

Strengthen Your Core: The Holy Spirit

Lesson: John 14:15-21, 25-26; Romans 8:1-2, 5, 14-17, 26-27

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2014:15-21,25-26;Romans%208:1-2,5,14-17,26-27>

Start with clips:

(Clip 1: ship sailing easily, wind full in the sails.)

Doesn't it seem like life is supposed to feel like this? You're on course, the wind is filling your sails, you're moving along effortlessly? Then why is it that life tends to feel like this?

(Clip 2: Galley slaves rowing.)

If you feel more like a galley slave rowing to the beat of a tyrant drummer, you need to get connected to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit puts the wind into your sails, and guides you on your correct course.

Over the centuries, theologians and Jesus-followers have had some difficulty explaining who the Holy Spirit is. Though the Spirit is mentioned somewhere around 130 or 140 times in the Bible, by name or by attribute, we've had trouble pinning her down. The clearest naming of the Holy Spirit is when Jesus says, at the end of the gospel of Matthew, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." But the problem is that, while we know what a Father is and what a Son is, we're not too clear on what a Holy Spirit is.

Let's begin with what the Holy Spirit is not.

§ While God is spirit¹, "the Spirit" is not simply a generic name for God, and any other ways God might present Godself. If you use "Spirit" that way, you're not being open-minded and interfaith and tolerant; you're just being unclear.

§ The Holy Spirit, while an advocate for us with God, is not an intermediary standing between us and God.

§ The Holy Spirit, while the source of life and of power, is neither "the life spark" nor an electrical outlet that you can simply plug into to get what you need.

§ The Holy Spirit, while the giver of spiritual gifts, is not the marker of your spiritual acumen: you don't "prove" yourself saved through demonstrations of the Spirit's gifts.

§ And, finally, the Holy Spirit is not simply the safe, warm & fuzzily vague version of God that exists everywhere like air or ether but is, in the end, meaningless.

For followers of the Way of Jesus, as we are, it might be really helpful to think about the Holy Spirit in the context of God's overall purpose and plan.

1) God's greatest desire is to be in deep, intimate, powerful relationship with his people.

2) In order to make that relationship more possible for us to achieve, God sent God's own self in human form in Jesus. God living with us as Jesus means that we are able to see and touch and experience God,

¹ John 4:24

and to see God's face, God's love, God's faithfulness, God's desires and behaviors in a form we understand ... that is, in another human being.

And, because Jesus experienced God as "father", or "daddy", actually, we are able to access a relationship with God that is more intimate, more human, than the one that comes from simply relating to a big abstraction or following a lot of really good rules.

We ourselves were created to be in that relationship with God. The reason Jesus is so important is because Jesus restores the possibility of that relationship to God, and because Jesus, through his example, teaches us what it is to live a daily life in relationship with God.

But when Jesus was here, walking on the earth, living with his disciples, he was able to have another kind of relationship with them. He could cajole them, counsel them, inspire them, give them feedback. He could be both their drill sergeant and their nurse. When Jesus was preparing for his crucifixion, when he knew his time here was drawing to a close, the disciples grew anxious, and so he promised to send them an advocate, a counselor. In other words, Jesus promised that God would provide his disciples with Jesus's power and his presence in the form of a God-given spirit.

What the Holy Spirit does, and the reason Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to remain with us after he had ascended into heaven, is give us the ongoing guidance and help in living our lives as apprentices and followers of the Way of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit maintains a particular kind of relationship with God and with us that helps us live our lives now, and live into the purpose and plan and desires God has for our lives. The Holy Spirit does God's work, Jesus' work, in our ongoing, post-salvation, lives.

When we are following the Way of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is active in our lives, and when we are open to her activity, she goads and prods us. The Holy Spirit guides and comforts us. The Holy Spirit teaches and leads us. The Holy Spirit is that: God working in and through us. The Holy Spirit is the God who dwells in and among us. The Holy Spirit is the one who, if we are willing, transforms us.

