

Pentecost: Walking by the Spirit

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[0:00] Amen.

Amen. That's okay. So, nearly 2,000 years ago, the Holy Spirit fell on the church on the day of Pentecost, and the world has never been the same again.

And it never will be the same again. Isn't that incredible? This is a cause to celebrate. This is a cause for great joy. We so often celebrate holidays, of course, by exchanging gifts, right?

It's really puzzling to me that we don't have a culture of doing so on Pentecost Sunday, right?

Because if today has a theme, it is this. It is gift-giving, isn't it?

Yes. And it's an amazing gift, because the gift of the Holy Spirit is not some dry abstraction. It's not simply something that happened a long time ago.

[1:31] It is a living reality in the church and in the heart of every believer. And it's still going on today. And it will go on until that day when the final trumpet sounds and Jesus returns.

Now, what is the place of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life? That's an essential question, isn't it? And I think it's one that is too underemphasized in the contemporary church, at least here in the West.

I can't help but think that the contemporary church in the West has become largely ineffective in our mission because we have so underemphasized the work of the Holy Spirit.

Why have we done that? I think there are a few reasons. One of them is that we have a tendency to think of the Holy Spirit in the wrong way. As the Scriptures and the creeds tell us, the Holy Spirit is God.

And the Holy Spirit is not an it, but a he. The Holy Spirit is a person. And because he is a person, we are supposed to have a living, vibrant, personal relationship with him.

[2:46] In other words, the Holy Spirit isn't the force. The Holy Spirit is the comforter. My comforter.

It's the day-to-day reality of the Christian life. It's not all thrills and fun. Indeed, walking by the Spirit is often challenging. And the work that the Spirit is doing in my heart and in your heart isn't even always immediately obvious to us.

So, how do we walk by the Spirit? And what does the Spirit do in the Christian life? What I want us to think about this morning as we look at our text from John chapter 14.

What we will find, I think, is that the Holy Spirit is intimately connected to and essential to every aspect of the Christian life from beginning to end.

So, let's look at our text. As Bishop Julian is fond of saying, he'll probably say this to us when he's with us in a couple weeks.

[4:18] Bibles are much better open than closed. So, if you would, please open your Bibles and look with me in John chapter 14. So, in terms of the promise Jesus gives concerning the Holy Spirit, we'll actually be working backwards through our text today.

Because I want us to look at the role of the Holy Spirit from the beginning of the Christian life to the end. So, let's start with the beginning of the Christian life.

I think that we'll find that without the Holy Spirit, there is no beginning of the Christian life. Of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says this in verse 17.

You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. When we think of the role of the Spirit in the Christian life, we have to start here.

We know the Holy Spirit because He is in us. Now, at first glance, that might sound puzzling to us. Maybe we think of that as putting the cart before the horse. But it's clear from our text that it isn't that the Holy Spirit dwells in us because we know Him.

[5:36] It's that we know Him because He dwells in us. And that's confirmed in other portions of Scripture. In John chapter 6, Jesus says, Except in the Holy Spirit.

No one can confess Jesus is Lord without the gift of the Holy Spirit. That means that if you have faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit already dwells in you, or you wouldn't have faith in Jesus. You would not have faith in His blood shed for you. When you heard the Gospel and you believed it, you believed it because the Holy Spirit worked faith in Christ in your heart. That has a couple of clear applications for us.

First, we realize that if we are believers, it is because of the work of the Holy Spirit in us, and has been from even before we confessed Jesus as Lord.

How do we know? Well, because we wouldn't have confessed Jesus as Lord if God had not given us the Holy Spirit to awaken faith in Christ in our hearts.

[7:15] It wasn't as if you and I just one day made the spontaneous decision to follow Jesus. No, the Holy Spirit came into our hearts, revealed the beauty of Christ to us, and drew us to salvation in Jesus.

It's no wonder that the Anglican priest and theologian J.I. Packer once said that the Holy Spirit is God the evangelist. That has applications for evangelism, doesn't it?

