

Truth for Today

The Bible explained

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The Person and work of the Spirit: The Holy Spirit in the world

Today we have the last talk in our series about the Holy Spirit, and we will consider the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the world. In our previous talks we have thought about the Holy Spirit in Christ, the Holy Spirit in the Christian, and the Holy Spirit in the Church. What can we learn about His interaction with the world?

My talk will have three main points, which are these:

1. That the world does not know, and indeed cannot know, the Holy Spirit.
2. The Holy Spirit is nevertheless active in the world, since it is He who causes us to have faith to be born again. He does this through His Word, and so the Word of God can be thought of as one of the main means of interaction between the Holy Spirit and the world. Although the world does not know Him and cannot receive Him, He dwells within the Church and within all true believers, as we have been hearing in the previous talks. Therefore, another very important means of interaction between the Holy Spirit and the world is through believers.
3. Finally, this means that it is important that, as Christians, our lives are consistent with what we believe, and that we do not grieve or quench Him, so that we do not hinder His interaction with the world.

1. The world does not know, and indeed cannot know, the Holy Spirit

First of all then, let's think about why the world does not know the Holy Spirit, and cannot receive Him. We know that is true from what the Lord Jesus said, and also what the Apostle Paul said. In John 14:16-17, the Lord Jesus said, *"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever - the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."* The Lord said quite clearly that the world could not receive the Holy Spirit, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him, but the Lord also said very clearly that the Spirit would dwell within individual believers.

Paul says a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 2:14: *"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."* The natural man, as Paul calls him, in other words an unconverted person, cannot know the things of the Spirit. They appear foolish to him or to her. We need the Holy Spirit to understand God correctly. *"For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God"* (1 Corinthians 2:11).

As such then, the Holy Spirit is an unknown Person as far as the world is concerned. Now, this does not mean that they do not understand the concept of the Holy Spirit or His place in Christian theology, but He is not known personally. His help and influence which He gives to Christians is not known. They are not *"guided into all truth"* as the Lord Jesus promised that His followers would be in John 16:13.

Now, if we were to stop here, that would leave us with a significant problem. We know from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 that it is the Holy Spirit who is responsible for new birth. Let's read John 3:5-8: *"Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.'" If the world does not know and cannot receive the Holy Spirit, but we must be born of the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God, how can that happen? Thankfully, as always, God has provided a way.*

2. The Holy Spirit is nevertheless active in the world

This is where we come to the second point of this talk, which is that there are indeed interfaces, if I can use that expression, between the Holy Spirit and the world, and those interfaces are God's word and God's people. God reaches people by His Spirit, through the means of His word and His people. You may remember that the Lord Jesus said in John 7:38-39, *"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."*

But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." The Holy Spirit, who indwells true believers, desires to flow out in blessing to others, just like rivers of living water. God wants to reach everyone: *"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9).

It's often easier to understand Bible teaching by thinking of examples, and we have some excellent illustrations of what I have just been speaking about in the book of Acts. Acts 8:26-40, is a great example. There we read about an important Ethiopian official, who had travelled to Jerusalem and was on his way back, evidently having purchased a portion of the Old Testament Scriptures. He was reading Isaiah 53:7-8 as we would refer to it. In Acts 8:29, we read how the Holy Spirit gave Philip the evangelist (see Acts 21:8) a specific instruction: *"Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot.'"* If we were to read on in the story, we would see that the official did not understand what he was reading in Isaiah (Acts 8:31, 34). Philip explained the passage to him (Acts 8:35), and the Ethiopian official was converted! (Acts 8:36). This lovely example illustrates for us the overruling and directing work of the Holy Spirit, who desired to reach this man, and the two means that He used, namely His Word, and one of His people.

Another good example is described in Acts 11, where Peter is recounting how he went to visit a Roman centurion named Cornelius, and how this man was converted. In Acts 11:12 Peter says, *"Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house."* Once again, we see the Holy Spirit directing. Let's read on in Acts 11:13-15: *"And he [that is, Cornelius] told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning."* We have the same pattern as with Philip the evangelist. Once again, the Holy Spirit directs, and then Peter preaches God's Word - *"words by which you and all your household will be saved"* as it says in Acts 11:14. Then, Cornelius and those with him believed the words, and they received the Holy Spirit for themselves.

These two illustrations are beautiful examples of the Holy Spirit acting as a river of living water, in these cases flowing out from Philip and from Peter. We also saw the importance of God's Word. James 1:18 tells us that the Word of God is one of the agents in our conversion: *"Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures."*

The importance of God's Word is further underlined for us in Hebrews 4:12: *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."* The last time I spoke on 'Truth for Today' I was speaking about the armour of God in Ephesians 6:10-20. If you heard that talk, you may remember that the armour of God includes *"the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"* (Ephesians 6:17).

There is a very interesting set of verses in Hebrews 6:4-6, which speaks of the Holy Spirit's interaction with people. *"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame."* These are solemn verses and they have unsettled some people.

