

## “The Witness of the Spirit”

Luke 12:1-12  
April 29, 2007

We continue our series on the Holy Spirit. We began with the words of comfort Jesus spoke to his disciples during his last meal with them: Do not be afraid, I will never leave you as orphans. I will send you the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will abide in you. Jesus promised: God is always with us. Then, last week, we looked at how the Holy Spirit was the Spirit of Christ, filling him with power and validating his work. It is that same Spirit of Christ bringing us confidence in two things: forgiveness and hope.

This week, we move on a little bit farther, to the witness of the Holy Spirit. What does the Spirit say? What do we say through the power of the Spirit? Why is it important?

This may be the heaviest topic in the entire series on the Holy Spirit. If the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, there is a fair amount of fear-inducing material in this passage.

Jesus is in the heart of his time of ministry in our passage this morning. He is talking to the disciples, though there is a large crowd gathered around. Some of this will sound familiar because we heard it in Mark 3. He has started on his way to Jerusalem for the Passion, and his rhetoric and criticisms regarding the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is heating up.

Read Luke 12:1-12.

The witness of the Pharisees is important because it is the contrast point to the witness of the Holy Spirit. It is the “here’s what NOT to do.”

### **The Witness of the Holy Spirit is clarifying.**

When we talk about the “witness of the Holy Spirit,” what I want you to hear is that the message of the Holy Spirit is consistent with what Scripture reveals. It is a confirmation and application of what God has given us through the law and the prophets. The Holy Spirit does not contradict or deny what God has said or Jesus has done. Just as Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets, the Holy Spirit confirms that in us. That is the witness of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, Jesus’ points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees; they demand holiness and yet do not live holy lives themselves. Note what Jesus is saying and what he is not saying: he is not saying that the Pharisees were not trying to live righteous lives. Rather, they mistook their efforts for actual righteousness. “Closer” to them meant “better.” They took pride in their “betterness” than others. They took pride in their ability to be more righteous than other people. Their efforts to appear more righteous required them to hide their sin – the irony is that in trying to hide their sin, they revealed it all the more. Jesus calls them hypocrites.

Can’t you see how aghast the Pharisees must have been as Jesus was saying this? “Where?” “How?” “Who are you to judge?” “Us? How about you? Eating and drinking with sinners – we can point out all sorts of ways that you are not doing what’s right!” We see this in churches all

the time; even pastors succumb to this. The first reaction to the accusation I am not right often is, “yes I am, you are wrong, what is the matter with you?” It takes a lot of effort to stop, try not to defend myself, hear what is being said, and recognize the truth.

The hypocrisy of self-righteousness is deceptive. It sneaks in if we do not pay attention. It sneaks in when we take the blood of Christ for granted; when we do not remember the cost Christ paid to deliver us from bondage to sin. How can you tell? Remember last week’s disgust, outrage, and anger with the shooter at Virginia Tech? If you feel for a moment that your sin is not as bad, not as troubling, not as disgusting, outrageous, and disappointing to God, you are probably being deceived.

One of the most famous sermons in American history is Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” (Jonathan Edwards the preacher, not the candidate for President). It is a powerful sermon and absolutely terrifying in its presentation of the clarity between natural man’s attempt at righteousness and the holiness of God. It is worth reading in full. For now, however, only number 9:

All wicked men's pains and **contrivance** which they use to escape hell, while they continue to reject Christ, and so remain wicked men, do not secure them from hell one moment. Almost every natural man that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do. Every one lays out matters in his own mind how he shall avoid damnation, and flatters himself that he contrives well for himself, and that his schemes will not fail. They hear indeed that there are but few saved, and that the greater part of men that have died heretofore are gone to hell; but each one imagines that he lays out matters better for his own escape than others have done. He does not intend to come to that place of torment; he says within himself, that he intends to take effectual care, and to order matters so for himself as not to fail.

But the foolish children of men miserably delude themselves in their own schemes, and in confidence in their own strength and wisdom; they trust to nothing but a shadow. The greater part of those who heretofore have lived under the same means of grace, and are now dead, are undoubtedly gone to hell; and it was not because they were not as wise as those who are now alive: it was not because they did not lay out matters as well for themselves to secure their own escape. If we could speak with them, and inquire of them, one by one, whether they expected, when alive, and when they used to hear about hell, ever to be the subjects of misery: we doubtless, should hear one and another reply, "No, I never intended to come here: I had laid out matters otherwise in my mind; I thought I should contrive well for myself -- I thought my scheme good. I intended to take effectual care; but it came upon me unexpected; I did not look for it at that time, and in that manner; it came as a thief -- Death outwitted me: God's wrath was too quick for me. Oh, my cursed foolishness! I was flattering myself, and pleasing myself with vain dreams of what I would do hereafter; and when I was saying, Peace and safety, then sudden destruction came upon me."

Don't fool yourselves, Edwards says. Unless you have been convicted of your sins by the Holy Spirit, repent and joined yourself to Christ as your only righteousness, hell awaits.

We do not preach like that much any more, though perhaps we should. The news consistently reports in surveys, most Americans believe in God. Most, in fact, identify themselves as Christian. Yet, when asked why people do *not* go to church, they suggest that the hypocrisy of believers is a major deterrent. The conversation usually ends up with something like, "I believe in God and can worship him on my own. I don't need a church."

Uh – huh.

