

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

It is significant to note that, though Jesus never taught his disciples how to preach, he did teach them how to pray. Much of his teaching on prayer is found in this rich and fragrant passage, which is called *The Upper Room Discourse*, found in John, Chapters 13 through 17. It is a passage that is filled with astonishing concepts. I know of no more challenging part of the Word of God than this. It is a vast area of mystery and beauty and glory. I never read it without feeling tremendously humbled in the experience of it. Perhaps in this place, more fully than anywhere else, our Lord unfolds to us the unique secret of Christianity, that aspect of life that has been called "the exchanged life." This is the secret of a Christian: He is not living his own life, he is living another's life. Or, more accurately, another is living his life in him. Until you have grasped that as the mystery and key of Christian living you have not graduated from the kindergarten level of the Christian life.

It is time now in our study of prayer to relate the subject to the total spectrum of Christian living. There is no passage that does it more effectively than the passage before us. In Verses 12 through 17, three revelations are given of the life of Jesus Christ at work within us:

- In Verse 12 we learn that the character of a Christian's work is "borrowed activity";
- In Verses 13-14 we shall find that the basis of a Christian's prayer is "borrowed authority"; and
- In Verses 15-17 it is revealed that the secret of a Christian's living is "borrowed deity."

This is the actuality of an exchanged life. That is our program for this study, So let us take it in detail.

In Verse 12, the character of a Christian's work is borrowed activity: Jesus says,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father." {John 14:12 RSV}

Each of these divisions in this passage consists of a staggering promise of tremendous possibility, and linked with it is a statement of a limiting or qualifying condition. Frequently as we read these great passages of the Scripture, we are either so dazzled by the promise that we fail to heed the condition, or we are so frightened by the condition that we pay little heed to the promise. But it is necessary that we take very seriously both aspects of what our Lord has said. Perhaps our greatest problem is to be so awestricken by these promises that we fail to heed the condition. There is a little sign, seen occasionally in offices, which says:

When all else fails, follow directions.

Sometimes when we try to lay hold of a promise of God, and it seemingly does not work, the reason is we have never followed directions. Thus, a conditioning statement is always the road to fulfillment.

Now, in Verse 12, the promise is tremendously plain. Jesus said "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do." That frightens and staggers us. It is theoretically acceptable, but it is practically unbelievable. We refuse to accept it at face value. We wonder if there is not a catch somewhere. There must be, we say, for is Jesus really saying that Christians living today, in this 20th century, do not only the works which he did but greater works than these? Is that what he is saying? The promise is so staggering that we attempt immediately to soften it. We say to ourselves, "Can this be true of me? After all, I am not Jesus Christ, and, therefore, I cannot be expected to do what he did." But how do you square an excuse like that with a verse like this? For in it Jesus plainly says, "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do."

Here is where we need to listen very carefully to exactly what it is he is saying. For Jesus is not saying here that a sincere, dedicated Christian of 1964 will actually be able, in his sincerity and his dedicated religious

effort, to do what Jesus did in the 1st century, let alone do greater works than he did. In other words, he is not contrasting our labors now with his labors then. He is not saying that dedicated Christian men and women are really going to transcend what he accomplished as the Son of God Incarnate among men. What he is saying is, as the Risen Christ, he will do through us greater works than he did as the Incarnate Christ living among men. Do you see the difference?

Notice what he links with this: "because I go to the Father." What does he mean? Why, it was his going to the Father that released the full potential of the Godhead for human lives and affairs. While he was here on earth the fullness of God was available to man only in one human body, the body of Jesus. By the strength and indwelling life of the Father he did all the works that we marvel at as we read the story of his life. But what he is saying now is, that as the Risen Christ, ascended to the throne of the Father, he himself will do through us, in terms of our personalities, and by the activity of our lives, greater works today than he did in the days of his flesh. That is what he is saying.

It is rather startling to realize that the work of the Incarnate Christ, that is, Jesus Christ of Nazareth working and walking among men, was, at its end, apparently a total and complete failure. We marvel as we read the story of the beginning of his ministry. Those miracles he did, astonishing things, raising men from the dead, healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, delivering men, women and little children from the oppression of demons, touching with his hand the withered arm of a man and immediately it springs into full growth and life again. We read the tremendous words that came from his lips, *The Sermon on the Mount*, the parables beside the seashore, these mysterious, marvelous, compelling things that he said. And we do not wonder at the crowds that followed him, hounding him, following him even into retreat, insisting upon his ministry, so that the news spread like wildfire throughout the land of Israel that here was a prophet risen in Israel again. Men left their work and their cities and their ordinary activities of life and went out to hear what he had to say, following him hours upon end.