It has implications. I do believe that for some reason that is in many ways unfathomable to me, the Holy Spirit has chosen to work through my thoroughly imperfect ministry to draw people to faith in Christ.

But I have never converted anyone, and neither have you. Even if God has worked through your sharing of the gospel to bring someone to faith in Jesus. You and I may have been used for the occasion, but it's the Holy Spirit that did the work and changed the hearts.

And that doesn't cause me to want to be complacent in the work of gospel proclamation and evangelism. In fact, it's quite the opposite. God has promised that through the proclamation of the gospel, chains will fall off and people will be saved.

[8:36] Not because you or I are incredibly charismatic personalities and persuasive, but because the Holy Spirit is at work changing hearts and revealing Christ.

Isn't that awesome? Let's move on. In the Christian life, the Holy Spirit is our helper, and He is a helper who will never forsake us.

In our text, verse 16, we read this. Jesus says, I will ask the Father, and He will give you another helper to be with you forever. In our text, what is rendered helper might also be rendered advocate or counselor.

In other words, as Christians, we have a helper who is God Himself dwelling in us. Take a second to let that sink in. Man. We have one who has taken up our case, who is on our side, and this God who is on our side isn't just somewhere up there.

He lives in us. That is such a comfort. Because life is so often difficult. The Christian life particularly so.

[9:54] I think about the things people face on a daily basis. Things like grief, loss, stress, anxiety, pain, suffering.

I could go on, but you probably don't want me to. I think we all get the point. Life is hard. We often feel weak and inadequate to face it. And we feel perplexed because we don't know what to do or even how to pray.

But the Spirit helps us. The Spirit comforts us. The Spirit reassures us. As Paul says in Romans 8, You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry, Abba, Father.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children, then heirs. Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

When we are afraid, when we are tempted to shrink back, the Spirit dwelling in us reminds us, You are a beloved child and heir of God, and you have been purchased by the blood of Christ.

[11:24] And that's not all. Paul goes on to say, The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Have you ever felt so overwhelmed that you didn't even know how to pray?

Anyone been there? I have. You know, I think of examples in my own life, and I remember when I was a young seminarian preparing for ministry, I developed rheumatoid arthritis, which is a really nasty disease that basically involves your body trying to destroy itself.

Almost overnight, I went from being self-confident and capable and athletic to being practically unable to walk and unable to get off the couch. I was running unexplained fevers with flu-like symptoms on a daily basis, and for months, I didn't even know what was causing it.

I didn't know what would happen. I had to take a break from my studies. I didn't know what my future would hold. I felt convinced that God had called me into ministry.

[12:54] But for every practical purpose, the future of that calling seemed uncertain and maybe even almost impossible by human wisdom.

I didn't know how to pray in that situation. But you know what? The Holy Spirit dwelling in me sure did. As a believer, I had God Himself dwelling in me, comforting me, advocating for me, praying perfectly for me when I didn't know how to pray for myself.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Holy Spirit got me through that. It was one of the most trying times of my whole life up to this point.

I certainly could not have gotten myself through it. And the Holy Spirit didn't do it through a miraculous or flashy or obvious healing, although He does sometimes choose to work that way.

I will say that I'm certain that it's God's providence that caused my disease to be treatable. It's manageable today. It doesn't keep me from doing ministry, but I still have it.

[14:08] But I didn't receive a miraculous healing. But you know what? I didn't need one. I had the Holy Spirit dwelling in me, groaning for me, praying for me, advocating for me, comforting me.

And you know what? That was more than enough. And whatever you are facing, that is more than enough for you too.

I promise, and more importantly, God's Word promises you that this is so. You are never alone. I will say it again because you need to hear it.

You are never alone. The Holy Spirit is your helper. Praise God. In the Christian life, the Holy Spirit is our helper.

In one sense, I could stop now. Maybe some of you are hoping that I will, because we have already heard a lot of good news from the Scriptures.

[15:18] But I want to hit another point for us to consider this Pentecost Sunday. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit in us that we become holy and Christ-like.

