

Bonsai Christians

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Q: Should we quench the Spirit in our lives and how does this occur?

A: On first reading this seems like a ridiculous question. I would expect everyone to reflexively answer, "No!" Upon closer truthful examination I expect everyone secretly answers, "Yes."

A strange thought came to mind regarding this subject: Bonsai gardening. Bonsai is a Japanese art form where a gardener deliberately stunts the growth of a tree or shrub that would, otherwise, be able to grow to a normal size. This stunting is achieved in two ways: aggressive pruning of new growth, and severely limiting nutrition. There is a lesson embedded in this concept that we may examine more closely.

We believe that what Christ meant by being "born again" [John 3.3&7] is a conversion experience. We believe that the outcome of a conversion is to have the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ living, even sealed, inside the convert. So we understand that every converted Christian has this greatest-of-all powers residing permanently in the individual heart. Then we proceed to stunt its power in us ignoring the biblical instruction in I Thessalonians 5.19: "Quench not the Spirit."

We stunt the influence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us in two ways: 1) we prune off any convictions that might embarrass us or cause us inconvenience, and 2) we control nutrition by limiting our exposure to the Bible and sound Biblical teaching.

Why would anyone do that? Or as the above question continues, ". . . how does this occur?" This occurs when we fail to surrender our will to the will of Jesus Christ.

First example: The Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ convicts us to donate money to an orphanage and we decide to spend the money on pleasures or comforts. Philippians 2.21: "For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's." We grow good at ignoring these convictions by taking our eyes off of Jesus Christ and observing that lots of others around us do the same. We take comfort that others are also spending money on pleasures and comforts. II Corinthians 10.12: "For we dare not . . . compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."

If this is true it would follow logically that we would tend to be thankful for those around us who are extremely self-indulgent so that we would look better by comparison. So we lionize the rich and famous because we secretly believe that they are worse than we in this area, which gives us comfort.

Second example: The Holy Spirit convicts us to admonish a fellow believer because they have said or done something out of line with Biblical teaching. We take our eye off this simple leading of the Holy Spirit and look ahead to an imagined and unpleasant outcome: we fear that they will resent us, attack us, and turn others against us. I say "imagined" and "fear" because if you approach this assignment with love and diplomacy the usual outcome is a wonderful improving of our Christian relationships. But the father of all lies [John 8.44] plants these fears in us, causing us to override the leading of the Holy Spirit and stunt this growth experience. We stunt and quench the Holy Spirit, instead of making a victorious Spiritual experience that would promote our growth.

Third example: The Holy Spirit is leading us in righteousness and service but we are insensitive to that leading for all the racket of the lust of the eyes and flesh, and the pride we feel when we gossip about others, believing ourselves to be superior. These are powerful forces pulling us away from a sensitivity or even a desire to hear the leading of the Holy Spirit. “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other; so that ye cannot do the things that you would.” [Galatians 5.17] So we have this great power of the leading of the Holy Spirit and we drown it out, or ignore it “. . . to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season;” [Hebrews 11.25]

It could be that we are culturally somewhat desensitized to this problem of having great power but not using it. We in the Industrialized World see it as reasonable to have great stores of wealth only to keep our hands off of it. Like insurance we want to have great power at our disposal but we hope we never have to use it. These features of modern industrialized living may make it hard for us to see the disastrous consequences in doing this, Spiritually. The Apostle Paul, who may not have had our cultural advantages, wrote about spending and being spent. [II Corinthians 12.15] How odd he would seem to us today.

Whatever excuses we may have for doing this, or however we may be able to understand and explain it away, it still causes us to fulfill a most terrible condition: II Timothy 3.5: “Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.” It puts us among some very terrible people foretold to exist in the end times. And the most disquieting thing about this group is that they do not see themselves as terrible. They sit around with others like themselves and comfort themselves with how terrible all the others are. Luke 18.11: “. . . God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are,”

How do we know that this group will also be viewed as terrible? Are we not tempted to think, “Aren’t you overstating it somewhat here?” Judge for yourselves by the parable of the talents in Matthew 25.30: “And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The intention of Christ, however, is that after being born again, we grow from babes to fully mature joint heirs of His in His Father’s kingdom and work. There are greater joys than earthly wealth, earthly popularity, or earthly pleasures. They are actually of real and material use to the Kingdom of Christ, being used by Christ to advance His cause. This is life’s greatest pleasure, and one that we rob ourselves of when we settle for the joys of this life. Remember the excitement in the disciples’ voices when they came back from being sent out two-by-two: Luke 10.17: “And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name.” They returned with joy. The greatest joy that a human can have. But if we read on we learn that “. . . thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and has revealed them unto babes:” [v. 21]

This highest of joys does not come to those initially seeking the highest joy. That would be the motive of the wise and prudent. It comes to those who, motivated by love, seek to give and be used. They are so overwhelmed with the love Christ has freely given them that they seek any service from the motive of gratitude. [Ephesians 4.32] It is a byproduct of that moment of genuine self-denial and sacrifice in obedience to Christ. It is captured by surrender. It is gained only by giving. Babes in Christ can experience this as well as the mature. Just immerse yourself in service and giving from the motive of a sacrificial service and genuine love and it will appear and grow. It is not reserved only for the bigger sacrifices. It comes with each and every sacrifice. If you wish for a lifetime of such joy, seek a lifetime of service: service at the beck and call of the Holy Spirit. Learn how to hear and be sensitive to that call. It is not something you have to

wait on. It has been in your ears from your conversion. It is something you have to gain sensitivity to, and responsiveness to.

The motive of each leading of the Holy Spirit is to build the believer up into the stature of Jesus Christ. Look at the first item in the list provided in Ephesians 4.12-13: “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:”

When we turn our hearing toward the world, its pleasures, and wisdom we start to sink like Peter did when he took his eyes off Jesus Christ while walking on water. But the Holy Spirit is there to help us as Christ was there to reach out and lift Peter. Why do we not more aggressively covet this precious, thrilling, life-giving leadership? The answer may be in Jesus’ comment to Peter during this very rescue: “. . . O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”