

THE MESSAGE OF THE SPIRIT

by Ray C. Stedman

You who have been following through this series of messages know that as our Lord spoke to his disciples in the Upper Room, and on the way to the Garden, there were two great themes which occupied his heart. The first was to reveal to them the secrets of his own life, the great principles which enabled him to function as he did, to act in the unforgettable way which was his. The secret, he said, was his relationship to the Father. The Father was in him, and he was in the Father. The second great theme he was seeking to impress upon these disciples was the relationship they would need in order to handle life after he had left them. It would be the coming Holy Spirit who would make available to them the same principle of life by which he himself had lived. Then it would be the Son in them, and they in him. This was to be the secret of their life. So, much of this passage deals with the ministry and message of the Holy Spirit.

This is the theme we will be looking at particularly this morning. Our passage opens with a new paragraph, beginning in the middle of Verse 4, Chapter 16, as indicated by the Revised Standard Version. After our Lord has revealed the hostility of the world which the disciples would face after he left them, the persecution and judgment and death they would be up against, he now says to them,

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." {John 16:4b-7 RSV}

This passage opens with a manifestation of the need of the Spirit of God. It is revealed to us in the condition of these disciples. Our Lord has indicated to them that there were certain things he did not say to them from the beginning. He did not tell them of the hostility of the world. He did not tell them about the tremendous opposition and persecution they would face. Nor did he tell them how to meet it. And he says why: "I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you." There he indicates our need as human beings to be kept and supported and strengthened. He was keeping these disciples himself. Since he was there, they had no need to know all that he was keeping them from, or how it was done. "But now," he says, "I'm going away. Now you'll need to understand what has been happening."

There he reveals to us the basic need of our humanity: to be kept. This is what the Scriptures teach us about ourselves -- that we are basically born to be dependent on something or someone else to keep us. We are not able to handle life by ourselves. No one is. The Big Lie, which has been circulated since the fall of man, is that man is independent, that he does not need anything, that he can be self-sufficient. He can run his own life, make his own decisions, and is able to handle everything himself. How widespread that notion is! You see it reflected everywhere -- especially among youth, who are confident that they know how to handle life. Nothing is going to trap them, or trick them, or deceive them. They are able to handle whatever comes. How delusive that is! Our Lord indicates here that these disciples had been able to exist only because he was with them and kept them.

And now, as he leaves, they are occupied not with what he has told them but with themselves. Because Jesus says, "I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'" it is evident that our Lord expects these men to question him. He is attempting to arouse their curiosity. He is saying to them, "Why don't you ask me some questions? Aren't you interested in what is going to happen, what the result of my going away is going to be?" Instead, all they can think of is what it might mean to them. They are occupied with themselves, just as we are, and can see only their own little world. And so, as he says, "Sorrow has filled

your hearts." Instead of curiosity, and the consequent knowledge they could have, and even the excitement about what is going to happen, sorrow has filled their hearts and they are occupied with themselves. What a revelation this is of what we are! We need someone to keep us. Now, that Someone who keeps us today is the Holy Spirit, as our Lord goes on to indicate:

**"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you."
{John 16:7 RSV}**

I know that you have often felt, as I have, that these disciples had a great advantage over us. To sit and listen to Jesus, to hear his words, to see his face, to see how he acted, to be with him in the midst of his miracles, to walk with him and listen to him and watch him -- what an advantage they had! How many of us have felt, "Oh, if only we could have been there, if only we could have seen what these disciples saw!" Yet Jesus is telling them very frankly and very plainly and very truthfully, "Look, it is going to be better for you when I leave. It will be better for you when I go away, for when I go away the Strengthener will come." I like that translation of the word. It is the Strengthener, the One who meets our needs from within, who is coming to us. That is what these disciples needed, and what we need.

