

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Being Holy in an Unholy World

“Clogged Channels”

Isaiah 63:9-10

I want to express a special word of “congratulations” to our high school and college graduates this morning.

I’m reminded on an occasion such as this of the words of a great general—**General Bob Knight**, Hall of Fame college basketball coach.

Now I know he’s not very popular here in Michigan or in most places but he did lead his teams to more wins than any other NCAA basketball coach in history.

Shortly after his 1976 Indiana University basketball team captured the National Championship—which, by the way, was the last team to go through the whole year and win the championship undefeated (I just thought I would throw that in!)—Bob Knight was asked by a news reporter, **“Why is it that your basketball teams at Indiana are always so successful? Is it the will to succeed?”**

Bob Knight answered like this: **“The will to succeed is important, but I’ll tell you what’s more important—it’s the will to prepare. It’s the will to go out there every day and train and build those muscles and sharpen those skills. Everybody, in some measure, has a will to succeed. The secret to success is in having a will to prepare.”**

We applaud all of our graduates. You have demonstrated that you have a “will to prepare.” And now you’ll move on to the next stage of your lives. So we pause today to recognize your achievements, to lift you up in our prayers, and to express to you the deep sense of pride we have for you in our hearts and in our minds.

As I was thinking about the message this morning and the great opportunity each graduate has to make a really powerful impact upon this world, one question kept floating to the surface of my mind.

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Here’s the question that just wouldn’t go away: **Well what is it this world needs more than anything else?** I’ve pondered that question again and again in my mind the past several days and I have an answer.

What this world needs more than anything else is Spirit-filled Christians. Let’s bring it a little closer to home and sharpen the focus. **What this church needs more than anything else is Spirit-filled Christians.**

Now before you begin to take me to task and say, **“Well what about world peace and what about justice and what about compassion and the well-being of all mankind?”** Let me just remind you of what the Bible says in **Romans 14:17**, **“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (New International Version).

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control” (Galatians 5:22-23 New International Version). **“So why’s the world in such a mess?”** you may wonder. **“Pastor Murphy, if there are supposedly 2.1 billion Christians in this world, if a third of the population is Christian, then where is all of this love and joy and peace and goodness?”**

Here’s the problem. There are a lot of people in this world who are “Christian” in name, who profess to be Christian, but who are anything and everything but “filled” with God’s Spirit.

Listen to what **Dr. Billy Graham** says. If ever there has been a prophet in our day, it has been Billy Graham. He has traveled around the world preaching the gospel. He has been a counselor to kings and presidents and prime ministers. He has preached to more than 214 million people in 185 countries.

If anyone has an accurate reading on the spiritual condition of the Christian Church around the world, it has to be Billy Graham. Listen to what he says. I’m quoting him word for word.

The very fact that some of us believe one thing and some another does not do away with the fact that God says, “Be ye filled with the

Holy Spirit.” I believe this is the greatest need of the church of Jesus Christ today.

Everywhere I go I find that God’s people lack something. God’s people are hungry for something; God’s people are thirsting for something. I find among professing Christians a great need and lack, a feeling of insecurity, and defeat in their Christian lives.

The church today is powerless. We are gathering for our prayer meetings, church services and Sunday School conventions. Christians meet; Bible classes are conducted; Bible schools are carried on, but we have no power because we do not have the Spirit of God in power and in fullness, in our lives. The Bible says, “Be ye filled with the Spirit.”

And so as I peer into the future and think about our graduates and think about our young people and think about the future of this church and the Church, I’m brought face-to-face with this crucial truth: **What this world needs, what this church needs, more than anything else is Spirit-filled Christians.**

Now that brings me to a second question I have wrestled with these past few days. **If this is true, if the church today is truly powerless, as a whole; if we do not have Spirit of God in power and in fullness in our lives; if Spirit-filled people are the church’s greatest need; what’s the problem? What blocks the flow of God’s Spirit in our lives and in our churches?**

God said to the members of the early church, “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you*” (Acts 1:8 New International Version). That is one of the most precious and encouraging promises in all of Scripture. But if there is a lack of power in our lives then that means something is blocking the flow of God’s Spirit in our lives and that’s what I want to talk about this morning – **the things that block the flow of God’s Spirit in our lives.**

I’ve entitled this sermon, ***Clogged Channels***. God wants to pour His Holy Spirit in and through our lives. In fact, some song writer picked up on this theme and wrote a song entitled “*Channels Only*.” *Are you familiar with it?* It goes something like this:

How I praise Thee, Precious Savior,
That Thy love laid hold of me;
Thou hast saved and cleansed and filled me
That I might Thy channel be.

Channels only, blessed Master,
But with all Thy wondrous power
Flowing through us, Thou canst use us
Every day and every hour.

But sometimes the channel gets clogged, the flow of God’s Spirit gets blocked and all of that wondrous power—power for God to really use us and bless us in a marvelous and meaningful way—ceases to surge in and through our lives.