That was the beginning. But when you come to the end, where are the crowds? Long before, they had already begun to diminish. "Many went back and walked no more with him" {cf, John 6:66 KJV}, the writers of the gospel tell us. Already many of the searching things that he had been saying had separated the weak from the strong, and many had gone back and refused to follow with him anymore. By the last week the actual number of disciples had been reduced to a comparative handful. And even these, in the hour of his capture and appearance before Pilate, forsook him and fled. In the time of his need they left him. There was only a tiny band of one man and three or four women that gathered around the foot of the cross. That was all the Incarnate Christ had to show for the marvelous ministry in the power of the Spirit which he had manifested among men. A total failure! That is the value of the works that he did.

Now do you see what he means when he says "greater works than these will you do, because I go to the Father?" His ministry among men, as a man, was a failure. It did not remain; it had no enduring effects. Those who came, attracted by the things they saw, faded back into the shadows when persecution began to grow. No one stayed with him. But there is a very significant promise uttered in the midst of this *Upper Room Discourse* that he addresses to these disciples. In John 15:16 he says to them,

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain." {cf, John 15:16}

Your fruit should remain. What you do in the power of the Spirit will not fade away. Those that you win to Christ, those that are brought by the ministry that you will be ministering will abide, and this cause will flourish in the earth and spread unto the uttermost parts till every nation shall hear the word, and out of every tribe and nation of earth shall come, at last, fruit that shall remain. This is what he means, "Greater work than these shall you do, because I go to the Father." It is his work in us.

I was down this weekend at Newport Beach speaking at the Mayors' Breakfast held in Balboa Bay Club, a lavish setting with yachts and pleasure boats anchored right outside the window. It was a great temptation to be there. There were gathered at the breakfast some two hundred men from that area, many of them non-Christians, and with us were the three mayors of the cities of Laguna Beach, Newport Beach and Costa Mesa. Norman Nelson was there and sang beautifully. After he had finished singing *How Great Thou Art*, I

saw one of the mayors wiping the tears from his eyes. God moved in a visible way at that meeting, and when we had finished, I overheard two men discussing it. One man, evidently a Christian, said to the other, "Well, you know, I think God was pleased with what happened this morning." The other man said, "He ought to be, he did it!" That seemed to me to capture exactly what Jesus is saying here. A Christian's true work is borrowed activity, it is never his own, and when he begins to think it is, he defeats every possibility of success. He sabotages the work of the Holy Spirit.

There is a condition to this, however. Remember, I warned you of that. These great promises have a condition linked with them that qualifies them, and without the fulfillment of the condition the promise will never work. What is it? "He who believes in me." That is the condition. Now that does not mean "He who is a Christian." You say, I am a believer. That means, so many months or years ago I received Jesus Christ as my Lord and now I am a believer. That is not the sense in which he is using it here. He is not saying everyone who is a Christian, and, in that sense, a believer, will automatically be able to do these things. He uses here a verb in the present tense which means "he who is continually believing in me." He who is appropriating by faith that which I am will do these things. In the Christian life, faith is always the operative word. He is not saying, he who holds the truth, but he who acts upon it, is the one who will do these works. God gives power and ability only to faith, and it is only when we learn that that these promises come alive in our life. This is the reason why, though we know these promises must be true because of him who spoke them, yet we see so dismally little evidence of it in our living. It is because we are not ready, simply, to take God at his word, and expect him to do these things. Expectation is the condition by which this becomes realized.

There is another passage, Verses 13 and 14, which sets forth the fact that the basis of a Christian's prayer is borrowed authority.

"Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it." {John 14:13-14 RSV}

Whatever, anything, I will do it. We sense immediately that this is too wide. If we take this as absolutely unlimited, a sort of magical Aladdin's lamp that we can rub and ask for any possible thing in the world, certainly we have missed the true point of this passage. It is too wide to take unreservedly. We sense also, almost instinctively, that it is too contradictory if taken without limit. We can see problems arising. What if a Christian athlete is praying for clear weather and a Christian farmer is praying for rain? Which one wins?

When our friend, Mr. Hendricks, was a single young man in college he met a young lady whose mother immediately had designs on him. It came to his ears that this woman had told some of her friends that she was praying that he might be her son-in-law. I remember Mr. Hendricks pausing and saying to us, with great significance, "Have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer?"

No, this promise cannot be limitless. There is a condition here. Our Lord means exactly what he says but we must understand what he says. This is a magnificent promise of vast scope, of tremendous encompassment, but what he says is "if you ask in my name." This is the condition.

That certainly means a great deal more than a magical formula to tack on to the end of our prayers. There is nothing quite as pagan, or silly, as this meaningless phrase, "this we ask in Jesus' name," added to our prayers without any understanding or regard as whether or not the prayer is actually being asked in Jesus' name. We do this because:

1. It is traditionally acceptable, and
2. We do not understand what "in his name" means.

"In Christ's name" means in his authority, on the basis of his character, in the value of his work.

