

THE FOUNDATION FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP – PART 2

SERIES: PREPARING FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

By Danny Hall

Our world is chock-full of all kinds of distractions from our love relationship with Christ: cell phones, pagers, the internet, digital cable, twenty-four-hour sports, entertainment, and news. We live fast-paced lives full of activities. God's voice is almost drowned out because it's so hard to find the time that we need to spend with God. The price we pay is that we miss the core of what it means to be a follower of Christ, and our ability to be fully engaged in the mission God calls us to is compromised.

In the second half of John 14 we're going to be looking at one of the most beautiful and important Scripture passages about what it means to be a follower of Christ. In this passage Jesus is continuing to prepare the disciples for their mission. He begins with a broad, bold statement about the nature of his relationship to his disciples: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Now, that sounds reasonable; in fact, all of us have attached the idea of obedience to our idea of following Christ. But we have a problem with getting things out of order, and it's important for us to understand how we do that.

In chapter 13 Jesus set up the disciples for this particular teaching by demonstrating servanthood to them as he washed their feet. Then he predicted their failure: one of them would betray him, and ultimately Peter himself, that bold, ambitious follower of Christ, would deny him three times even before that night was over. Having shattered their illusions of self-confidence and their ambitions for roles of greatness in the kingdom, Jesus brought them to a point of vulnerability where he could teach them how they could truly be the people of God and the leaders of God's kingdom.

In the opening half of chapter 14 he established that their eternal future would be secure in him—"the way, and the truth, and the life," the one way to communion with the Father, the true and genuine Savior, the one who brought real life to them. Blessings would flow from this grounding in the security of their relationship with him.

Jesus continues these foundational principles for life and leadership in the kingdom by exhorting them now as to how they are to follow through, and what resources they have. So he starts out, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Now, keeping his commandments is extremely difficult. He has already predicted their failure. Is this an impossible mission? In the rest of chapter 14 he begins to lay down for them the foundation of how it's possible. The instructions that he gives the disciples ring down through the ages to you and to me. They give us hope and direction, the foundation of how we also can be the people of God in our world.

Let's read John 14:15-31:

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a little while the world will behold Me no more; but you will behold Me; because I live, you shall live also. In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him." Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it comes to pass, that when it comes to pass, you may believe. I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me; but that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, even so I do. Arise, let us go from here."

Jesus lays out the context in which the disciples will be able to move from spiritual failure to hopeful expectation of the

wonderful fulfillment of God's purpose in their lives. He describes a new relationship, looking forward to the day of Pentecost not many days hence, when the Spirit of God will come upon them, just as he now comes to us when we put our faith in Jesus Christ.

Let's look at how he describes this.

The indwelling Spirit of Christ

First he says, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth. . . ." Jesus is telling them that they are about to enter into a different kind of relationship with him that is going to be mediated by the Holy Spirit. Throughout this chapter he has told them he is going away but coming again. He is headed to the cross, and after the cross, to resurrection and then ascension. He will no longer be physically present with these disciples as he has been for more than three years. But he doesn't want them to be fearful. "I will not abandon you as orphans without hope," he says. "After I pray to the Father, he will send you another Comforter who will come to be in you and mediate my very presence with you, so that I will always be with you!" One of the wonderful themes that resonate throughout the New Testament is that of the personal presence of Christ in our lives. When Jesus gives the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, his final words are, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." In Hebrews 13:5 God promises, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you."

Notice the way Jesus describes the Spirit: "another Helper." Just as Jesus has been the disciples' comfort and help, walking beside them, there is coming another who will be that Helper, dwelling within them. The word that the NASB translates "Helper" is sometimes translated "Comforter" or "Advocate." It literally means "one who comes alongside," bringing encouragement and assistance in whatever way is needed. This is the role of the Holy Spirit in the absence of Jesus. He comes to dwell in us to provide help, direction, and comfort by making Jesus real to us, and through him Jesus lives in us and is constantly present with us.