I know it is hard for us to believe that it would be better for Jesus' disciples when he had gone. But have you ever noticed in reading through the Gospels that when Jesus finished the *Sermon on the Mount*, or even this *Upper Room Discourse*, or any of his great messages which the disciples heard, that they ever went away with their faces aglow, their minds understanding, their hearts committed, and ready to work? Instead the record tells us that every time he talked to them he puzzled them. They were perplexed, they couldn't figure him out, and they went away arguing about what he had to say. They were full of questions, and they disputed among themselves as to who was going to fulfill these things, vying with each other for first place. But you discover that after the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came, when they gathered together and heard the words of the Lord they went away tremendously strengthened and encouraged, ready to face life with radiant faces and joy in their hearts. That is what the Spirit does. It was indeed to their advantage, and to ours, that Jesus was not with them. Suppose he were here in the world today, right now, July 15, 1973. Where would he be? Well, probably somewhere in Texas! But certainly not in Palo Alto! And how would you ever get to see him? Yet by means of the Spirit we have access to him, as these disciples never had.

Now our Lord goes on to point out the ministry of the Spirit, the way he would work when he came. This is one of the most helpful passages in Scripture to enable us to understand the workings of the Holy Spirit in our day, in our generation. He says to them, Verses 8-11,

**"And when he comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment [The ministry of the Spirit to the world is to convince them of these three things]: of sin, because they do not believe in me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more, of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged."
{John 16:8-11 RSV}**

I wonder if there is any verse of Scripture more frequently misread than that one. It is very commonly quoted, and most of us read it as though the Holy Spirit is going to come into the world and work directly upon the hearts of unbelievers, those who are not Christians, and convict them, or convince them, of these three things: sin, righteousness, and judgment. But if you read it in that way you have not read this verse correctly. That is not what he is saying. I want to read it again, together with the preceding verse, and emphasize a key word. And I want to take that same word and insert it in a place in Verse 8 where it does not occur but where the context makes clear it belongs. I think then you will see what I mean. Jesus says,

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes to you, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment:" {John 16:7-8 RCS Version}

You see, the Holy Spirit is not coming to the world; he is coming *to you*, to the church, to the Christian. And when he comes to the Christian, this will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.

That is what he is saying. In fact, back in Chapter 14, Jesus had said specifically to these disciples that when the Spirit of truth would come, the world would not be able to receive him. It does not receive him -- it cannot receive him -- because it neither sees him nor knows him. Therefore he does not come to the world; he comes to us. But when he comes to us and operates in us as he intends, he will have this three-fold effect upon the world.

What effect? There are three things the world ought to see when it looks at the church. If it does not see these three things, then the church is not a Spirit-filled church. It is not operating in the way it is intended. You can bring that down to the individual as well. There are three things the world ought to see when it looks at you, as a Christian. If it does not see these three things, then you are not filled with the Spirit. You are not being led by, and operating by means of, the Spirit of God, as the Lord intended for you to do.

The first thing the world ought to see when it looks at us is that the issue of life is Jesus. It ought to be convicted of sin, "because they believe not on him." I am convinced that if the church had not reflected Jesus, and spoken of him, the world would soon have forgotten him. In fact, by now he would have become some dim name in history, for the world desperately wants to forget that Jesus ever came and lived among us. It desperately wants to relegate his name and all his teachings to the farthest reaches of ancient history and to forget about him. If you do not believe that, just listen to the teachers of today. They tell you that undoubtedly Jesus was a great man, but he lived in the far distant past. What he said has no relevancy to our day and so we need not be concerned about him. What is the church for? It is to bring Jesus consistently before the world. It is no accident that the great spiritual awakening of our day, in which the Spirit has been moving in great power, has been labeled "the Jesus Movement." That is what the church ought to be doing constantly talking about Jesus.

When I travel around the country I visit many different churches. And so many times I find that the thing most emphasized by the church in its attempts to reach out to the world is the church! The church presents the program of the church, and what the church will do, and offers the church to society. The early Christians never wasted their time in that. They never talked about the church; they talked about the Lord. The church doesn't save anybody. The church doesn't help anybody. It is the Lord who does it. He redeems, he changes, he revolutionizes, he forgives, he restores, he heals -- not the church! When the church is Spirit-filled it talks about Jesus. And when the world hears that, then it is finally convinced that its most basic and fundamental sin is not the evil things it does but the fact that it does not believe in Jesus.