Paul described it like this: “*Having a form of godliness, but denying its power*” (2nd Timothy 3:5 New International Version). *Have you ever known anyone like that?* They look like a Christian. They talk like a Christian. They know all of the lingo and the language. They have all of the rites and the rituals down pat. They talk a good game but when push comes to shove there is just nothing there when it comes to the fruit of the Spirit. *Love? Joy? Peace? Patience? Kindness? Goodness? Faithfulness? Gentleness? Self control?* Forget it! Clogged channels!

Oswald Chambers has said it like this: “*There is one thing we cannot imitate; we cannot imitate being full of the Holy Ghost.*”

So what are those things that block the flow of God’s Spirit in our lives? What are those things that grieve the Holy Spirit and limit His power and His presence in our lives?

You’ll find the answer in the book of **Psalms**, the **78th chapter**. But before you turn there, I want you to turn first to the book of **Isaiah** and carefully contemplate two brief verses of Scripture – **Isaiah**, the **63rd chapter**, verses **9 and 10**.

The prophet Isaiah is talking about the nation of Israel in these verses, God’s people, His beloved. This is what he says, “*In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of*

old. Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and

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became their enemy and he himself fought against them” (New International Version).

Can you think of anything worse than having almighty God fighting against you? What did the people of God do to cause this? They grieved the Holy Spirit. That’s an old fashioned sounding word. I know that. But the definition is simple. To grieve simply means “to break the heart of” or “to hurt” or “harm” someone.

In this case, the Israelites, the people of God, broke the heart of, they hurt, they harmed, the Holy Spirit. So much so that God quit working for them and began working against them. *But what did they do that so grieved the Spirit of God?*

The answer is found in **Psalm 78**. Psalm 78 is kind of like a brief synopsis of Israel’s history and it documents the actions that caused God to sorrow over and fight against Israel. It points out specifically four things that grieved God and cause Him to withdraw His Spirit from Israel...and they are the very same things that grieve God’s Holy Spirit today—that block the flow of His Spirit and His power in our lives.

Forgetting God, Grumbling, Disobedience and Disbelief! Let’s take a quick look at them one-by-one.

Forgetting God. Look at **verse 11**. *“They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them”* (New International Version). And then it goes to list a number of miracles God had performed on behalf of Israel.

God freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt; He parted the Red Sea so they might find safety when Pharaoh and his army pursued them and thought he had them trapped; He guided them through the wilderness with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night; He provided food for them when they were hungry and water when they were thirsty.

He performed miracle after miracle after miracle. And, yet, the Bible says here in **verse 32**, *“In spite of all this, they kept on sinning”* (New

International Version).

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In another place in Scripture as God reflects upon His relationship with Israel, His people, He laments, *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you”* (Isaiah 49:15 New International Version).

But as for Israel, He says, *“You deserted the Rock, who fathered you; you forgot the God who gave you birth”* (Deuteronomy 32:18 New International Version).

Now it wasn’t that their minds were wiped clean of the knowledge and existence of God. It was all there in the hard drive of their minds. What the psalmist means when he says, *“They forgot what he had done,”* is that they began to take for granted the mercies and the miracles of God.

They just assumed that they had earned and deserved all of the wonderful things that had come pouring into their lives. They lost that sense of awe and wonder of the marvelous and manifold works of God. They allowed the sacred to become profane, the extraordinary to be dismissed as ordinary, and the special interventions of God totally overlooked and disregarded as just a part of normal life.

Someone sent me an email this week. The first line said, *“Read this today and don’t delete it if you are too busy. You’ll see why.”* Now normally my first reaction would be to automatically delete it. I’m not much for these modern-day chain letters. But for some reason I didn’t delete it and I went ahead and read it. Here’s what it said.

A young and successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar. He was watching for kids darting out between parked cars when suddenly he saw something out of the corner of his eye.

He slowed down thinking it was probably a kid about to run carelessly out into the street, but it wasn’t a kid. It was a brick that someone had thrown and it came crashing into the front door of his brand new Jaguar.

He slammed on his brakes, jumped out of his Jaguar, and saw a kid crouched between two parked cars. He grabbed him around the neck, pushed him up against the parked car, and hollered,

“What’s a matter with you, kid? That’s a brand new Jaguar. That just did

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hundreds of dollars of damage. Man, you’re going to pay and pay big.”

And he clenched his fist to hit him, but the boy cried out, “Please, mister, don’t hit me. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what else to do. I threw the brick because no one would stop and help me.” And he pointed back to the curb and there sprawled on the ground was a little boy all bruised and bloody and a wheelchair.

He said, “My little brother fell out of his wheelchair and I can’t lift him up. Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He’s hurt and he’s too heavy for me to lift him up.”

Well, he wasn’t hurt all that bad—just a few scrapes and bruises. The man lifted the boy into the chair, dabbed away the blood with his handkerchief, and carefully sent them on their way. As he walked back to his Jaguar with a big lump in his throat suddenly the damage didn’t look all that bad.

In fact, he never had it fixed. It wasn’t all that big and he kept it there to remind himself: “Don’t go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention!”