Let me illustrate:

All of us are familiar with the phrase, "In the name of the law." Policemen do their business "in the name of the law."

Now, supposing a policeman goes into a cheap slum area of the city at three o'clock in the afternoon. He is called there because of some murderous activity that is going on, and he comes up to the address that has been given him, and knocks at the door, and says, "Open in the name of the law." No one opens the door, so after he knocks again and requests that it be opened in the name of the law and there still is no answer, he breaks it down and goes in and makes his arrest.

Now, we will say, at ten o'clock that night, that same policeman is drunk. He is out in a residential area and for some reason on his own, in his drunken stupor, he stumbles up the steps of a house, and knocks on the door, and says, "Open inna name of the law." Those within hear the thick voice and recognize that it is a drunken policeman and refuse to open. So the policeman breaks down the door, and when he does, he is arrested and taken to jail himself.

Why? It is the same action, and exactly the same man. What is the difference? One was truly done in the name of the law, the other was done outside the law, even though the same words were used. One was authorized activity, the other was unauthorized.

That is what Jesus means.

When we ask in Jesus' name we are to ask within the realm and scope of his work and his character. Whatever he is interested in having done on earth, then we, as the instruments of his activity, are involved in accomplishing it. "Whatever you need," he says, "ask for it and it shall be done." Whatever! Anything! If it is a need within this limit, you can ask for it and it shall be done, without failure.

Let me illustrate again by referring to the breakfast in Newport Beach:

It was my responsibility to bring a message there, and, as I frequently do in a time like that, I felt very inadequate, helpless. Here was a wealthy, affluent area. The meeting would be held in lavish surrounds, I knew, and in such a resort area, oftentimes great religious indifference abounds. Present at the meeting, I knew, would be scores of men who were not in any way outwardly identified with Christian faith and many of them would be typically shallow, rootless, unconcerned modern pagans. It was a challenging meeting, an opportunity to speak in the name of God to men who would otherwise never give an ear, and I felt it. I felt inadequate, I felt the tremendous challenge and my own inability. I have learned, by long experience and by the Word of God, to recognize that that feeling of inadequacy is an excellent thing. I welcome it now, because I know it is designed to lead me to ask for what I need. So, before the meeting began, I simply asked. I asked for three things:

1. I asked that what I said might be relevant, that it might come to grips with the situation in which these people found themselves.
2. Second, that it might be challenging, that I might say something that would awaken these men; and
3. Third, that it might be powerful, that its effect would not diminish, that it would not be lightly swept aside but come home with power to the heart.

Now what I said was neither clever or profound, it was very simple. I simply tried to call attention to the moral revolt that is widespread in the United States today and the fact that it is eating away at our national life and destroying the very foundation of our government, things that you read and are hearing today on every side. I tried to point out something of the moral emptiness of a life like that, and how futile and meaningless and purposeless life seems to be, and what the Christian answer is.

Immediately after the meeting two Chiefs of Police who were present from the cities of Newport Beach and Costa Mesa came right up to me, visibly moved, and shook my hand and said, "We know what you are talking about. This is the first time we have ever heard anything that seems to suggest an answer. This is what we desperately need down in this area."

And one of the mayors who had, before the meeting, insisted, with some asperity, that he would have absolutely no participation in the meeting, volunteered at the end to get up and say that this was something that he felt had sounded out the crying need of that area and he hoped that this would be an annual event. He welcomed our team to come down the next week and hold Breakfast Meetings throughout that entire area.

What is the explanation of that? "Whatever you need, ask, and it shall be given you," that's all. If it lies in the direction of the moving of Christ in the affairs of men today, whatever you need, ask. It will be given. Anything! If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.

Now let us come quickly to this last passage, the fact that the secret of the Christian's life is borrowed deity. Jesus said,

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." {John 14:15-17 RSV}

What a staggering promise this is! Our Lord is promising here that the One who will come to make his home in every Christian's heart and life is nothing less than God himself! The One who comes is the third Person of the Trinity, who supplies to us the fullness of God. "Filled unto the goodness of God" {cf, Eph 3:19}, is Paul's prayer for us, that in the possession of the Holy Spirit we may understand and realize that the One who comes is God himself indwelling us.

The names that he uses here suggest the richness of this promise. He said that he will be "another Counselor." I like the old translation better, the word is "Comforter," but we should understand it in its original meaning. It comes from the word *fortis*, that is, "to make strong," and *com* means "with." Someone who stands with you and makes you strong; that is a Comforter, one who gives strength. In this word, Jesus is saying that he who comes will be the One who has within him the fullness of power, all the strength that we could possibly need, that is the first thing.

Then he is called the Spirit of Truth, and that is a wonderful statement. Don't you hunger after truth sometimes? In this bewildering world, this perplexing age in which we live, don't you sometimes almost physically hunger for someone, somewhere, somehow, who can tell us the truth? Well, that is who this One is, the Spirit of Truth, the One who unfolds reality, who exposes error, who tears away the veils, who dissolves the mists that confuse us and blind us, who removes the doubts and brings us face to face with things as they really are in life.