The second thing they are to be convinced of is righteousness, Jesus says, "because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more." That is, when the world looks at the church it ought to see a different way of life, a different standard of behavior. What it once saw in Jesus it is now to see in the church. And this is what convinces the world there are absolutes in life. Secular writers and philosophers will tell you that there are no absolutes, no standards. Whatever anyone wants to do is right for him to do. There is nothing inherently right or wrong; it is only good or bad in terms of how it affects an individual. We are deluged today by "situational ethics," the idea that the situation alone determines whether a thing is right or wrong. And the world will believe that until it sees in the church a standard of behavior which makes it realize that some things are always helpful, but that others always blast and ruin, that there is clear-cut righteousness and there is absolute evil.

Last Sunday night during the Body Life service there was some wonderful sharing, a wonderful openness, and a sense of the Lord's presence at work manifesting itself in our love and concern for one another. I met a man afterward who was standing on the platform looking out over the congregation as people were talking and sharing and visiting and praying. He shook his head and said, "I don't understand this. I don't get it. I can't get over it. All these young people -- what do they want to come here for? I don't understand." I said, "It's because here they can hear the truth. And there is one thing young people want more than anything else -- truth, honesty, reality, the way things are. Here they can hear it, and it is truth about Jesus." He said, "Well, maybe so, I'll say one thing: these are the most beautiful young people I've ever seen."

That is what the world ought to see when it looks at the church: beauty. It is what the Old Testament calls "the beauty of holiness." When the Word of God is fulfilled, and the Lord Jesus is reigning in an individual's life, and that person is obedient to the Lord and to his word, there is a beauty about that life which captures attention. It is righteousness, the beauty of holiness, and it captivates others. They understand there is a

difference, and they want to be like that.

The third thing the world is to see as it looks at the church is judgment, "because the ruler of this world is judged." That is, as they look at the church they ought to see that there is coming a head-on clash between the philosophy of the world and the philosophy of Jesus Christ, and that the one who is going to win is Jesus. All that the world lives by will ultimately be demolished, destroyed. A judgment is coming. And the sign of it to the world is that the power of Satan is already broken in the lives they are observing. Here are people who live by different standards. They follow a different system of morals. They know how to love, how to reach out. They no longer are tied up in themselves, bound up within, tortured by tensions and fears. This is not seen perfectly in any one of us, but the world sees it beginning and growing and happening, and it shows them that the power of evil is broken, that the prince of this world is judged, that this is the goal toward which history is moving. This is what the world is to see when it looks at the church. But it is only when the church is living this way that the world can see it. If they don't see it, it is because we are denying the reality of that judgment.

Our Lord moves on, in Verses 12 through 15, to how the Spirit himself will work in the believer, with each of us. This is an extremely helpful passage. Jesus says,

"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you." {John 16:12-15 RSV}

There is the teaching of the Spirit to each believer. The primary fulfillment of this, of course, was to these disciples themselves. It was the process by which the rest of the Scriptures were given. As this was fulfilled in these apostles' lives, they were led by the Spirit to speak the truth which is recorded here in the pages of the New Testament -- the Gospels, the Epistles, and the book of the Revelation. Some even see this division in the words of Verse 13:

- "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth;" would be Gospels,
- "he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak," would be the Epistles, and
- "he will declare to you the things that are to come," would be the book of Revelation.

Whether you see it that way or not is up to you. But I would like to look at this passage as I think the Lord meant it to be taken. Here we understand the process by which the Spirit himself is going to teach us:

First Jesus emphasizes the prerequisite to learning. He says to these disciples, "I have yet many things to say to you." Why didn't he say them? What was hindering him? The answer, of course, as he says, is that they couldn't bear them then. It would have been laying too heavy a load on them. It would have been a demand greater than they could fulfill, and so he refused to lay it on them. What was it they were lacking? They lacked the understanding of the resource upon which to draw. They did not know how to handle these demands, how to satisfy these requirements, and so Jesus would not tell them these things until they had the power by which to respond.