Some theologians call that transformation "sanctification". Whatever you call it, our transformation happens over time, in our souls and through our lives. The Holy Spirit is the ongoing being of Jesus healing, shaping, gifting, prodding, guiding, and moving in our lives on a daily basis as we follow his Way. She is the agent of our transformation.

It's no wonder that it's so hard to put a name to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is "a noun that acts like a verb": She is activity that lives in and among us and pushes us toward Jesus, with the mission of transforming us and the world. Let me say that again: The Holy Spirit is activity that lives in and among us, and pushes us toward Jesus with the mission of transforming us and the world.

How do you know you're allowing the Holy Spirit to guide and transform your life? When our lives are being transformed by the Spirit, we grow in what the apostle Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit": love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This sanctification is what John Wesley called "being made perfect in love". It happens in people, it happens in groups, and it can happen in the world when we practice Jesus' ways.

If you find that you are trying to follow Jesus, and you're practicing his ways, but you're still the same old crabby, negative, arrogant, impatient, unkind, self-centered, doubtful and impulsive old sinner you've always been, at least one of three things is happening:

- 1) You're kidding yourself about following Jesus.

2) You're practicing his ways, but you're doing it out of your own ego need.

Or 3) You're trying to do everything by the sweat of your spiritual brow, under your own power and control.

Remember those galley slaves we saw in the video clip in the beginning? A lot of us are like that. We're trying to move the ships of our lives through our own labor. We don't pray for God's guidance, and when we get it we don't listen to it. We're so concentrated on hanging onto the oars and pulling them through that water that when the wind of the Spirit kicks up we don't even think to open our sails.

You see this in groups too: Someone gets a great idea to help others, but we don't pray for the Spirit to get involved. Or someone's running a ministry that does a lot of good work, but lives aren't transformed because the Spirit's never been invited to be there.

If you want to do the work of Jesus, you have to have the power of the Holy Spirit working with you. Those gifts that the Spirit gives – healing, prophecy, leadership, teaching, faith, mercy, tongues, and so forth – they aren't gifts that the Spirit drops down your chimney one night that you get to use as you will. Those gifts are Spirit-built and Spirit-powered, and if you're trying to use them for your own purposes or under your own power, you're going to fail or run out of steam. Eventually you have to stop rowing.

When you're running on your own power, getting by on your own grit and determination, you feel like this: *show clip of Ben-Hur slave ship again*. You can get a long way, but you'll be exhausted and cranky when you get there, and you'll never build the kin(g)dom of God on earth that way. As Paul put it to the Galatians: "Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law (that is, by running on your own power and by the rules), or by believing what you heard (about the good news of Jesus)? ... After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"²

But if running on Spirit power, when her gifts are being used in you for God's purposes, you'll feel more like that ship sailing in the wind. You will feel the Holy Breath, the wind that was present at creation, propelling you forward. That doesn't mean life will always be easy. You'll run into rough seas. Sometimes you'll find yourself stalled, stuck in a calm without the breath of the Spirit blowing into your sails. You might even get shipwrecked, like Paul. But what God started at creation and Jesus continued at Calvary, only the Spirit can continue in you. Only the Spirit can give you the power to be like Jesus and carry out Jesus' commandments, commissions, and ministries. Only the Spirit can perfect you in love.

I want to give you a prayer that you can use any time you need to open back up to the Spirit's power in your life. It's on the takeaway sheet for this week; I invite you to take it with you and post it over your mirror, in your car, on your desk – wherever you need to take the Spirit's breath of life in.

Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, and let it out. Take another deep breath, and let it out. Now imagine that this next breath is God's own self, God's own strength, God's own love waiting to dwell in you. Breathe in; breathe out.

Now open your eyes, and pray this prayer with me: Holy Spirit of God, you've got me. I'm yours, and I'm glad today to listen for your direction. Fill me with your presence and lead me. Turn on your power, Lord, and let it flow through my life today.

Amen.

² Galatians 3:2-4