

10th August 2025, Reflection – The Creed (9): ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit’

I wonder if you’ve ever had the experience of watching the news with children and seeing some piece of bad news – and the kids ask you ‘why do people do that?’ – and it’s hard to answer, and you find yourself saying: ‘well, that’s just the way the world is.’ You’ve probably asked yourself the same question many times, too – ‘why do people do that?’ ‘Well, that’s just the way the world is...’

The more we understand the world, the more we see that the world is governed by fundamental laws. I’m not talking about legal laws, but insights which describe the way things really work: in science, the law of gravity, or Newton’s laws of motion; in politics, at election time: ‘it’s the economy, stupid’; in fashion, ‘red and green should never be seen with nothing in between’. Wise words.

But across all human society, there’s an even more fundamental law at work. Human beings are essentially selfish. It’s wired into us from birth – babies automatically do what they need to do for their own survival, which is to cry when they need something: a baby’s cry is pitched at just the right level of volume and urgency to get their parents’ attention, so they can be fed, or changed.

And the power of the will kicks in remarkably early. Even by a year old, if you tell a child ‘no’, they’ll want to do the opposite. One word you never have to teach a toddler is ‘mine’! Let alone adults...

The bible has a little word to describe this fundamental human condition, and that is sin. And left unchecked, this innate tendency always kicks in. People prioritise themselves – their needs, their advantage. We might cover over much of this impulse with forms of social convention, or by building levels of comfort around us where our interests aren’t threatened. But it’s there, under the surface – watch what happens when two lanes on a road merge into one, or when a product runs short in the shops – and any healthy assessment of human behaviour might as well admit that right at the start.

All of which begs the million-dollar question: How does a person become good? This fundamental question has been exercising humanity since time began. We are moral beings; we understand concepts of goodness and badness, we know that some lives are better than others, and some actions are better than others. But *knowing* something is one thing: *doing* it is a different matter!

Many huge brains have thought long and hard about this, and many societies have orchestrated elaborate schemes to engineer it. But it basically comes down to one of two options: either you try really hard to be good yourself, or someone else forces you instead (usually through a system of compliance and punishment – we start with the naughty step and work up from there!). It helps if you have a clear and detailed understanding of what it means to be good – and this is actually harder than it sounds at present, that’s a massive problem in our post-truth culture. But assuming you know roughly what you *should* be doing, the usual ‘answer’ to being good is all about human effort – either self-motivated, or enforced by others.

But what if that doesn’t actually work? What if this whole endeavour is ultimately bound to fail? What if even the most perfect law can’t make people good? What then?

This was God’s dilemma with Israel. He’d rescued them, given them a comprehensive set of laws to live by, raised up leaders when needed, given them umpteen second chances, intervened miraculously, even in response at short-lived attempts to change – by the time of Ezekiel, you’re essentially looking at a 700-year social experiment: 700 years of trying, and the basic problem was the same. God’s people either couldn’t, or wouldn’t, do the right things consistently. And let’s remember, that the bible insists that this is not the fault of a particular nation: it is the human condition. Hard as we try, no-one can be good all the time. And even those we call ‘good people’ are often driven by decidedly mixed motives.

It is *this* dilemma which underpins both of our passages for today. Ezekiel is a great prophetic declaration of what God is going to do to sort out this fundamental issue. It’s abundantly clear by the

5th-century BC that **no law, however perfect or complete, is going to make people good**. Look at the way God repeats the word 'profaned' in the first part of our passage. It's not just that God's people have failed to do good and be good – it is that, in doing so, this dishonours (profanes) God's name.

There's nothing wrong with God's law, by the way. The problem isn't a faulty set of instructions – but what these instructions do is highlight the faulty operating system. It's why Paul also says 'the letter kills' – the letter here is the Law; and what the Law did, and does, is highlight how much we fail to live it – the consequences of which are separation from God. Hence the letter, which was meant to bring abundant life in union with God, actually brings spiritual death instead. The letter kills because the problem isn't the law, it's us who can't obey it. Or, to put it another way, it is what's *inside* us. If this isn't right, then our actions (even our 'good' ones) won't be either. **We need heart surgery – we need what's inside here fixed.** After 700 years of failure, a totally new solution is needed.

So, how does God fix it? Fundamentally, he has to do it himself. He has to intervene directly, in person. As God says a couple of chapters earlier in Ezekiel, 'I will come and shepherd the flock myself.' Now at this point, I'm going to skip the vital next step, which is Jesus coming, dying and rising again. We've looked at that in detail over the last few weeks, and that will always remain at the heart of our faith. But, once that's happened, once God has come in the person of Jesus, has defeated sin and death, and has opened the way for a new and universal way for humanity to access, not just forgiveness but all the resources and blessings of God – what happens next?

This is where the Spirit comes in. **The glorified, ascended Jesus is now able to pour out his very self in the form of his Spirit, to be with us and change us from the inside out.** This is exactly what Ezekiel prophesies in the 5th-century BC: 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful keep my laws.' We can't reform ourselves, we can't make ourselves good – but now there is the promise of a new power at work, something beyond our own resources. God comes himself and gives us the gift of his Spirit – the Spirit which has the power to enable us to love and obey God, just as we were always designed to do.

This is what is poured out by Jesus at Pentecost, and this is what Paul testifies as happening in his letter to Corinth. Ezekiel's prophecy has come true! This testimony is 'written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.' (See the way he picks up the language of Ezekiel.) **It is the Spirit that gives us life, and finally allows us to answer that million-dollar question: it is God's Spirit that enables us to change, to be good and do good.** We'll still fall short in this life – none of us get to perfection this side of the grave – but we *do* change. If we keep opening our hearts to God, we do find ourselves becoming more loving, more kind, more generous, more peaceful, and so on. Ask someone else who knows you – you might be surprised!

But let's never forget where this power comes from. 'Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.' We never allow ourselves to believe the lie that it's all about *our* effort, *our* achievements – **we live by grace, and humility.**

But if it is humble, it is glorious, too. The Spirit brings freedom, and also transformation. What a verse the last one is: 'And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.' We become what we behold – the more we gaze on Jesus, empowered by the Spirit, the more we become like him. It reminds us that to live in the power of the Spirit is not just about obedience or living the right kind of life, it is about living in the abiding presence of Christ. It is not just empowered religion, it is intimate relationship. The Holy Spirit is not just a doctrine but a *lived reality*. Today, I've consciously not gone into detail, but set out the big picture. And if you've never given the Holy Spirit serious attention, my counsel to you all is to make that your top priority. The Spirit who draws into God's presence, who enables us to live the life that God designed for us, who transforms us to become what we behold – with ever increasing glory. I believe in the Holy Spirit. Amen.