

“The Spirit Now Given”
John 7:37-39
(Ezekiel 36:25-27; 1 John 2:26-27)

Introduction

We have noted in the past that, while the church of Jesus Christ makes special effort to prepare for the celebrations of Christmas and Easter, there is no such season of preparation for the celebration of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit of God was poured out upon his people. This, of course, is because Pentecost comes as the culmination of Eastertide. However, we must remember that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, the work of Christ does nothing for us. We are left with a lovely story from two thousand years ago that is powerless to accomplish *in us* what Christ has done *for us*.

This may help explain the state of the church throughout much of its history. For example, we have many large churches today with lots of activity, but filled with people who have the same hopes and dreams, the same culturally-shaped ambitions and aspirations, as non-Christian Americans, and who likely have little sense of the presence and majesty of a holy God. Truth be told, we may spend little time seeking his desires for our lives, mortifying patterns of spiritual laziness, selfishness and outright disobedience, and learning to love God and others from the heart.

And this is what we should expect if we simply live by our own wits, our own natural power and strength. Any attempt to mortify sin, to live with an awareness of God’s presence, to seek his kingdom and righteousness, that is done in our own strength is doomed to end either in legalism or in spiritual depression, or possibly in both. This is why, between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus told his disciples to wait for the promise of the Father: the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

But that raises a crucial question: how could the Lord promise the Holy Spirit when the Spirit was already present and active among his people? The Spirit is first spoken of in the second verse of the Bible: “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit was active in the lives of the prophets and leaders of Israel. David prayed, after he had sinned so terribly with Bathsheba, “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11). Isaiah wrote of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the midst of Israel and of Israel grieving the Spirit by her rebellion against God (Isaiah 63:10,11). The Gospel according to Luke opens with the parents of John the Baptist, Zechariah and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, with Jesus’ mother, Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, and with John the Baptist filled with the Spirit from birth.

In the light of such overwhelming evidence, how could the Spirit be spoken of as “promised”? How could Jesus tell his disciples to wait for the Spirit to be poured out? And how could John say in our text, “Now this he said about the Spirit, whom

those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given” (John 7:39)?

In order to answer that question, we must understand that the greatest gift given to the child of God is nothing less than the life of God. This morning, I want to remind you of the treasure we have been given in salvation by reminding you of several popularly held, partially true but incomplete, descriptions of the gospel. Then, I will try to describe the gospel in its fullness and glory.

Body

1. Salvation is forgiveness of sins. We remain broken people who sin, but at least we are forgiven sinners.

It is true that the gospel offers forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is entirely of grace, and is received through faith alone. Nothing that we do can contribute in any way to the grace of forgiveness, made possible only because of the perfection of Jesus’ life offered in place of ours. The moment we are saved, we are forgiven forever.

It is also true that we remain sinners, that we continue to sin, and shall continue to sin until we stand at last before our Lord, and he at last makes us perfect, not only in our standing before him, but in actual fact.

This is the extent of many Christian’s understanding of the gospel. It is all true, but woefully incomplete.

2. Salvation is not only forgiveness, but includes the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

This is a crucial fact. Apart from some understanding of this, we have no idea why God could not simply forgive us without sending his Son to die in our place. The righteous requirements of God’s law had to be satisfied. The penalty had to be paid, or God could not forgive us and remain just and righteous. It is, in other words, this imputed righteousness that alone enables God to forgive sinners without himself becoming an accomplice, implicated in our sin and rebellion by the act of forgiving and setting free those who have broken his law and rebelled against him.

And he does not simply pay our debt and leave us broke. He credits the riches of his righteousness to our account. All of this also is gloriously true, and for many of us who stand in the noble reformation heritage, this is the fullness of truth. Here the soul rests, and nothing more is sought.

This is, indeed, the souls resting place; however, God has more, so much more that depends upon this great bedrock fact and flows from it, but that takes us out of the realm of merely contemplating what God has done for us, and invites us into the living experience of what God wants to do in us. We must always build on the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us. But, we must build. A foundation is not a building.

