

Chapter 14: 15ff
The Gospel of John
Discourse on the Holy Spirit

Nowhere is the spiritual nature of this gospel more clearly expressed than it is in Jesus' discourse regarding the holy Spirit. The Spirit's role is described by Jesus in several ways. However, they all boil down to the fact that it is through the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, that we participate in the divine love and life of God.

Jesus begins by pointing out that if we love him, we will keep his commandments. As we have already seen in his previous discourse, Jesus' commandments are summed-up in the rule of love—to love as he has loved. But how is that possible? How could flawed, mortal, and weak human beings, crippled by their alienation from God, love in the way that the divine Son of God loves? Is this an act of the will? Can we conjure up the ability to love God and one another from within our own hearts?

This commandment is the very expression of what it means to be reconciled to God and one another. While it is within the realm of possibility to understand this, it is not possible to actually fulfill this commandment. Jesus introduces his discourse on the Holy Spirit precisely because we receive and participate in the reconciliation Jesus accomplishes through the gift of the Spirit of God.

Therefore, faced with a commandment that is beyond our capacity, he follows with the premise that he will ask the Father to give us "another Advocate, to be with you forever." The bond of love between Jesus and the Father is the Holy Spirit. The being of the spirit is love and life. The Father made Jesus' son-ship clear through the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him when he was baptized. Jesus' work, his Passion, his dying and rising is what reconciles us to God. This is what makes it possible for us to be included in the bond of love between the Father and the Son. This is why Jesus can promise that through him, we too can receive the Spirit—inclusion in the Trinitarian bond of love and eternal life.

Jesus first refers to the Spirit as "another Advocate." This is a translation of the Greek word "*paraclete*." This can also be translated variously as "helper," "comforter," "encourager," and "intercessor." Only the gospel of John uses this word to describe the Spirit. Thus along with Jesus himself, the Spirit intercedes for us with God. Paul also uses this terminology in Romans where he says, "the Spirit intercedes for us with signs too deep for words." This is another way of saying that the spirit brings the life and love of God to us. We therefore are enabled to participate in—to be included in—the life and love of God. Because God is everlasting, this inclusion is "forever."

Jesus then refers to the Spirit as "the spirit of truth." Truth here refers to being—to what is. When we speak the truth, we share what actually is. To lie is to share something that is not. Lies are darkness because they represent an attempt to avoid

or cover up what is real. The truth reveals what is and therefore sheds light so that we can see what is. The Spirit is truth because the Spirit reveals who God actually is. The spirit does this by bringing the life and love of God to us. The Spirit shares this love and life with us “because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

Jesus says that the “world” cannot receive the Spirit” because it neither sees him nor knows him.” The world—that which shapes our lives in space and time—is focused entirely on what is extended to the self. Our lives in the world are caught up with external concerns: worries about wealth, power, the opinion of others, how we look success, knowledge (in the abstract), and so forth. Therefore, our inner self is defined by these externals. We are what we have; we are what we do; we are reflected in the opinions of others or the standards of success in our particular culture and society. Our neighborhoods, our cars, the prestige of our occupations, and the desire to be affirmed as a person of value—these are the things that define who we are and who we became in “the world.” Moreover, life in the world brings on pressure to conform to whatever is “politically correct.” This is an apt term because politics is the exercise of power, and to be “correct” means living by the values, opinions, and standards of whatever culture you live in. To be outside of these things is to have the rug pulled out from under you in terms of your inclusion and acceptability. This causes anxiety, worry, and can leave to despair. We fear this because it means the loss of both the sense of self and the feeling of being “right with the world.”

This external self that we so desperately strive to construct and maintain at the cost of being anxiously obsessed with the affairs of life in this world—this self is a “persona”—a mask that keeps us entirely unaware of our spiritual self—the self that has the potential of coming into being—of being “birthed” (‘born anew’ in John’s terminology) through a relationship with the unseen God. This new self comes into being (the “new Adam” using Paul’s terminology) through the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit, says Jesus, will be “in you.”