Let's observe some other facets of the ministry of the Spirit. First, his ministry is accessible only to believers. The world does not know him or understand him. But he abides with us and will be in us.

Jesus is talking about the new age that will be inaugurated on the day of Pentecost. Up until then, the Spirit of God certainly has dwelled within some people, and he has come upon some people for special power and special service. But on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit will come to be present in every believer, assuring their life in eternity with Christ, and to be present in the community of faith, actively working and moving through the people of God. The Spirit who has been *with* them in the presence of Jesus and has been working in the world *around* them is going to come and reside personally *in* them all. And that personal presence of the Holy Spirit will be the strength of those who trust in the Savior.

They will have a growing awareness of this wonderful relationship that they have with God. Notice the language: "You shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you." The Spirit's primary ministry is to foster this relationship in our lives. Now, the Spirit does many things in our lives, and in chapter 16 more of the work of the Spirit is going to be described for us. But I would suggest to you that the foundational ministry of the Spirit is to make Christ real in our experience. In a fine book called *Keep in Step with the Spirit* J.I. Packer summarized this concept well:

"The truth of the matter is this. The distinctive, constant, basic ministry of the Holy Spirit under the new covenant is so to mediate Christ's presence to believers—that is, to give them such knowledge of his presence with them as their Savior, Lord, and God; that three things keep happening.

"First, personal fellowship with Jesus . . .

"Second, personal transformation of character into Jesus' likeness . . .

"Third, the Spirit-given certainty of being loved, redeemed, and adopted through Christ into the Father's family . . .

"By these phenomena of experience, Spirit-given knowledge of Christ's presence—'elusive, intangible,

unpredictable, untamed, inaccessible to empirical verification, outwardly invisible but inwardly irresistible,' to borrow Samuel Terrien's description—shows itself." (1)

Jesus is trying to say that the coming of the Spirit ushers us into new possibility of relationship with God. We are intimately connected to the Father and the Son, and Christ is present and real in our midst and in our individual lives forevermore. We live in the stream of that beautiful relationship.

Now having laid this foundation for the presence of the Spirit, Jesus returns in verse 21 to the theme of obedience.

The nature of obedience

"He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him." Once again, keeping his commandments takes place in the context of relationship. Obedience doesn't just stand by itself. Throughout this passage, four times, obedience is directly connected to our love for Jesus. The primary thing that we need to focus on is our relationship with him, for when we are in love with him, obedience flows.

Now, we are very much accustomed to approaching obedience another way. I would imagine that when you're thinking about your Christian life, a lot of what runs through your head is a list of things that you know you ought to be doing for God. In the early days of my ministry when I was pastoring a little church in rural Mississippi, I found that if I went to the most pagan, irreligious person anywhere in that community and started a conversation about spiritual things or about the church, I could predict exactly what would be the first thing out of their mouth: "I know I ought to be in church." That was the universal response. We get this mentality in our spiritual lives that obedience is about doing things, and so we all have this list of things that we ought to do. Now, Jesus calls us to do many things, but he doesn't begin with a list. He begins with this: "When you love me, you will obey me." A little later he says, "There are those who don't obey me, and it shows that they don't love me." So when we're struggling spiritually and we feel that perhaps we're not living up to what God has called us to do, rather than trying to generate the will to go out and perform the things on our list, we need to focus on our love relationship with Jesus.

I remember the earliest days of my walk with Christ, right before I entered college. There was such a passion in my heart for the Lord. I was going to Bible studies all the time. I was in ministry and the word. "In love with Jesus" would describe me perfectly. It was the height of the Jesus movement in Atlanta, and every Friday for about a year, one of my good friends and I would do something that we called malling. We'd meet for lunch and pray and worship together, and then we'd go to shopping malls, where a lot of high school kids and college kids would hang out on Friday afternoons and evenings. We'd hang out with them and just start talking about Jesus. We had more fun malling! We just loved having lunch together, praying and worshipping together, and hanging out with people and talking about Christ. It all flowed out of this passionate love we had for Christ and what he'd done for us, how he'd touched and changed our lives, who he was.