- 3. Salvation is more than imputation and forgiveness. God has not only done something for us, but has done something in us as well. He has given us his Spirit: the same Spirit who came upon Jesus at his baptism, and in whose power Jesus lived and ministered. In other words, the very same power that was available to Jesus in his life and ministry is available to us here and now.**

This takes our understanding of the gospel beyond the merely legal concept of sin and guilt, forgiveness and justification, and brings us into a living experience of the life of this God who loved us so much that he gave his Son for us, to save us from sin and death, and make us his adopted children.

This, in fact, was my understanding of the fullness of the doctrine for many, many years: Jesus poured out at Pentecost the same Spirit in the same sense that had empowered him throughout his ministry. This in itself is far more glorious than many Christians really believe or contemplate. Just think of having available the same power for living and loving and ministering that Jesus himself had. The very lowest understanding of the Spirit's work must lead one at least to acknowledge this.

However, God has done something even greater than this, and when this greater thing is grasped, it begins to make clear certain Scriptures that are otherwise difficult to understand. Well, then, what is it?

- 4. Salvation is all of this, and something gloriously more, and here is the key to understanding in what sense John could say of the Holy Spirit that he had not yet been given: Salvation includes the very power, not of the Son of God in his humiliation and earthly ministry when his glory was set aside, but of the risen, ascended and glorified Christ who is seated at his Father's right hand in power and glory.**

It is in this sense that John could write, "as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:39). Jesus had to accomplish redemption, break the power of Satan and his rebellion, kick down death's doors from the inside, make a way for us to be fully forgiven and justified, and then resume his seat at the right hand of the Father, now as the risen conquering Son who has triumphed over everything that would separate us from the love of God.

What I am saying is this: Jesus has given us far more than he himself was given at his baptism. The Spirit was poured out upon him as he had been poured out upon the Old Testament saints, upon Abraham and the patriarchs, upon Moses and the prophets, upon David and the righteous kings of Israel, upon Zechariah and Elizabeth, and upon Mary and John the Baptist.

This is exactly the point where most of us make our mistake – as I said, I missed this for many years, and spoke of the new age dawning at the outset of Jesus’ ministry, when the Spirit descended on him. But this was the culmination of the old age. He was fulfilling it, living the old covenant perfectly, so that he could open the way to a glorious and new covenant, and could pour out his Spirit with all of the power and authority of the One who had conquered sin and death.

5. How did the writers of Scripture know these things? How could they know that Christ was declared King of kings in the heavenly realms, and that he took his seat in majesty at the Father’s right hand?

The testimony is uniform, whether reading John or Paul, or Luke quoting Simon Peter. Each says what Jesus himself had said: the witnesses are two: There are the human witnesses, the apostles who witnessed Jesus’ ministry and his death, and who saw him raised from the dead and ascending from this world. The second is the Holy Spirit, who witnessed the return of Jesus in power and glory to the majesty in heaven. It is he who bears witness to the church. [Read John 15:26,27 and Acts 5:30].

It is, therefore, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the church that assures us that Christ is enthroned in heaven, and that we are accepted in the Father’s presence because of him.

Conclusion

But what are we to make of this as we return to work, as we try to live here on earth’s dust, a place of love and betrayal, of joy and sorrow? What does this mean, what should it mean to us this morning?

It means, first, that Paul was not merely speaking of our position or standing in Christ when he wrote to the church at Ephesus, “And [God] raised us up with [Christ] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6). Paul is speaking of actual fact, and what ought increasingly to be our experience, our point of reference. If I am a member of Christ’s body, and the head of that body is in heaven seated at the Father’s side, then I am seated there also.

For example, if I am swimming and my head is out of the water, I can breathe. I don’t need any other part of my body out of water to breathe feely, only my head. If my

head is in the throne room of God, and I am learning to live connected to the head, then I am breathing the very air of heaven. And, of course, in both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New, Spirit and air and breath are all the same word.

It means secondly, that we should be astonished and appalled at the state of the Church, and at the state of most of our lives. God has given us nothing less than the presence and power of the risen, conquering Christ, and most of us live such distracted, anxious, faithless and powerless lives.

Finally, it should give us incredible hope and confidence in approaching God and asking for a greater experience of the reality of what he has already given, the grace of forgiveness and the glory of his presence and power.

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