The Spirit is not external to us, as the objects of the world are. So long as we are enslaved to the world—the external through which we define ourselves—we will be entirely distracted and alienated from the Spirit who dwells in our hearts. This is why Jesus says the world cannot see or know him.

But how do we come to know the Spirit who dwells in our hearts and who, as Jesus says, “abides with us”? That is, once gifted with the Spirit, the Spirit remains. It does not abandon us. The Spirit is always with us, even when we have become so distracted with our life in the world that we become entirely unaware of the Spirit’s presence.

Elsewhere, Jesus compared the Spirit to wind. We can’t see it. But we can feel it. We don’t know where it came from. We don’t know where it goes. But we know its presence. This is how it is with the Spirit. It is like a breath of fresh air—a breath that gives life and love, a breath that blows into our hearts and thereby enables us to participate in the redeeming life of God.

In verse 18, Jesus tells us where the Spirit comes from. He had already said before that the Spirit would come from the Father at his request. Now he is more explicit; the Spirit comes from him. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." The Spirit brings his redeeming love and life to us. When we open our hearts in faith to him, he comes to us in the Spirit. We can't see him. He is not out there in the world. Rather, he dwells in our hearts.

It is important here to pay attention to context. Jesus is bringing words of assurance to his disciples. After his "glorification"—his death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father, he will no longer be with them as he is now. They will not see him as "the Word made flesh." Nevertheless, he will return to them as, in the words of Paul, "a life-giving Spirit." Paul also said, "It is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me."

Jesus' use of the word "orphaned" is important. An orphan is a child without a parent—it is also disciples without their master: the One in whom they have put their faith. When he is gone, they will feel "orphaned." But when he returns to them through the gift of the Spirit, they will become "children of God." They will be "born from above" through the Spirit because the Spirit brings his life and love into their hearts. They will no longer be what they were—defined by the externals of the world. They will no longer be dependent on the status, the approval, the inclusion that comes from being conformed to the external values and standards of the world. They will no longer have to fear losing their sense of value and positive affirmation.

In the world, loss, change, illness, disability, failure, ageing—all of these things and more can rob us of our value in this world. In fact, most of the people who joined the Christian community in the apostolic period were people from the lower and despised classes; the poor, slaves, "sinners," widows, orphans. What attracted them to the Christian faith was the love of Christ. They didn't have any positive or affirming life in the world. No one considered them to be people of any value. When they died, they were put in mass graves with no identification. It was as if they never existed.

As they heard the good news of Jesus Christ, and as they came to faith in him, the Spirit of love and life came into their hearts. It was as Jesus had said (as recorded in the synoptic gospels): Those who are exalted will be humbled, and those who are humbled will be exalted." When we open our hearts in faith, Jesus comes in the power of the Spirit. His love and life dwells in our hearts, and we are no longer dependent on 'the world' to tell us we are loved, valued, and included.

This is what Jesus is telling the disciples. He will no longer be with them in the flesh. But he will return to them in the Spirit. And because his return will be "in" them, he will give them a share in his divine and eternal life. "I am the resurrection and the life...and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Jesus again affirms this: "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

These affirmations define why Jesus must go through his passion—his crucifixion, his death, and his resurrection. He was sent into the world in order to bring us into God's Trinitarian circle and bond of love and life. "On that day," (When he returns in the Holy Spirit) "you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

Jesus and the Father are one in the bond of the Holy spirit—three persons with one divine essence. This was how the Church Fathers would come to understand who God is; he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But they are not three separate Gods. They are One in their divine being. What Jesus is telling his disciples here is that this One triune God is reaching out to us, creatures created out of the elements that make up all creation, and yet stamped with the image and likeness of God. (Genesis 1-2) Being created—having come into existence in a moment of time where nothing lasts forever, where nothing is permanent or everlasting, we are mortal. We too, as creatures who live in separation from the divine life, will return to whence we came—the elements. Only God is everlasting. All being that is not "in God" will perish

But this is not the Creator's will for us. Created in the image of God, we were made for fellowship with God. For this reason, Jesus came—to save us from our estrangement from God and thereby to save us from death as well. In order to do that, Jesus too must die—not because he is estranged from God, but because he must enter into our alienated and mortal existence so as to save us from it. He is God entering into our lives so as to save us for life with him--so as to bring us into the Trinitarian bond of love and life.

