

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Person and Role of the Holy Spirit: The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Today our subject is "The ministry of the Holy Spirit". This is an important and vital subject to every Christian, though sometimes overlooked. It will help us if we first read what the Lord Jesus has to tell us on the subject.

"These things I have spoken to you while being present 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 things that I said to you." (John 14:25-26)

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning." (John 15:26-27)

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you." (John 16:7-15)

How would you feel if today a close and trusted friend, a wise and strong companion of many years, said to you that it would be better for you if he or she left you? Better for you, expedient for you, advantageous for you if I go away! This is one of the most startling statements that the Lord Jesus made to His disciples. In the verses we have just read together, the Lord Jesus is speaking to His disciples, only hours before He would be betrayed, arrested, subjected to a show trial and crucified. Jesus knew this, but obviously His disciples didn't, and He is preparing them for what lay ahead. He said, "It is to your advantage that I go away." (John 16:7) Even without knowing about the dreadful events that would unfold over the coming hours, I am sure the disciples would struggle to think of any circumstance that would be to their advantage if Jesus left them. He had become their wise and constant companion and guide; a close and trusted friend upon whom they had come to rely totally.

Today's talk is the second in our present series on the role and Person of the Holy Spirit. We are taught very clearly in Scripture that, until the Lord Jesus had returned to His Father in heaven, the Holy Spirit, another divine Person would not be sent here to earth. Not as in the past to occasionally dwell upon a person for the completion of a particular task or to pronounce the mind of God about a certain matter, but now to dwell within true believers and never to leave them.

I am not able to talk within this short time about the many facets of the ministry of the Holy Spirit but if we, for the purpose of today's talk, confine ourselves to the Lord's words recorded for us in the verses we have read in John's Gospel we will learn a great deal. The first thing to notice is that without the ministry of the Holy Spirit we would not even possess eternal life, we would not be believers. Talking to Nicodemus in John 3:3, the Lord emphasised the absolute necessity for a person to be "born again" or "born from above." Nicodemus was bemused by this and questioned how this could be possible. "Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'" (John 3:5)

From other Scriptures we learn that the water referred to here is almost certainly the Word of God. Peter in his first letter speaks of believers being "born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever." (1 Peter 1:23). Elsewhere the Apostle Paul also writes of "the washing of water by the word." (Ephesians 5:26)

We can clearly see that the work of the Holy Spirit is vital in "New Birth" but we will never be able here on earth to understand the work of the Holy Spirit in searching us out and preparing our hearts to believe the message of God's great and free salvation through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. To acknowledge Jesus as Lord according to Romans

10:9 is to be saved but we also learn that it is only through the Holy Spirit that we can do this. "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:3)

In the verses we read together from John's Gospel, the Lord spoke of seven distinct ministries that the Holy Spirit would fulfil. Interestingly, although we more often than not concentrate on the effect of the Holy Spirit working in our lives, the Lord speaks first of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in relation to the truth contained in the Word of God. Primarily the Lord Jesus is speaking to His disciples although His words are also true for us. These are the men who would go out and proclaim the "good news of God ... concerning His Son Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:1-3) Some of them would also be called upon to write a significant proportion of the New Testament. These men had been with the Lord Jesus for about three years and He had constantly been teaching them and demonstrating to them "the truth is in Jesus." (Ephesians 4:21) Or in the Lord's own words, "I am the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6)

However, whilst these disciples were His constant companions, it is clear that they had understood little of the true meaning of much that Jesus had said to them. The first verses we read in John 14:26-27 teach us that the Helper, the Holy Spirit will "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you." For these disciples would not have to rely on their own failing recollection of what had been said by the Lord Jesus but would be perfectly able through the Holy Spirit, Himself a divine person, to accurately remember and record what was said. The importance of this in laying the foundations of the Christian faith is clear for all to see.

The next passage we read was from John 15:26-27. "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning." The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to testify of the Lord Jesus. We can so easily miss this point! We live in a very selfish world and are prone to think a lot about me, about what I want, what I need and deserve. It can also very quickly be all about me! It's not all about me; it's all about Him, Jesus Christ! Think about some of the Scriptures that emphasise the absolute pre-eminence of Jesus Christ: "All things were created by Him and for Him." (Colossians 1:16) "The Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment unto the Son, that all men should honour the Son." (John 5:22-23)

What we learn from these verses in John 15 is that another facet of the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to bear testimony, to draw attention to the Lord Jesus Christ. In Hebrews we read "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they." (Hebrews 1:1-4) The incarnation of the Son of God marked a climax in God's desire to bless and dwell with mankind. In the Old Testament, there were pictures and shadows of God communing with men and women, but there was always distance and restrictions, but now God was dwelling as a man on earth. He could be seen, spoken to and even touched!

And so the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to testify of the Lord Jesus. It isn't just that Jesus has a message from God for us; He is the message! All we can know about God we learn from Jesus Christ. Jesus said to His disciple Philip, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). "Immanuel," God is with us! So it is vital, absolutely vital that the Holy Spirit draws our attention to the Lord Jesus. John in the first chapter of his Gospel writes, "In Him [Jesus Christ] was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:4). The question you and I have to answer is, "How much time and thought do I give to my blessings and how much attention do I give to the Lord Jesus who made these amazing blessings freely available to me?" When the Lord Jesus was speaking to the Jews in John 5:39 He said, "Search the scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me." Guided by the Holy Spirit, we will find pictures and prophecies of the Lord Jesus all through the Old Testament.

