

1 Thessalonians 5:19 (Read 5:1-24) – Don't put out the Spirit's fire

Do not put out the Spirit's Fire

Last Sunday morning, Nigel spoke from 1 Thessalonians 4 about the promise of Christ's return. It gives us comfort concerning those we have loved who have "fallen asleep in Jesus" – who have died trusting in the Lord Jesus. We know we shall be reunited with them when Christ returns. We will praise God together for his love and grace towards us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But this same promise of Christ's return in judgment is a challenge to each one of us: Have we trusted in the Lord Jesus? Are we longing for the day of his coming? Will we be among those who share eternal glory with him on that day? Will we be there?

This morning I want us to look at the following chapter, 1 Thessalonians 5. Paul is instructing these young Christians at Thessalonica – and he is instructing us – how to live in the light of these things. Jesus is going to come again in glory: how should we occupy ourselves as we wait for his return?

Having given a number of instructions, Paul wraps them up with a series of rapid-fire exhortations, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it" (5:16-25). Paul is telling us that not only are we to live towards the day of Christ's appearing, God is also preparing us for that day by his Spirit.

This morning, I want to focus on one of these punchy exhortations, namely, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire"

The Spirit as Fire

Paul describes the Spirit here in terms of *fire*. This might seem an uncomfortable image of the Spirit; fire is so destructive. Many of you will have read or heard about Claudia Winkleman's daughter, Matilda. She was out celebrating Halloween when her party dress caught fire from a candle and she was engulfed in flames. Fortunately, it was quickly put out and the girl is now recovering, but we can imagine how frightening and painful it must have been. Why then does Paul speak of the Holy Spirit as fire?

Well it's not original to Paul. John the Baptist told the crowds that he was only able to baptise them with water, but he then said of Jesus, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt 3:11)

And Jesus himself said, "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" (Luke 12:49). Jesus longed for the outpouring of fire upon the earth; this is why he had come.

And on that first Day of Pentecost, after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension he poured out his Spirit on those first disciples. On that day, the Spirit appeared in the form of tongues or flames of fire, resting on each one of them (Acts 2:3).

So, putting these verses together, we see that the outpoured Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. His Spirit comes like fire to continue the work Jesus came into the world to do.

But it's vital to realise that the fire of the Spirit comes not to destroy but to cleanse and purify.

Think of that time when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. The fire of God's presence did not destroy the bush but set it ablaze with God's glory. So today the Holy Spirit's fire makes us conscious of the presence, power, glory and holiness of our God. It is an uncomfortable encounter to be sure, but it designed for our blessing.

The experience of the Thessalonians

The Christians at Thessalonica would have understood what Paul was talking about because they had experienced something of the Spirit's fire. When Paul first spoke to them about Jesus, something happened to them. Paul writes that they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). What was it that made this radical change in their lives? It was the fire of the Spirit burning in their hearts. Paul writes, "our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction." (1 Thessalonians 1:5). That holy fire fell on them and their lives were filled with the blazing holy presence of Jesus in all his risen power.

And once that fire had been kindled in them could not be contained: it spread out from them to touch the lives of others: "The Lord's message" says Paul, "rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere." (1 Thessalonians 1:8). The fire that had touched them spread from them to touch and transform the lives of others.

Now, says Paul, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." Keep that fire burning.

Do not put out the Spirit's fire

What Paul had to say to these Christians in Thessalonica nearly 2000 years ago is equally relevant to us today: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire."

Why is it just as important for us? Because we live in the same situation as the Thessalonians: Jesus Christ *has* come – he has died for sins of the world; Jesus Christ *is* Lord – he is risen from the dead and reigns in glory; Jesus Christ *will* come again in judgment and every knee will bow to him. But Jesus longs that people would come to know him now that the fire was already kindled. As one of our songs expresses it:

"One day every tongue will confess You are God.
One day every knee will bow.
Still the greatest treasure remains for those
Who gladly choose you now."

We need the fire of the Spirit within that we might rejoice now in all the blessings that come from knowing God in Christ. We need the cleansing fire of the Spirit to make us more like Jesus – to prepare us for the day of his coming. And we need the fire of the Spirit to make us living witnesses through whom the fire will spread as others come to know him.

Jesus wants this fire to be kindled and to burn throughout the earth. That is why he came. That is why he died. That is why he has poured out his Spirit on his people.

We need this fire to make us the people God wants us to be. We need this fire if others are going to be drawn to Jesus Christ through us – that they also may be set alight with love for God.

So, it's vital that we not put out the Spirit's fire

How can we put out the Spirit's fire? Surely we can as soon put out the sun with a fire extinguisher!

We cannot stop the Spirit's work, but we can damp down his activity in our own lives. We can grieve the Spirit by ungodly thoughts and acts; by growing cold in our love for Christ. We grieve the Spirit when we turn a deaf ear to his prompting and walk in the way that he would lead us. We can become so comfortable with how we are that we insulate ourselves against his transforming power. We lose the vision for all that God has called us to be and do in Christ. We have no appetite for following Christ in the path of costly discipleship.

And so our fire grows cold, especially when we drift away from fellowship with one another.

We need continually to stir up the fire

Jesus not only came to bring fire on earth, he longed for it to be kindled.

How much do we long for the blazing fire of the Spirit: long for him to sweep through our own lives, burning away all the rubbish and refining the gold – making us more like Jesus? How much do we long for the Spirit to fill us with love for God and a passion for Christ and his glory, filling us with love for others and a concern that they too may know God and his transforming power?

Think of the day when Christ shall return. There will be fire on that day – the blaze of his glory will fill the whole earth. Does something of that fire burn within you already as the Spirit prepares you for that day?

Let me conclude with some verses from a hymn by Charles Wesley. He was a man whose heart had been set on fire with love for Christ. Let us make the words of this hymn our prayer this morning:

O Thou Who camest from above,
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
Upon the mean altar of my heart.

There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
To work and speak and think for Thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up Thy gift in me.

"Do not put out the Spirit's fire." But be on fire for Christ as you look for and long for the day of his coming.

16/11/2014 – Peter Misselbrook