Graduates, young people, old people, everyone... **don’t go through life so fast that God has to throw a brick at you to get your attention.** God whispers in our souls and speaks. He does marvelous things in our lives. He intervenes. But we push Him to the periphery and go about life as though all of these good and wonderful things are just common and routine.

Oh, I plead with you, place God at the very center of your lives. Recognize His blessings. Worship Him. Serve Him. Lift Him up and praise Him every day. Don’t take the miracles in your life for granted—receive them with gratitude.

They forgot God. They also...

Grumbled. Look at **verse 19.** “*They spoke against God*” (New

International Version). They complained. They whined. They were never quite satisfied with what God had done for them. No matter what He did it was never quite good enough.

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He gave them “bread” from heaven—manna—as they made their way through the desert. They didn’t have to plant it. They didn’t have to harvest it. They didn’t have to pick it and pluck it and thresh it. All they had to do was go out every day and gather it up. But they got sick of it and said, “*Isn’t there any meat? Isn’t there any variety? What’s bread without meat?*”

And so God sent them meat. Coveys of quail came flocking into their midst and they had meat to eat. So much meat that they got full and sick of it and they began to complain about something else.

God let them see into the Promised Land. He let them have a little foretaste of what He had prepared for them. It was a land flowing with milk and honey. They brought a cluster of grapes and it was large that it took two grown men to carry that one cluster of grapes. But instead of being grateful for what God had in store for them all they could do was grumble about the size of the people and the challenge before them.

You know usually when we think about damaging and destructive sins, we don’t think about grumbling, whining, complaining but if there was anything that grieved the Spirit of God and blocked His work as the Israelites made their way through the desert...it was this spirit of murmuring. In fact, God said to Moses, “*How long will this wicked community grumble against me?*” (Numbers 14:27 New International Version).

I’ve been a pastor and have been working with pastors for 35 years. I don’t know of anything that discourages pastors more and drains their energy and their hope and their passion and limits their work—the work of God—than does a constant spirit of grumbling.

It’s a destructive and dangerous thing. Just ask the Israelites. Someone has said it like this: “*Grumbling is the death of love.*” It grieves the Spirit of God and blocks the flow of His work in our lives. When the apostle **Paul** writes to the church at Ephesus, “*Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God*” (Ephesians 4:30 New International Version), do you remember what he

was talking about? Unwholesome talk!

He writes, *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to*

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their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29 New International Version). And it is in that very next verse that he warns us to grieve not the Holy Spirit of God.

They forgot God. They grumbled. Third...they disobeyed.

Disobedience. Look at **verse 10.** *“They did not keep God’s covenant and refused to live by his law”* (New International Version). **Verse 57** – *“Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless, as unreliable as a faulty bow”* (New International Version). **Verse 41** – *“Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel”* (New International Version).

Nothing can so block the flow of God’s Spirit in your life and hinder His will than can disobedience. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** once wrote, *“One act of obedience is better than a hundred sermons.”*

Someone else has said it like this: *“The evidence of saving faith is not how much you believe but how well you behave.”* Christ’s sheep are marked in the ear and the foot—they hear his voice and they follow Him.

But if you keep saying *“No”* to God’s Spirit in your life; if you keep ignoring Him whenever He pricks your conscience or whispers in your ear or taps you on the shoulder; you’ll grieve him and clog the channel of the Spirit’s flow and work in your life and render yourself spiritually powerless.

There’s one other thing mentioned here in **Psalm 78** that grieves the Holy Spirit.

Disbelief. Look at **verse 22.** *“For they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance”* (New International Version). **Verse 32** – *“In spite of his wonders, they did not believe”* (New International Version). **Verse 42** – *“They did not remember his power”* (New International Version).

The Bible says it so clearly in **Hebrews 11**, the great “Faith Chapter,” *“Without faith it is impossible to please God”* (Hebrews 11:6 New International Version).

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Elisabeth Elliot, whose husband was the brave and courageous missionary **Jim Elliot** who gave his life to bring the gospel to the Auca Indians, once put it like this: *“You will never understand why God does what he does, but if you believe him, that is all that is necessary. Let us learn to trust him for who he is.”*

Ten times God is described in **Psalm 78** as being *angry, grieved, or vexed*. Disturbed by their lack of faith, God cries out in another place, *“How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?”* (Numbers 14:11 New International Version).

Here is my prayer for you...and here is the key, I believe, to living a Spirit-filled life.

Put God at the very center of your life. **Remember Him** every day. As you get up in the morning take time to think of Him and praise Him and lift Him up. Let that set the pattern for your day.

Rejoice in the Lord always. *“I will say it again: Rejoice!... Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things”* (Philippians 4:4,8 New International Version). *“Encourage one another and build each other up”* (1st Thessalonians 5:11 New International Version).

Obeys the promptings of the Spirit. Obedience in little things is a big thing with God.

Trust Him. Even when you can’t track Him, trust Him. God is *“able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us”* (Ephesians 3:20 New International Version)