That is a very important consideration. Today there are many conferences and seminars and meetings being held in which great biblical truth is being set before people. But they are not always being told how to respond to it. The only response they know is to summon up their natural commitment and their natural strength and to try to do the best they can to fulfill it. When that happens it always destroys people without their knowing why, because what they are told to do is right, but they don't know how to respond to it correctly. It is important for us to understand that you have to know how to respond by faith and trust in the One who dwells within you, before you ever learn of the demand which the truth of God makes upon you. That is the prerequisite to learning.

Then Jesus goes on into the process, and the three divisions he gives are most helpful. "When the Spirit of

truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." The word he uses for *guide* means "conduct," like a tour guide, a tour conductor. I was recently in Hawaii and visited the city of refuge, the ancient site where the Hawaiian kings had erected a city which, like the biblical cities of refuge, was a place where those who accidentally killed someone, or violated a taboo, could run from the revengeful relatives or the avenging justice. Once they had attained the shelter of the city of refuge they were safe from harm. Our guide took us around this site and explained point by point what each feature meant. That is what this word refers to here. The Holy Spirit will be like a tour guide. He will take you through the truth of the Word and the truth about life, and he will patiently and gradually explain to you what it is all about. Your level of understanding will rise as you go. In other words, the work of the Spirit is going to be a gradual unfolding of truth in every individual's life. It is not going to be one big display in which you get it all in a six-week course. Rather, it is a gradual unfolding as you move through life, and a deepening level of understanding as you penetrate into truth until it begins to make sense.

The second aspect, Jesus says, is that "he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak." What does he mean there? He means that the Spirit of God is never going to give you isolated truth. He will not come out with some startling, brand new, absolutely different revelation which nobody has ever heard of before! He will never do that. Every now and then we hear of some preacher who says, "God has spoken to me and has revealed to me this brilliant new idea. Nobody has ever taught it before. If you want to know the secret you've got to come to me!" That is exactly what Jesus says will not happen. The Spirit of God will never speak that way. He will speak only what he hears. The Spirit, as God, is always hearing what God forever is saying to men. Therefore, what he says is always integrated truth, always in line with what God has already said. It is in line with what he has already spoken. It will never differ from what he has said in the past, but will fit into the context of life as God has revealed it.

The third division is, "he will declare to you the things that are to come." Unquestionably this refers to the passages in our New Testament which predict our Lord's return and what will happen at the end of history to lead up to it -- when the kingdoms of the earth will rise up and band together in enmity against the Lord, when persecution and violence and tribulation will break out upon the earth, when the man of sin will arise and rule with worldwide authority to put down all men and institutions which represent God, and to exalt man as god in God's place. But it also means that the Spirit of God is going to be presenting truth in such a way -- by means of the revelation of the Word and a gradual elevating of our understanding of it -- that it will point to the consequences which lie ahead. It is *consequential truth*, i.e., it will open your eyes to where you are going. It will help your understanding of life to see what the results are going to be. Therefore the work of the Spirit is constantly to be making us aware of what lies ahead.

All of this is what the Spirit of God will be doing when he comes into the life of a believer. Our Lord ends with the point, the aim, of the teaching of the Spirit: "He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Sometimes when you listen to Bible teachers today you get the idea that there is to be a kind of Jesus-oriented Bible teaching with which we begin the Christian life, but that as we grow a bit and mature we are to move on to Spirit-oriented truth, to recognize that the sign of maturity is to be concerned no longer with Jesus but with Spirit. Nothing could be further from the truth! The work of the Spirit is to glorify Jesus. The Spirit-filled life is the life in which Jesus is central. And the one who matures is the one who grows deeper in his understanding of Jesus. "For the Spirit will not speak of himself," Jesus said, "but he will take what is mine and reveal it unto you."

