

Sermon for Sunday, October 10, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"HOW TO LIVE A GOD CONTROLLED LIFE"
Galatians 5:16-24

Text: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these two are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would." Galatians 5:17

We can talk about God in three basic ways. First, we can speak of his holiness, his otherness, his transcendence, his out-there-ness. But second, we can turn right around and talk about how he became present in the very world itself and upon the stage of history. When we speak of God in those terms, his then-ness, we speak of Jesus Christ. Third, we can also speak of God in terms of here and now. We can speak of him in terms of his presence in human hearts and in human lives right today. When we speak of God in these personal terms of the present, of the here and now, we speak of the Holy Spirit. So when we speak of God the Father or God the Son or God the Holy Spirit we are not talking about three different gods. We are simply talking about different ways we can experience God.

When the Bible comes to talk about God in this third way, in this inner, here and now sense, he is often connected with the expression of fire. For example, John the Baptist said of Jesus that he came to baptize us with fire and the Holy Spirit. So, this morning I want to talk about keeping the fire hot. Another way of saying it would be to say we are going to think together about how to stay close to God or how to live a God-controlled life.

According to St. Paul there are two forces at work in us Christians. He calls the first force the flesh. He is talking simply about our human-ness, our humanity. The fact is, St. Paul doesn't think much of our humanness. Man may have some good inclinations and some noble thoughts, but on the whole man is evil and destructive. We used to be quite optimistic about man, but not any more and much of modern literature has dealt with the theme of man's fallenness. St. Paul was pessimistic about our humanity and wrote, "Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like." That is not a very pretty picture of man and when we look at the world today we wonder if St. Paul might not have been peeking into the 20th century when he wrote that!

But in the Christian there is a second force at work that St. Paul calls the Spirit of God. Just because we are human, we want to keep "God-here-and now" at arm's length. We will talk about God who is out there somewhere away from us and we will talk about the historical Jesus who is way back there somewhere in history. But this God who is out there and who is back there is also the God who is right here. Now, when we let this "Right Here God" into our hearts, we have that second force at work in our lives. The result of this force at work in us is described by St. Paul as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

This means the heart of the Christian is a sort of battle ground between two forces. As St. Paul put it, "For the desire of the flesh is against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other..." (Gal. 5:17). Now, let us ask ourselves this morning which of those forces do we want to control our lives; which sort of person do we want to be? I assume because you are here this morning that you are at least interested in a Spirit-filled life that is controlled by the Here-and-Now-God, so I want to talk about how to live a God-controlled life.

Lot's of people have the idea that once you decide for Jesus and say you believe in him that is all it takes. That simply isn't true. I find that every morning when I get up I have to decide again who is going to be boss of my life that day, Jesus or me. Lot's of people have the idea, too, that being a Christian means that you are exempted from problems and burdens and ills. That isn't true either. We are still human beings living in a human world and we are still subject to all of the ills and frailties that being human means. And then there are some who think that Christians are never tempted when nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, the person who is trying to live a God-controlled life is more sensitive to sin than a person who is controlled by the flesh. Only when you resist sin and temptation do you know how strong it really is. The man who gives in to sin right away has no idea how bad or how strong temptation would have been five minutes or five hours later. Only a person who has resisted sin to the last knows how strong it really is. So being a Christian who is God-controlled means we are more aware of sin than ever before. Because all of these things are true, we have to keep the fire hot.

The first step in living a God-controlled life, in keeping the fire hot, is to read God's word every day. Lot's of people leave out this step, but it won't work. I am deeply distressed about people's ignorance of the Bible. There is where God speaks to us and there is where he makes his will known to us. I have people tell me, "God told me this," or, "God told me that," or, "God spoke to me in prayer." But how can you be sure what you heard was really God? Maybe it was your own desire. I actually had a man tell me not long ago that he and his outside girl friend prayed together before they got in bed to commit adultery. Maybe what you think is God's voice is just a bad case of indigestion! Maybe it is your subconscious needs asserting themselves. The only way I can know if God is speaking to me or leading me is to measure what I think is God against what I know is God, his Holy Word. God is consistent. God does not contradict himself. If what I hear in prayer is consistent with the Word and does not contradict what God said in the Bible, then I can believe God spoke to me. But I can't trust what I hear until I measure it against the word because I can't trust myself. I'll tell you truthfully, I do not know anyone who is living a God-controlled life who does not steep himself in Holy Scripture, in the Word of God. If we want to keep the fire hot, we have to feed on the Word of God.

I have people tell me about their feelings--they say something like, "I feel this is alright," or, "I don't feel this is really wrong." You can't trust feeling, but you can trust the Word of God. Do you have some question about how you spend your time or money or energy? Go to the Word and it will tell you. Do you wonder about your relationship to some person or maybe for you young people are you wondering about what you should or shouldn't do in relationship to a boy or girl friend? Go to the Bible and it will tell you. You can trust the word. Your feelings will mislead you but the Word never will.