Most of you, I am sure, will know about John Bunyan, the author of the famous *Pilgrim's Progress*. In his autobiography, which he called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, he described how these verses greatly unsettled him. But rightly understood, these verses should not alarm true believers. We have the assurance of the Lord Jesus Himself that those who truly belong to Him will never perish. *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand"* (John 10:27-28). What Hebrews 6:4-6 describe are one who has definitely heard a message from the Holy Spirit Himself, and has decidedly and absolutely refused it. But Hebrews 6:4-6 are very interesting from the point of view of describing how the Holy Spirit interacts. I am indebted to one of Lewis Sperry Chafer's books which pointed that out to me. Hebrews 6:4-6 talk about those enlightened, those who have tasted the heavenly gift, and become partakers of the Holy Spirit. What these expressions teach us is that the Holy Spirit, acting as He does as a river of living water, comes very close to people, greatly seeking and desiring to reach them. He brings enlightenment and knowledge of God's things. The solemn point is that these things can be refused, as we have seen in these verses.

3. As Christians, it is important that we do not hinder His interaction with the world

So far then, we have considered firstly that the world does not know the Holy Spirit, and secondly that He is nevertheless active in this world, through His Word and His people. Let's move on to the third and final part of this talk, which is that it is important that our lives are consistent with what we believe, and that we do not grieve or quench the Holy Spirit, so that we do not hinder His interaction with the world.

I have just been re-reading a book called *God the Evangelist*, with the subtitle *How the Holy Spirit works to bring men and women to faith*. It is written by David Wells. I found this to be a very helpful and interesting book. David Wells makes the point that the Holy Spirit is just that, **Holy**. Therefore, David states, the Holy Spirit is concerned about the holiness of our lives just as He is concerned with the message of the Gospel that we preach. The Holy Spirit is a Person, not an influence or a power, and therefore He acts according to His principles.

We know from the New Testament that we can grieve Him or quench Him. Ephesians 4:29-32 teaches us as follows: *“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.”*

The context of Ephesians 4:29-32 suggests that speaking corrupt or worthless things, being bitter against people or being malicious or slandering, and having an unforgiving spirit, can all grieve the Holy Spirit. If we do not pay attention to these things, we may well grieve the Spirit and so inhibit His work of grace that He wants to do through us for other people. (See also 1 Thessalonians 5:19)

Colossians 4:5-6 teaches us that we should *“walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”* We have similar instructions in Ephesians 5:15-18: *“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.”*

If we want to redeem the time, as these two sets of verses teach us, and if therefore we want to have speech always with grace, seasoned with salt, so that we will know how to answer each one, we will need to be filled with the Spirit. That way, He will be able to flow out of us in blessing, like rivers of living water. He will seek to reach others through us. This cannot happen if we are grieving Him by our actions. As David Wells points out in his book, the Holy Spirit is not simply a power that we can unleash.

This is actually quite a solemn, but also an encouraging teaching from the Bible for those of us who are Christians. How we live our lives does have an effect on how the Holy Spirit can use us in His interaction with the world. On the other hand, it is also a real encouragement. If we seek to depend on the Lord and be led by the Spirit, not **trying** to be good but rather seeking the Lord's help and empowerment in all things, then the Holy Spirit may very well use what we say and do for the blessing of those around us.

A couple of years ago I was in Oxford one Sunday evening and I attended a service at a church there. The preacher gave a very helpful sermon, and one point I remember was his comments about evangelism. If I remember him correctly, he was saying that he had been preparing some notes, I think, or perhaps a course, on evangelism, and it had struck him how little the New Testament actually gives in terms of specific instructions on **how** to evangelise. Now we do of course have a number of examples of how evangelism was done in the early church, as related to us in the book of Acts, and I have given some examples in this talk. Furthermore, we do have some specific instructions, for example in 1 Peter 3:15: *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.”* But it is true that there are not many specific instructions on technique. There are however very many instructions in the New Testament epistles about **how we should live**. That, I think, is quite telling.

How we live will have a direct impact on whether we are pleasing or grieving the Holy Spirit. This in turn will affect whether He chooses to use us or not in His gracious mission of reaching others. And so we see that how we live is important in the context of the relationship of the Holy Spirit with the world. So let's be encouraged - the Holy Spirit can use ordinary Christian lives as we live our day to day lives in the presence of God, and He seeks to reach others through us.

Conclusion

Well, we have covered a lot of ground today. I hope that it has been encouraging and helpful and I would love to hear your comments. I found it challenging and yet encouraging as I prepared for this talk, and I trust that I will seek the Lord's help to put into practice what I have been speaking about. Let's briefly recap the main points to help us remember.

We covered three main points, which were

1. That the world does not know, and indeed cannot know, the Holy Spirit;

2. That the Holy Spirit is nevertheless active in the world, and that He works by means of His Word and through believers. We considered the examples of Philip and the Ethiopian official, and Peter and the Roman centurion, to illustrate this second point. In both these cases, we saw how the Holy Spirit was as a river of living water, flowing out from these men of God. This was the promise that the Lord Jesus made to those who would believe in Him;
3. Our final point was that it is important that our lives are consistent with what we believe, and that we do not grieve or quench the Holy Spirit, so that we do not hinder His interaction with the world. He is the **Holy** Spirit, so He is concerned with our practical holiness as He is concerned with reaching others. I am grateful to the helpful books I mentioned in this talk which have helped me to understand the Scriptures concerning this subject.

May the Lord encourage us in our day to day lives, and may He use us for the blessing of many others!

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