This witness is continued in the New Testament through the writings of the various disciples and others. Jesus went on to say, "And you [the disciples] also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning." (John 15:27) The Holy Spirit would work through the New Testament writers to record for all time an accurate record of the work and teaching of the Lord Jesus and the application of that teaching for us today. Other talks in this series will draw attention to the fruit of the Spirit as recorded by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." It is the desire of God to see these features in His people, but first the Holy Spirit wants us to observe them displayed perfectly in the life of the Lord Jesus. And as we read the record of the Lord Jesus as recounted in the four Gospels, we can do so and learn to express these same features in our lives.

But the Holy Spirit is also here to bear witness to the people of this world as a whole. Creation is a witness to the majesty and power of God. It is a record that can be seen each and every day by everyone living on this planet. David wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech,

and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” (Psalm 19:1-4). Now additionally the presence of the Holy Spirit here on earth is a record, “And when He [the Holy Spirit] has come, He will convict [in the sense of exposing] the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin...” (John 16:8-9)

This is not an easy verse to understand and maybe as a consequence we do not often think about it as part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. But there is great significance in the fact that the Holy Spirit is here in this world. Why is the Holy Spirit here at all? It is because Jesus Christ is not here! “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” (John 16:7), and also, “The Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (John 7:39) The Holy Spirit would not come to earth until Jesus had returned to heaven and been glorified there. Why did Jesus return to heaven and His Father? Because He was rejected and crucified here!

And so the presence of the Holy Spirit is in itself a witness, and the Lord Jesus in John 16 goes on to expand on this. The Holy Spirit “will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.” (John 16:8-11) The presence of Holy Spirit here exposes the sin of this world. He is only here because in our sin we, all of us, rejected and crucified the Son of God. The presence of the Holy Spirit here also brings to light righteousness, God’s righteousness, because although the man Jesus was abused and crucified here, the crowd cried out “We will not have this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14), He has been accepted in heaven and honoured there. But soberly the Holy Spirit also exposes the fact that there is “judgement to come”. If God has acted righteously, and He always does, in exalting Jesus Christ in heaven, He must also act righteously in dealing with the sin of this world. So there will certainly be “judgement to come” for all who refuse to acknowledge their personal sin and seek God’s freely offered forgiveness.

The verses that we read together from John 16 go on to speak about another aspect of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.” I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12-14)

It was often evident that the disciples didn’t understand the things that the Lord Jesus was teaching them. Even in the early verses of John 10, when the Lord used a picture that they would have been very familiar with, a sheep fold in the desert and a doorway into the sheep fold, we read, “This parable Jesus spoke to them: but they understood not what things they were which He spoke unto them.” (John 10:6) This should not really surprise us. Paul writing in 1 Corinthians says, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:6-14.)

The focus of God’s dealings with mankind changed completely with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Previously there had been a physical centre, Jerusalem, and rituals and ceremonies to perform. But now the focus is on the spiritual not the physical and our attention is shifted away from this earth and to heaven “where Christ sits at God’s right hand” (Colossians 3:1) This marked a huge change for these Jewish disciples. Much of their long-held traditions would have to be laid aside as they embraced the freedom of Christianity and then go out to share the good news with the Gentiles they had once so completely despised. The Holy Spirit would empower them to do this. Being Himself God, He would be more than able to know the mind of God and guide these followers of the Lord Jesus and ourselves too.

It is worth noting here that in the verses we read the Holy Spirit is called the “Spirit of Truth” on more than one occasion. As Christians, we should rejoice in the fact that we have to do with a God of truth, absolute and unchanging truth. Jesus Himself is “the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6), and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth who will guide us into all truth. In a changing world God’s truth stands inviolate; standards change, fashions change but Truth, God’s Truth does not. This may increasingly bring us into conflict with the world around us.

The Holy Spirit will guide us into “all truth”. This suggests that all God wants us to know has now been revealed in the Scriptures. We may be limited in our understanding because of our own lack of obedience and commitment to study God’s Word, but the potential is there for each of us. Paul writing to the Christians at Corinth said, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12) The wonderful fact is that whatever our restrictions and limitations now here on earth, there is a day coming when we will “know just as we are known.”

The Holy Spirit however doesn’t want us just to look back to the life lived by Jesus here on earth, He also draws our attention to the majesty of Jesus Christ now, today in the presence of God. In the epistle to the Hebrews we read, “We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour.”

(Hebrews 2:9) It is really encouraging to see Jesus triumphant and crowned with glory and majesty in heaven! Very soon the whole world will see Him in His glory when He returns to judge and reign over this world.

This leads on to the final ministry I wanted to think very briefly about that is, "He will tell you things to come." Only God knows the future. He is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, but in His Word He has, through His Holy Spirit, recorded for us coming events. As we study the Scriptures, we are shown some of God's plans for the future, most dramatically, of course, in the Revelation, but also throughout the entire Bible. We must be careful in our interpretation of these Scriptures. They tend to give the broad brush strokes of the picture rather than the fine detail, but guided by the Spirit of God we get a glimpse of what the future holds.

I do hope this very brief look at some aspects of the ministry of God the Holy Spirit has been helpful and will encourage you to study the Bible more to find the truths there that God wants to share with us.

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