The second step in living a God-controlled life is prayer. Show me a man who is not praying regularly and I will show you a man whose fire is going out. Some people think of prayer as a sort of spiritual "gimme" time. Making our requests known to God is a part of prayer, but it is much more than that. Prayer is saying "thank you." Prayer is praising God. Prayer is quietly and deliberately telling self to get off the throne of the heart so Jesus can sit there. It is letting the rivers of God flow through the soul to wash away the silt and dirt and trash. It is listening for the still, small voice. If we omit this step, our fire will go out.

The third step in living a God-controlled life is fellowship with other Christians. I certainly cannot live a Christian life by myself and neither can you. I need the

inspiration you can give me. As Bonhoeffer puts it, "The word of Christ in the mouth of my brother is stronger than the word in my heart." Therefore, I need you to speak God's word to me and you need me to speak His word to you. We need one another's support in time of temptation and failure, we need God's love and forgiveness made real in another person so that God comes to meet me in your face, in your hands, in your deeds. No, we cannot keep the fire hot unless we are fellowshiping with other Christians. Show me a man who is irregular in his fellowship with other Christians and I will show you a man over whom God is losing control.

The fourth step in living a God-controlled life is what Bill Bright, a Presbyterian who is the head of Campus Crusade, calls spiritual breathing. When you breathe, you exhale and you inhale. When you practice spiritual breathing, you exhale by confessing and you inhale by appropriating forgiveness. You exhale by confessing. You will not be perfect and there will come time after time when you will stumble and fall, when you will sin against God. By some deed that cannot be undone or some word that cannot be unsaid you will sin. If you are going to keep your spiritual fires burning you must confess that sin immediately. To leave a sin unconfessed is to throw water on the fire. Get that sin out of your spiritual lungs by exhaling in confession. And then inhale, appropriate God's forgiveness. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I Jn. 1:9) If you will confess, God will forgive-- it is as simple as that. So, we are practicing spiritual breathing when we are exhaling in confession of sin and inhaling in appropriating forgiveness. A fire, in order to keep on burning, must have a constantly renewed source of oxygen. By spiritual breathing we keep a fresh supply of God's Holy Oxygen flowing into the furnace room of the soul.

Finally, a fifth step in living a God-controlled life, in keeping the fire hot, is to share your faith. What happens to a fire if you isolate it and don't add fuel to it? By the same token, your fire will go out if it doesn't spread. When there is a forest fire, they cut what they call fire-breaks. If they can isolate the fire, they can keep it from spreading and it will go out. A fire that isn't spreading is a fire going out. Let me change the image from fire to water. To stay fresh and sweet water must flow, it must move. Water that is unmoving, that is trapped, that has no outlet becomes stale, brackish, covered with slime and eventually will not support life. For example, in the land of Jesus there are two seas, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee gives of itself, it flows out into the Jordan River and because it does, it is fresh and sweet and filled with fish. But the Dead Sea has no outlets. What it gets, it keeps. Because this is true, there is no life there and it is truly the Dead Sea. So with the Christian. If he is not sharing Jesus with others, he is a fire gone out, a Dead Sea.

I have a friend who is an alcoholic. Several years ago, after he had been a drunk for over 20 years, he came into a new relationship with God. He knew in a wonderful new way what it was to have the presence of the living Jesus, the "Here-and-Now God" in his heart. He got the fires of God burning in his heart and he kept pouring on the fuel! I wish you could have seen the "before" and the "after". With that fire in his breast he asked God to deliver him from the desire to drink and for the first time in many years, he knew what it was like to go through a day not only cold sober, but without even the desire to take a drink. Not only that, he became a dynamic witness for Jesus. Everywhere he went he wanted to share with others what God had done for him and I don't know anybody who was a more effective witness for Jesus than he was. The days, the weeks, the months, and even the years went by and he was still sober. Then, some months ago, disaster struck his family. His wife became ill and steadily grew worse. Surgery was required and the process of returning health was slow and discouraging. The burdens, both financial and

emotional, were tremendous. All of his problems combined to do their damage for they took their spiritual toll on my friend. He got drunk again. When it was all over and he was in the hospital trying to recover from the devastating effects, I visited with him, "My friend," I asked him, "what happened to you?" He looked off into space for a moment and then he turned, eyes brimming with tears, to look at me. He said sadly, "I got away from God. I didn't keep the fire hot."

Simply because he is and will always be an alcoholic, when my friend gets away from God it will be obvious. When you are drunk it is apparent to everybody. But for all of us, when we get away from God it might not be as obvious as getting drunk, but the tragic results in our lives will be just as disastrous. Dare I suggest this morning that many of us are letting the fires burn low? Dare I suggest that many of us are no longer living God-controlled lives? My friend has already asked Jesus to take over his heart and life again. He is already reading the word again, he is praying again, he is fellowshiping with other Christians again, he is practicing spiritual breathing again by confessing his sin and appropriating God's forgiveness and he is already sharing his faith again by letting me tell his story this morning. And, praise God, he is sober again. I invite you this morning to let the "Here-and-Now-God" take over the rulership of your life. Then you, too, will know the love, joy, peace, and patience that St. Paul talked about. You, too, will know what it is like to live a God-controlled life.