For what it's worth, there is merit in the criticism that church people often can be hypocritical. That said, it also is true that the hypocrisy of church people does not make non-church people any more righteous in God's eyes. Further, there also is merit in suggesting that worshiping God only on your own is not worship because God commands us to gather together to worship. If we do not obey, God is not really Lord and we are not really worshiping him. Both positions are hypocritical.

Jesus says that the failures of the Pharisees – and all people – will be brought to light. The scene is the throne room of heaven where everything is revealed. Nothing will be secret. Think about that for a moment: everything you have ever done – the things of which you are proud and the things of which you are ashamed – and it will be all there right before you. At that point do you want to trust in your own righteousness or trust in Jesus?

The witness of the Holy Spirit is one of clarifying judgment here and now. The Holy Spirit brings us to our knees. And that's not a bad thing; in fact, it is the only good thing.

The witness of the Holy Spirit bring this truth before our eyes: *Jesus* is our righteousness, here and now and always. *Jesus* is our holiness, here and now and always. *Jesus* is our savior and our Lord, here and now and always. Our only hope is to cleave unto him, holding on to him with all we are. Even so, in our own strength we are not able; ah, but here is the peace and comfort that we have: the Holy Spirit is holding onto us. Nothing, says the scripture, nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. The love of God in Christ Jesus is our hope, it is our peace, it is our confidence; we are able to trust because of the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

The witness of the Holy Spirit is clarifying because it ends any pride or boasting based upon our own works or our own doing – we are not righteous on our own, we are made righteous because of Jesus. "Everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God."

## **The Witness of the Holy Spirit is personal.**

Which brings us to our second point today: the witness of the Holy Spirit is personal. The work of the Holy Spirit brings about humility in believers. The personal work of the Holy Spirit comes in two forms: causing a positive fear of God and relieving a negative fear of others.

In verse 5 Jesus tells the disciples to fear the one who, after he has killed, has the ability to cast one into “hell” (is how the NRSV translates it). The only one with that ability and authority is God himself. Again, the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

Actually, “hell” here is “gehenna,” which was a burning trash heap outside of Jerusalem. The fire never stopped in gehenna – which is where we get much of the fire and brimstone preaching about the torment of those who do not repent and receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. Without resorting to scare tactics, hear what Jesus is saying: do not fear those whose power is limited to this world; do fear the one who will judge between those who live in the kingdom of God (the new Jerusalem, the city of shalom, the city of peace) and those who will be cast outside of it. The division will be made based on the response to the witness to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus tells the disciples that a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not. This has troubled believers for a long time. How do we avoid making the mistake of inadvertently blaspheming against the Spirit? Looking at the context may provide some clues.

Speaking a word against the Son of Man, or Jesus as he was talking about himself before the resurrection, would be forgiven. Consider Peter: he denied Jesus three times, yet still was redeemed. Blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is something different altogether: it means that someone specifically acts to reject the salvation that they have received through the Holy Spirit. It is more than just being frivolous, it means acting to reject salvation. It is to say that God does not save.

Those whose hearts God convicts later in adulthood or in the depths of their despair; those are like the ones who have responded positively to the witness of the Holy Spirit. Their profession of faith, “Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior” and their belief in God’s power raising Jesus from the dead provides their salvation.

In the early church, the claim “Jesus is Lord,” made you subject a death sentence in some circumstances. In recent days – Cassie Bernall at Columbine High School being a widely-known example – “Jesus is Lord” makes you a target for evil.

Judgment *and* a target for evil?

If all of life were just what we see; then, yes, perhaps this would not be good news. Fortunately, life is *not* just what we see. The witness of the Holy Spirit is of the *resurrected* Jesus.

The witness of the Holy Spirit is a witness of hope. It is in the confidence of the Spirit that we can proclaim Jesus Christ is risen. In a world still searching for the bones of Jesus, we have the

confidence that Jesus is raised from the dead. Our lives have an eternal purpose, our lives have meaning beyond the world we see. What is the chief end of mankind? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

The witness of the Holy Spirit is a witness of love. Jesus came to us while we were yet sinners; the Holy Spirit is with us, teaching us, confirming in us, leading us as disciples of Jesus.

The witness of the Holy Spirit is a witness of confidence. In times of trial, the Holy Spirit will give us the words to speak. Experience tells us that there will be times of trial – that is, times when our faith is tested. Either we experience hard times of loss and disappointment or we are put on the spot to defend why we believe in Jesus. The promise Jesus makes to his disciples remains a comfort to us: Jesus does not leave the disciples orphaned, the Holy Spirit will be with them and in them. The first time this happens, it can be scary. Looking back on the first time, we see the truth of Jesus' promise, that the Holy Spirit was with us.

Again, here is where the witness of the Holy Spirit is personal: God is faithful to his promises to you and to me. The Holy Spirit is with us – always.

### **Conclusion**

As we continue in this series, we will be looking at the manifestation of the Holy Spirit – the gifts and other things – in the lives of believers. Those will be sermons of great joy and wonder. It is important to remember the foundation and the focus of those gifts and manifestations. It is important to remember that all of those things are given for the purpose of glorifying God for what he has done for us in Jesus Christ.

The witness of the Holy Spirit is clarifying and personal: at the name of Jesus, every knee will bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

**8:45 (prayer and offering)**

**10:00 (prayer)**