Because Jesus does this, the Holy Spirit brings us into fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit brings us into a union with the Son, and through the Son with the Father. We thereby participate in divine life—eternal love and life. The image of God—an image that has been corrupted and distorted by the images we create for ourselves in "the world" is restored. We are born anew into life that comes from fellowship with God. Union with God through the Spirit and in the Son brings divine love into our hearts so that we can live as Jesus commands. Thus, Jesus continues, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

We do not wait until we die to enter into fellowship with God. Fellowship with God, (entering the Kingdom of God as the synoptic gospels put it), begins with the gift of the Holy spirit. The Spirit brings the eternal life of the resurrected Son of God to us. The "love of God is poured into our hearts" as Paul puts it. This gives us a share in the eternal life of God and assures us that we will live in fellowship with God forever.

Jesus then turns to another of the roles of the Holy Spirit—the teaching or knowledge the Spirit gives us. In verse 25 Jesus says, "...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Jesus' teaching as recorded in the four gospels does not save us. His death and resurrection saves us. Because he died and rose for us, the Kingdom of Heaven has been opened-up for us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, Jesus' teaching (his parables, exhortations, and sayings) reflects what life in the Spirit looks like.

For example, when we receive the love of God, which is the gift of the Spirit, we are like the good Samaritan; we are received by the Father just as the Prodigal son was received by his father; we can see Jesus as Lord just as the blind man who was healed saw Jesus as Lord. We can forgive seven times seventy; we can pray for our persecutors and love our enemies; we can become the "salt" of the earth. We will understand that "defilement" is what comes out of our hearts rather than from having neglected purification rituals; we will understand how faith begins as a small seed but turns into a large plant; we will experience how faith can move mountains.

All of these things and volumes more Jesus taught an uncomprehending crowd of people and disciples. They struggled to understand him—what he said and what he did. However, as Isaiah said of the people of Israel, they heard but didn't understand. Indeed, they could not understand because they were yet "of the world." Their minds and understanding were clouded and darkened by the distractions of the world, as if they were all like Martha who was consumed by worry over her obligations and tasks.

However, when the Spirit descended upon them after Jesus had opened the Kingdom of heaven for them, then they would remember and understand everything he had taught. The Spirit would "enlighten" them by his presence in their hearts. This would open their minds, and it would all make perfect sense.

From a worldly point of view, Jesus' teaching often seems outrageous and incomprehensible. Love your enemies? Become a servant? Forgive those who hurt you? Humble yourself like the repentant tax collector? Don't worry about tomorrow or become anxious about your bodily needs? None of this makes sense in a world where everyone strives for wealth, status, power, and the approval of the crowd. It doesn't make sense because the values taught by Jesus and the values of the world are in conflict with one another. The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar are incompatible. Why would anyone who is immersed in the Kingdom of Caesar take Jesus seriously?

The fact is they didn't take him seriously. They put him to death on a tree as if he were cursed by God. But he doesn't stay dead. He returned as the exalted Son of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. This same Spirit brings the living Jesus into our hearts through faith. Now "Christ is present in faith." (Luther) And he comes to us as we open our hearts to his word and promises—proclaimed and sacramental in the context of the worshipping community. Those things that Jesus taught we repeat over and over again. And we understand because the Spirit who dwells in our hearts enables us to understand.

At this point, Jesus tells his disciples, "I will no longer talk much with you..." He is on his way out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley to a garden named Gethsemane. Here he will pray for strength to do this Father's will. Judas will betray him. The other disciples will fall asleep, perhaps from the wine they consumed. In any case, Chapter 14 ends with this: "Rise, let us be on our way."

But John is not done sharing. Three chapters to go before the story of the Passion.