I read a wonderful testimony by Dr. Emile Caillet concerning his discovery of the Bible as an agnostic young man. At the age of twenty-one he had never seen a Bible and it was years later, as a married man, that he finally was given a Bible. He began to read it and he discovered that this was the answer to his life-long search for what he called "a book that understands me." As he read, he discovered that this was the book because it revealed the One who understood him. His testimony was to a life-long experience of delving deeper and deeper into the marvels of a Book that understood him, because it was revealed by the Spirit of God who is the One who understands us.

And note, this privilege is exclusively Christian. Only the Christian can be led by the Spirit of God into the nature of reality, into truth. Jesus said, "... even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him." This is exclusively Christian. The world will never be able to understand reality, never! As long as men remain worldlings they are blinded to the ultimate nature of things. They will never understand them because man is both the specimen to be examined and the examiner, and the problem is that the error that is in the examiner affects the examination! Man reasons continually in a vicious circle of unbelief that prevents him from discovering ultimate reality. But when the Spirit of Truth is come, he takes away the veils, he dissolves the mists. Little by little, gradually, we begin to understand who we are, and what we are, and why we are what we are, and why others are what they are, and what this world is and where it is going and what its end is going to be. The Spirit of Truth -- there is nothing more magnificently Christian than this ability to see truth clearly.

But now we come to the condition, for the brutal fact is that, though every true Christian has the Spirit of Truth, thousands walk in darkness and understand no more about themselves than the most blind pagan around. Though we have the Spirit available to us, we are as deluded and as blinded as any worldly living next door. Though we have the potential he does not have, we are not getting into it. We may be Bible-taught, but we are not Spirit-taught. Why not? Because Jesus says "... he dwells with you, and he will be in you," and there is a vital distinction there.

Now, please don't nail me to the mast for heresy. I know as well as you do that every believer, when he receives Jesus Christ, receives the indwelling Spirit of God, that He is in us from the beginning. We do not need later to pray for his coming. He is there right from the start. Historically, it was true that these disciples were not to receive the indwelling of the Spirit until the Day of Pentecost. He dwelt with them before but he was to be in them on the Day of Pentecost. But, having said all that, it is still true that, positionally, though the Spirit of God is dwelling in you, as far as you are concerned, experientially, it is as though he only dwelt with you. You are not laying hold of his indwelling life, and for all practical purposes he is not there, he is only with you.

This is the explanation for the prevailing weakness in Christian living.

The other night at our Board of Elders meeting we were wrestling with this problem. We were asking ourselves this question, "Why is it that though truth seems to be poured out continually in this place, through our teachers, in the pulpit and in so many ways, yet in many of our peoples' lives there is such a superficial shallowness? There is so little reflection of the truth our ears are hearing. Why is this? How is it that Christians can know so much and experience so little?" We were wrestling with this problem. I commented how disturbing it is to sit down with a group of people and mention some great promise of Scripture or Christian life that ought to be ours and to have everybody nod their head in agreement with it, and then to see the look of shock come into their eyes when you propose some action on it. They look amazed that you intend to take these words seriously, and act on them. As we talked about this, one of the young men who was with us said a very helpful and insightful thing. He said, "You know, I think I know what it is. I have found it in my own life. When I simply give up arguing back, and start obeying the Lord, I discover all these things begin to work. In my experience I have discovered it is possible to have God at arm's length, dwelling with me. And when he is out there, nothing works; but when I yield to his sovereign direction in my life, and I begin to act on what he says, then he is in me and things begin to happen." He put his finger right on the point. This is what Jesus says.

"In you" means that you are under the control of the Holy Spirit, and yielding obedience to his totalitarian sovereignty. It means the total collapse of all your rebellion against him.

"Oh," you say, "I'm not in rebellion against the Spirit of God. Why, I'm a Christian. I don't rebel against him."

Let me ask you: "What kind of life are you living? Is it God-centered, or is it self-centered? Is it to please yourself that your activities are done and your desires aimed?" Then you are in rebellion against the Spirit of God, and to have him dwelling in you means the total collapse of all that revolt until you are saying, "Lord Jesus, whatever you say, your word is my command. I am ready to obey."

It is not our relationship with Jesus Christ which counts before the world, it is our resemblance to him.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, we ask thee to search our own hearts on this day, and save us from this damnable perfidy of talking truth and not living it, of echoing orthodoxy but refusing to submit in practical ways, or shepherding our resources and protecting our lives and refusing to fling them into thy cause and abandon ourselves to thy purposes. Lord God, what hypocrites! Keep us from this, that we may know the fulness of the glory of these promises fulfilled in our lives in this day and age. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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