

## SERMON FOR PENTECOST (Cape Town - 11 May 2008)

**Text:** <sup>1</sup> Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, <sup>2</sup> because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.<sup>3</sup> For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. ...<sup>11</sup> And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Rom.8:1-2, 10-11)

Last Sunday as we were preparing for Pentecost I already mentioned how complicated and how controversial the topic of the Holy Spirit is. It is one of those topics where there isn't always agreement between the churches. In fact, at times it can even be divisive as churches or individuals claim the Holy Spirit for themselves at the expense of others.

I for myself know that we will never capture the full understanding of what the Holy Spirit works. But the one thing I do know with great certainty is that when Jesus promised his disciples his Holy Spirit, he was promising them something quite special. He didn't want to scare them, he didn't want to divide them, he didn't want to cause uncertainty, but he wanted to uplift them, unite them, and bless them in a way that even exceeded their wildest dreams.

The prescribed sermon text for this Sunday is complicated to say the least. But I believe that Paul touches here on one of the central aspects of the Holy Spirit. And if we manage to understand what this is all about, we will be all the richer for it.

In this part of the letter to the Romans, Paul addresses the issue of "repeated sin" in our lives and how this burden can be overcome.

I am quite sure that you have noticed, that before you became a dedicated Christian sin didn't really bother you too much. In other words, if you used God's name in vain, or did a bit of illegal tax evasion, or cheated for the sake of your company or your own benefit, you didn't lose too much sleep over it.

Maybe the apostle Peter in his early life can serve as an example of this. At that point, he was such a boastful or even arrogant person. When Jesus for example announced that all of his disciples would desert him shortly before his death, Peter declared rather boastfully, that others may do so, but he would never do so. He would even die with Jesus if called upon. Peter, was so uncritical towards himself, he didn't even realise what was in his heart.

But later on it changed for him. And it changes for us as we are drawn closer to Jesus. In his holy presence, we get a heightened sense of our sinfulness. If we gossip, it bugs us afterwards. If we lie, or drink too much, our conscience gives us no rest. And we have this deep desire to be freed

from the burden of sin.

But try as we may, the same sins tend to repeat themselves. In fact there is a “pattern” that develops in our lives. We sin, we ask for forgiveness, but the sin comes straight back again.

In our Bible study this last week we saw this pattern also in the life of ancient Israel. Slowly but surely, especially in good times, the Israelites drifted away from God. God punished them. They repented. God forgave and send them a redeemer. *And they sinned all over again.*

This creates such a burden. The author of Psalm 73 reflects on this. He says: For those who are not god-fearing people life is much easier. When they sin there is no conscience that attacks them. They lie, they cheat, and they even become rich. But we battle with ourselves all the time.

And by the way, the “law of God” does not help here. The law plays the very important role of making us “aware” of our sins. It shows us what is wrong in our lives. But once the law has done this, it does not help me further. The law hasn’t got the *power* to change me. I can hear it a hundred times in a single day: “You shall not do that. You shall not do that.” But that will not change me. Through my own strength I might be able to hide my sin from the public eye, but my “heart” doesn’t change. The sin remains under the surface, ready erupt any moment again.

We have a problem! Don’t we?

But God sees us struggling with ourselves. And it is in this situation that he promises us his Holy Spirit.

As noted before, Peter was struggling. One day he was declaring boldly: “***Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God***”, and only a few weeks later, he denied even knowing him. And when Jesus looked at him, he started crying. He cried, because maybe for this first time in his life, he realised: “I cannot change”. He was like a reed in the wind.

The apostle Paul was no different. He writes in Romans 7: “***I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out... The evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing***” (v.18-19).

But it is Pentecost. And Jesus said to his disciples: “When I go, I will send you my Spirit.” But what does this mean?

Sometimes we think, receiving the Spirit of Jesus means, that God now gives me the “inner strength” to overcome sin. In other words, if I really have the Spirit, the sins that I have failed to overcome in the past, will now be conquered. With the aid of the Holy Spirit within me I will now have the power to resist.

But this is not what Jesus meant. The Holy Spirit is no some kind of external aid I get to keep the law of God. The Holy Spirit fulfils a totally different purpose. In fact, he takes the focus away from the law that condemns me. And he takes the focus away from me, and what I must do to accomplish to law of God.

Fact is, the more we try to fulfil the law, the more the sin within us creates the desires to do what we don't want to do. It is almost like dieting. I tell myself all day, "I must not eat too much, I must not eat too much," but by saying it to myself, my focus is on food all day long. And somewhere along the line the wall breaks.

The Spirit takes us away from the sphere of the law. The law makes us focus on "ourselves" and what we should do. The Spirit of God focus on Jesus, and fixes fixes our eyes on what God has done for us. He reminds us of God's great love towards us. He reminds us, that nothing will ever separate us from this love. He reminds us, as Paul writes in our sermon text: "***There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ***". That is good news!

The root problem of sin is that we are too busy with ourselves. Am I liked? How popular am I? Will others accept me? This in turn leads to comparisons, jealousy, gossip, self-defence.

The Spirit of God takes the focus away from ourselves. He shows us how marvellous God is. He makes us realise, that even if others reject us, we are accepted by God. And if we feel accepted and loved, we suddenly loose this need to gossip, or we loose this craving, that we must have certain things to have a fulfilled life.

The law of God convicts me of my sins, but the Gospel sets me free. It set me free by changing my focus.

We haven't reached the end station, of course. We still tend to sway from the one side to the other. Our natural and selfish tendencies sometimes at times still overshadow what God has done for us in Christ. But the Spirit is at work.

I can see him at work here in our congregation. I see him when we learn to accept God's love and forgiveness and are eager to share them with others. I can see it when busy people suddenly have "time" for God.

I was reminded of this, this last Friday when I went to a prayer meeting at Panorama School. One of the teachers told us about a church in America that is revamping schools in their community. When a school is run down, the church moves in and gives it a total revamp. They paint the school, they do the garden ... and soon both teachers and learners are revitalised.

And I said: "Where do they get the time?" And another teacher said: "Is like tithing. If you give a tenth of your money to God, you never become poorer. Likewise if you give a tenth of your time to God, you will discover that you will always have enough time to do the rest as well."

That is what the Spirit does. He changes our focus. He puts God first... and the rest falls in place. We worry about so much in life. But Jesus said: "***Do not worry. Seek first the kingdom of God ... and all these things will be given to you as well***" (Matth.6:33).

In short, all of this means: The prayer of Pentecost: "Come Holy Spirit..." means: "Spirit of God, change my focus. Help me see God's love. Help me believe his promises. Let me live as one, who

knows: I have been saved by Christ.” Amen.