How vast is this range of teaching? Well, Jesus tells us. "All that the Father has is mine. The Spirit is going to take the things of mine and reveal them unto you, and all that the Father has is mine. Therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

A young man asked me the other day, "Is it right for a Christian to study secular subjects which have nothing to do with the Bible?" My answer was, "Paul tells us in First Corinthians 3, 'All things are yours, and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.' And in Colossians 2, Paul says of Jesus Christ, 'In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' As you investigate any realm of science or knowledge or truth, if you do so in reliance upon the indwelling life of Jesus and the teaching of the Spirit of God, he will open that branch

of truth to you. More and more you will begin to understand and see the things God has hidden there."

Remember the story of George Washington Carver, that brilliant scientist who founded the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He was born a slave but he managed to get an education as a scientist. He said, on one occasion, that the hunger of his heart was to discover the secrets of the universe. "But," he said, "God said to me, 'George, that's too big for you. I've got something more your size. You take a peanut and work on that.'" And so he began to investigate what God has hidden in a peanut. He found over 330 different products which could be made from the peanut, revolutionized the technology of his day, and became a tremendous leader among the American people. But he always remained a simple, Bible-believing, humble servant of God who relied upon God to open his mind to truth, in whatever field it lay. "All things are yours. All the power of God is yours." That is what Jesus means. "All that the Father has is mine, and it will be made available to you through the Spirit."

For millenia the Colorado River has been grinding its way down through the Grand Canyon, on through Arizona, and on its way to the Gulf of California. For centuries men lived and died alongside that river -- starved to death, froze to death, shivered, sat in darkness -- all for lack of power. Yet there was one of the most powerful rivers in America flowing by. But its power was unavailable -- until one day some men built Hoover Dam. They erected this tremendous dam at great sacrifice of money, and even of life, but for the first time the power of the river was made available to man.

That is something like what happened at Calvary. All the power of God was there, flowing around man, but unavailable -- until the cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross, at enormous sacrifice, the power of God was released to man. Yet it was still too much.

As you drive across the Mojave Desert between Arizona and Los Angeles you see the great transmission towers which bring the power of Hoover Dam into the Los Angeles basin. Every one of them bears a warning sign: Danger, High Voltage. Energy is streaming through that wire at hundreds of thousands of volts. But how can you use a hundred thousand volts? It is too much. So a system of transformers has been installed which breaks it down until it comes out at levels we can use -- 110 volts, 220 volts -- whatever it takes. By this means all the power generated at Hoover Dam is now available for people to use in Southern California. Something like that is what is in view here.

I like to read Jesus' statement this way:

It is better for you that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Transformer will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he, the Transformer, comes, he will make available to you all the limitless forces which lie in me. He will take what is mine, and give it to you in quantities that you can handle, just right for your situation. For back of him lies all the limitless power of God.

That is what he is teaching us. That is what the world is waiting to see in our lives -- power, coming not in some spectacular flash which startles and scares everybody, but released in useful quantity. That's what I need. I'm like these disciples -- a brother to them. I cannot bear the full revelation of the love and grace of Jesus Christ. I need to have it broken down to my size. But it is there, ready for me to take, ready for me to use in my situation.

That is available to each of us.

- So that the world, looking at us, can see the sin of not believing in Jesus. He is the issue.
- So that they can see the righteous conduct which God alone can produce in a life.
- So that they can know that God is still in control of history, that all of history is trending toward a one great event which lies yet in the future.
- So that they can see in us that quality of life which makes life worth the living.

That is what the Spirit of God is come to do.

He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. {John 16:14}

RSV}

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the truth of these words. How much evidence we have right here in this room that these words are true, that this is what you are doing today -- to the end that the world in its blindness and darkness may see you, Lord of Life, Lord of Glory, the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, the key and secret to life itself, and that they may come to you and receive life at your hand. We thank you for that life, and for the power given to us by the Holy Spirit. Help us to walk in these ways. In his name, Amen.

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