Now, I wish that I could say that I had lived in the stream of that passion all of my life. But there are times of great passion and energy for the Lord, and then life sort of sets in. You settle down and get married and have a family. You get a job. You've got all these things going on in your life, and all of a sudden the business of life starts to crowd out your love for Christ. Part of the problem that most of us have is that we do all this in a context that sometimes sets us up for failure. In any Christian culture or group, an accepted norm of behavior develops. So whenever the love wanes and the passion evaporates, we keep returning to that list of things that we ought to be doing. We get sucked into what can only be described as old-covenant living. If we keep on doing that without a love relationship with Jesus, it will burn us right out. We will become discouraged. But Jesus calls us to this wonderful, passionate relationship: "Love me, and you will obey."

Jesus is trying to get us to understand that it is the essence of true spirituality, of new-covenant living, that we are in love with him. Then all these resources of the Holy Spirit are unleashed in us, and we are able to obey and live for him as he has called us to do. At PBC we talk about new-covenant living a lot, and most often we turn to the Pauline theology of the new covenant, particularly 2 Corinthians. But I would suggest to you that there is nowhere in Scripture that has more profound words about new-covenant living than this passage.

In the final portion of this chapter Jesus goes on to lay out four outcomes of this love relationship with him.

Teaching, encouragement, insight, mission

The first is in verse 26: “These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.” One of the roles of the Holy Spirit, mediating the presence of Christ, is to instruct us about who Christ is and enlarge our knowledge of him. He says to the disciples specifically, “I am going to bring to remembrance all the things that I said to you, and I will teach you all things.” There is an important application of this to these ones who will be writers of the New Testament. In a very real sense, the Spirit working in them will bring to remembrance the things that Jesus has taught them, the history of his life, and the theology of who he is, to form the Scriptures. But in the same way the word of God written by these initial disciples has become a rich reservoir of instruction for us that the Holy Spirit uses to teach us about Christ as we live in relationship with him. The Scriptures are a wonderful, living communication of God about all his glory and who he is.

I was in seminary in an era when there was a huge theological battle raging about the authority of Scripture. The most talked-about topic in my seminary days was whether the Bible was really the inspired word of God. I went to a conservative seminary that was always defending the inerrancy of Scripture. Some of my colleagues had made it their personal cause and were filled with constant polemic in defense of the Scriptures as the word of God. There was a British professor who was a mentor to me. He had a great, wry sense of humor that wonderfully penetrated all the bluster of us young theologians and made us think about things we’d never thought of before. One day we were in the middle of one of these discussions in which people were rallying to the defense of Scripture, and he said, subtly, “You know, you should never talk about the inspiration of Scripture with your Bible closed.”

I started thinking about that, and I thought about it more during my first pastoral experience at the church in Mississippi. I realized that there were a lot of people in that church who would have gone to their death defending the integrity of Scripture as the word of God, but who never read it. What good is that? Part of the dynamic of Christ’s presence in our life through the Spirit is that he’s speaking to us, teaching us, opening up our eyes to the wonder of who he is. And Scripture is the avenue through which he communicates to us to build our relationship with him.

The second outcome of our love relationship with Jesus is peace. Verse 27: “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.” He returns, as he will several times throughout this discourse, to the issue of fear and unsettledness. He knows the disciples’ lives are about to be turned upside-down, and he has just undermined their confidence in themselves by predicting their failure. So he speaks again to the fear and trembling they will experience when they see him arrested and crucified as they themselves flee. He says, “Don’t be troubled. Once the Spirit comes I will not be leaving you. I give you peace, not as the world gives, but as I give.” What that means is simply this: God is not going to solve all our problems when we live in the Spirit. In fact, it’s just the opposite. Most of the time becoming a believer makes your life harder in some ways, humanly speaking. There are issues you have to deal with that you wouldn’t deal with otherwise. But one of the beautiful promises is, “I will give you my peace.” In Christ’s relationship with us, he is personally present with us in every difficulty, every dark shadow, every trouble, and he gives us the strength to face each one.

