand and thinking, *She did it to me again. She's off chatting away, and here I am—alone and defenseless.* Then I heard the voice of the Holy Spirit clearly inside of me, saying, *I'm here, Robert, and you're not alone!*

The Holy Spirit and I started a conversation, one of the first of more than I can count. On this night, when the Spirit spoke, my eyes noticed a man across the room. The Holy Spirit said, *Do you see that man? He got a very bad report from his doctor the other day. He's afraid he's going to die and leave his young family destitute. You could pray for him. So I did.*

Next I noticed a silver-haired woman, and the Holy Spirit commented, *She lost her husband a few months ago. She's battling loneliness and crushing grief. Let's pray for her.*

At one point a man walked up and started a conversation. Instead of looking for a window to climb out of, I asked the Holy Spirit to use me to bless or help this person. The Holy Spirit prompted me to ask him about an area of his life that seemed quite personal. Still, I obeyed the Spirit's prompting and said, "Are you doing OK with...?" and then mentioned what the Holy Spirit had revealed to me. The man looked at me in shock for a few seconds and then began to cry. I had the humble privilege of praying for him and giving him some desperately needed encouragement.

What's more, I didn't interact with this gentleman in a way that made me seem weird or made him feel humiliated. That's not the way of the Holy Spirit! I can say this from my experience with Him: He is gentle and kind.

Wherever He is allowed to work in a person or situation, encouragement, light, life and healing come.

How the Spirit Speaks

One Sunday I had just concluded my message and invited those who wanted to receive Christ or needed prayer to come forward to the altar. A number of people were responding to that call, but my eyes fell upon one gentleman in particular. To my knowledge, I had never seen him before, and there was nothing about his facial expression or manner that would indicate why he was coming forward.

Nevertheless, as I looked at him, I heard the familiar voice of the Holy Spirit telling me something. I knew from experience that the Spirit reveals such things only because He wants to heal, restore, encourage and bless.

So I stepped toward the man and said, "Sir, as you were coming forward, the Lord told me something He wants you to know. He told me that you feel like the prodigal son, because you have been away from Him for a very long time. He just wanted me to give you a message from Him—'Welcome home, son.' "

Instantly the man's eyes filled with tears, and he fell into my arms. On behalf of the father who ran out to meet the returning prodigal of Jesus's parable, I put him in a bear hug that depicted in tangible terms the loving, forgiving embrace that awaits every person who turns to God.

What I did not know was that this was the man's first time inside the walls of a church in nearly 20 years. As he told me later, he had been raised in a Christian home and had given his life to Jesus as a boy. His Christian wife had been praying for him. But he had strayed and been running from God for a long, long time. True to form, the enemy had been lying to him and telling him God would not receive him if he returned: *You've done too much. You've been too sinful. God has given up on you.*

So nervous was he about his return to church that while driving there he pulled over into an empty parking lot. When his wife asked him what was wrong, he turned to her and said,

"I'm like the prodigal son. But I just don't know if God will really have me back. I'm afraid." With some encouragement from her, he continued on to the service. And because the Holy Spirit still speaks, it was my privilege to bring him a very specific, amazingly redemptive word from a loving heavenly Father.

It's true: The Holy Spirit wants to speak clearly to us just as much as we want to hear clearly from Him. With that said, however, I want to give you some keys to hearing the voice of the Spirit. If you know how He talks, then you can know how to listen.

Through His Word

First, the Holy Spirit is a person. We shouldn't think of our relationship with Him as anything more complicated than a relationship with any other person. When you meet new people and want to build relationships with them, you have to get to know them. You gradually learn about their backgrounds, their likes and dislikes, their habits and passions. The more you learn about them, the better you know them. The same is true with the Holy Spirit.

What if the person you just met had written a book about his life? If you wanted to know what he was all about, wouldn't it make sense to read what he'd written? The Holy Spirit was the inspiration behind every word of the Bible. So the starting point for a relationship with Him is the Word. In its pages we learn how God walks, talks, thinks and acts. As we read and study Scripture, we discover His personality and character. If you want to get to know God, you have to read His Word.

Pouring out your heart to God in prayer is the way you can talk to God.

But renewing your mind by reading His Word is the most basic way you can allow God to talk to you.

Through His Voice

In addition to speaking through His Word, God also speaks to individuals. He hasn't been giving His people the silent treatment for the past 2,000 years! Hebrews 13:8 tells us that God doesn't change; He "is the same yesterday, today, and forever." This being true, why is it so hard to accept that God is still talking to us today?

Jesus Himself talked about the voice of the Spirit in John 10: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. ... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (vv. 1-5, 27).

Five times in these verses, Jesus refers either to the shepherd talking or to the sheep hearing the shepherd's voice. The sheep don't just hear his word; they hear his voice. We are Jesus' sheep, and according to His Word, we can and should hear His voice—the voice of the Spirit. When we hear it, we should know it.

Debbie and I were married in 1980, but we've known each other since elementary school. Once in a while she'll call me from a phone number I don't recognize on caller ID. On those occasions, when I answer the call and cautiously say, "Hello?" I hear a voice on the other end say, "Hey!" That single word is all I need. My voice and inflection instantly change to one expressing affection and familiarity.

Without hesitation I respond, "Hey, honey. How are you?" I

know the voice of my sweet bride. I've been listening to it for more than 30 years. After all the time we've spent together, talking and just living, I know her voice better than anyone else's on earth.

We can know the voice of the Spirit that well too. We can instantly recognize His voice beyond any doubt when He calls our names and speaks direction or encouragement to us. And don't think that the Holy Spirit only speaks to "important" or super-spiritual sheep in the Shepherd's flock. You can know God's voice and hear Him just as clearly as the most famous evangelist hears Him.

We can come boldly before the throne of God through the access purchased for us through the blood of Jesus. And we can come to know His voice of reply, because Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to speak on behalf of the Father and the Son. Anytime you meet someone who really knows the voice of God, you quickly realize that person has spent a lot of time with Him. Getting in God's presence—dwelling there, living there and listening there—is the way to practice hearing God's voice.

In the early phases of this learning process, many believers say that the voice of the Spirit sounds a lot like their own thoughts or their own self-talk. There's a reason for this. When the Holy Spirit wants to get a message to you, He must communicate to your born-again human spirit and from there to your mind. So you're not likely to hear an audible voice. Instead, it comes as a *thought*. So it's easy to question whether the message is your own thought or something the Spirit is telling you.

With time and familiarity, however, you can learn to clearly distinguish between thoughts that are your own and those that come from the Spirit. The Shepherd still speaks to His sheep, calling us by name. Keep spending time with Him so that the next time He whispers, *Hey*, in your ear, you won't have to look at the caller ID. You'll know right away that God is

speaking to you. The more you hear, recognize and acknowledge His voice, the easier it will become to hear Him every time He speaks.

What an amazing privilege to have the Holy Spirit with and in us. He can be a trusted friend who wants to make everything better. The opportunity to have this member of the Trinity as an ever-present friend is a privilege beyond human comprehension.

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Watch Gateway Church Senior Pastor Robert Morris explain why the Holy Spirit is neither weird nor spooky at