In our text from John 14, verse 15, Jesus says, If you love me, you will keep my commandments. It's no accident that this verse is where it is in the text, connected to the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Because without the Holy Spirit, obedience to God is impossible for us. I would be too frail and broken to do it on my own, and so would you. So it's important that we understand this rightly.

Jesus is not saying that if we obey Him, then and only then, we will be given the Holy Spirit. If that were the case, no one would ever have the Holy Spirit.

And Jesus is not saying that salvation is by our works. Our salvation is by the work of Jesus, His perfect life, and His atoning death.

[16:29] But what Jesus is saying is that knowing Him and loving Him, which as we've already noticed, cannot be done without the work of the Holy Spirit, will lead us to want to live in obedience to Him.

We will grow in godliness if we know and if we love Jesus. And it's not through working harder so as to pull up ourselves by our own bootstraps, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

This aspect of the Spirit's work in us, I think, is probably the most neglected aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit in the contemporary church. At least, again, here in the West.

I'm not convinced that's true everywhere. We too easily bristle at the thought of pursuing godliness and obedience to God, don't we?

It's easy to understand why that's a temptation. We want to be our own bosses and we really like comfort. Walking by the Spirit is not comfortable and never will be.

[17:36] As if I needed to remind you of that fact. It's not convenient. Going back to J.I. Packer, who I think has written a lot of helpful things about the Holy Spirit, he gives us this valuable insight on this aspect of the Spirit's work in us.

He says, the Holy Spirit's main ministry is not to give thrills, but to create in us Christ-like character. Does that sound dull?

It is anything but that. For one thing, if we love Christ, the idea of becoming more like Him, a gift that we receive through the Spirit's work in us should delight our hearts.

God's Spirit-empowered calling to us is to become like the one that we love. How great is that? The next thing is that this call to grow in obedience and godliness is a call to battle.

It is anything but dull. It is, as our baptismal service puts it, nothing less than the call to fight bravely under Christ's banner against the world, the flesh, and the devil and to continue as His faithful soldiers and servants to the end of our days.

[19:07] Maybe not comfortable, but it is certainly not dull either. as I move towards closing, now that we've looked at what the Spirit does, let's think about how we grow in our walk with the Spirit.

I will tell you that it's not ordinarily through running off to live in a cave where we have mystical experiences all day long. It's not primarily through things that we would necessarily consider extraordinary at all.

It's through that basic stuff of Christian discipleship, particularly through what we would call the ordinary means of grace, word, sacrament, and prayer, which should lead us to ask, what are we doing with our time and our daily lives?

We're talking about walking by the Spirit. That is a very important question. When we go, so when we go to take a book off the shelf, and we grab our Bibles, instead of grabbing the Da Vinci Code, or whatever else we might be grabbing, trusting that God will work through the Holy Spirit to apply His Word to our hearts, when we do that, sit down to read our Bibles, we are learning to walk by the Spirit.

when we take time out of our busy days to be deliberate in prayer, we are learning to walk by the Spirit. When we wake up tired on Sunday morning and we choose to go to church, to hear the Gospel preached, to gather around the table for Holy Communion, we are learning to walk by the Spirit.

[20:54] When we seek with God's help to turn from our sins, we are learning to walk by the Spirit. When we seek to love our neighbors as ourselves, we are learning to walk by the Spirit.

And this learning process is what we call sanctification. It's the Holy Spirit working in us and working through us, and it is a lifelong process.

That might seem daunting. But we know that we have the promise that God will finish what He started in us.

If we know Christ, we already have forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. In fact, in Ephesians, the Holy Spirit is described as the seal and guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.

we think about the work of the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the Spirit will finish what the Spirit started.

[22:15] The Holy Spirit drew us to faith in Jesus, to forgiveness in His name, and the Holy Spirit assures us that we are forgiven, adopted, and beloved in Christ.

Beloved in Christ. The Holy Spirit guarantees that we will be made holy through His work in us. And the Holy Spirit guarantees that we will have eternal life.

I don't know about you, but I think that sounds like a good cause to celebrate. What do you think? Praise God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Two thousand years later, we still have every reason to be filled with great joy. Praise God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.