The third outcome that Jesus talks about is what I call insight. Verses 28-29: “You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it comes to pass, that when it comes to pass, you may believe.” Saying, “If you love me...” implies that there is something faulty in their love at this point. Great things are going to happen if he goes to the cross, but they don’t understand it yet. There is confusion and ambiguity and insecurity about Jesus at the cross and the whole mission they’ve been commanded to take on. But on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit comes to them, all of a sudden their eyes will be opened to what God has been doing.

Something similar happens to us. The Spirit gives us insight into how God is working and moving in our lives. That doesn’t mean that every question will be answered; there’s a lot of mystery in our lives. But part of what the Spirit does is help us to see the world through God’s eyes, interpret what is happening in terms of what God wants to do, and give us a new way to see the world. We begin to trust that God is moving, and part of the confidence we have to trust God when we don’t have answers comes from having understood some of the answers some of the time. Even though we

cannot always answer the questions, we know that God is faithful.

The fourth outcome of walking in this new-covenant life is a sense of mission or purpose. Verses 30-31: “I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me; but that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, even so I do. Arise, let us go from here.” Jesus is saying, “I’m about to go into battle, and I’m not going to be around to teach you much more. Satan is about to have his day. He thinks he’s going to win the battle, and I am going to go to the cross, but don’t worry about it—Satan’s not the one putting me on the cross. He has nothing to do with me. But so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father has commanded.”

Then he says, “Get up, let’s go.” John masterfully uses physical expressions to describe spiritual reality. Earlier in chapter 13 (Discovery Paper 4732) we noted that when Judas went out to betray Jesus, John said, “And it was night.” He didn’t just mean it was dark outside. He was talking about a spiritual darkness. In the same way this expression “Get up, let’s go” is pregnant with meaning beyond the physical reality that they are now leaving the upper room to go toward the vineyards. The first step that Jesus takes out of that upper room, he is walking toward the cross. The events of the evening are now set in motion. He is headed to the garden to pray and to teach, and in that garden he will be betrayed and from there will be taken to trial and eventually to the cross. He purposefully walks toward the mission and says, “I am going to do what the Father has called me to do.”

He is asking them to go with him into that mission when he says, “Get up, let’s go.” They are going to cower and fail for a while, but when the Spirit comes they are going to understand it. Christ is commissioning them now for the mission of communicating the love of God to the world. Our love for the Father is demonstrated by our getting out of our comfortable seats and walking out into the world of need, toward the purpose to which he is calling us, facing the battles there with the resources and strength of the Spirit who is present in us.

It is a wonderful, exciting thing to walk in the new-covenant life that Christ has given us, in which the Spirit’s personal presence is making Jesus alive in our own experience. Out of that a love relationship with Jesus and the Father grows and grows, and from the love of that relationship, obedience flows as we trust the resources of God to do the things he has called us to do. From that love relationship he teaches us, brings us peace and encouragement in the midst of the battle, gives us insight to understand the ways that he is moving, and sends us out into the world with a mission to carry forth his love.

Take a few moments to reflect on your own attitude toward following Jesus. Is the first thing that comes to mind the list of things you ought to be doing? Or is it Christ himself? Do you recognize this day that God has given you his Spirit, that Christ wants to be real in your life, that he loves you and invites you to love him in response? Or is your life so full of distractions that there is no hope of your cultivating that love relationship with Christ, and therefore being taught and encouraged and equipped by his Spirit? We want to be men and women who embrace the mission of God, a mission that is possible because of who Jesus is and his presence in our lives. It is my prayer that we go forth with joy and praise to him, confident that he is able to strengthen us and use us, that we go in the power of his presence through the Spirit to make known the greatness of who he is.

NOTES

(1) J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, © 1984, Fleming H. Revell, a division of Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 49.

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