



SO HELP ME GOD

Ezekiel 36:22-27; John 14:15-20

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I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever. John 14:16.

We think of help as something we need less as we move from dependence to independence. For instance, children's need for the help of adults decreases as they grow into adulthood. Someone who's been severely injured needs help less and less as he or she recovers.

The help we require from the Holy Spirit (the "Helper" in John 14:16) is different. The more we grow in our faith, the more we depend upon the Spirit's help. This is because mature Christians are those who have moved from independence to dependence with God. The more we love the Lord, the more we know how much we need him.

The other day I was re-reading the liturgy for the ordination service, as a reminder of what I promised and what was promised to me when I became a priest. In it, the bishop told me that I would need the Holy Spirit more, not less, after I was ordained. He said:

Always remember how great a treasure is the congregation committed to your charge. They are the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood. The Church and congregation you will serve is his bride, his body. And if it should happen that the Church, or any member thereof, is hurt or hindered by your negligence, you know the significance of your fault, and the grievous judgment that will follow. For this reason never cease to labor, with care and diligence, until you have done all that you are able, according to the promises you make, to bring those committed to your charge into that unity in the faith and knowledge of God, and to maturity and fullness in Christ, that there might be no place left among you either for error in religion, or for persistently indulging the vices of life. *Be mindful, however, that you cannot do this on your own; for the will and the ability is given by God alone. Therefore you ought, and need, to pray earnestly for his Holy Spirit.*

What follows next in the ordination service is a series of eight intense, sobering promises. And if the ordinand answers them all in the affirmative, then the bishop lays hands on him and prays for the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon him in a new way, to help him in the priestly work to which he has just committed his life. When I was first ordained, I had no idea how much I would need need this infilling of the Spirit as a pastor. However, I am increasingly conscious of my need, and of the provision, of the Spirit's help in my work and life.

Without the help of the Holy Spirit, I would have long ago broken the promises I made when I was ordained. Here are a couple of examples of what the bishop asks of the ordinand:

Will you be ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away from the Body of Christ all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word; and to admonish and exhort, both publicly and privately, the weak and the strong within your charge, as need may require, and occasion be given?

Will you be diligent to frame and fashion your own life, and that of your family, according to the doctrine of Christ; to make both yourself and them, as much as you are able, wholesome examples and patterns to the flock of Christ?

The only hope I have of keeping these promises is the help of the Holy Spirit.

There's a fad going around in churches today that says we shouldn't worry about keeping promises like these. It says that if you're worried about obedience, it's because you're a legalist, and you need to be "set free" in Christ. In fact, I know a man who went through this ordination ceremony, making all the same sobering promises, and was ordained by the bishop. But then after the service, he said something like this to the congregation:

I want you to know that I cannot and will not keep these promises. But that's okay. If you understand the good news of the Gospel, then you know that I don't have to keep them. Jesus died for me so that I can be free from the weight of legalism. He died for you too, so that you don't have to feel guilty for all the promises that you have broken or will break in your life. All you have to do is believe in the good news of the Gospel.

Is this good news? Is it good for a newly ordained pastor to tell those committed to his charge that he won't do what they need him to do, but it's okay because his broken promises will be a living reminder of God's grace? What if, at the end of a wedding, the bride and groom faced the congregation and said, "Of course we can't be expected to keep the vows that we've made. But that's okay, because we'll be a living example of Christ's love for the church, Ephesians 5:32."

What's missing here? What's absent from such expectations of what God will do? The help of the Holy Spirit.

WHAT JESUS ASKS US TO DO, HE EMPOWERS US TO DO

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. John 14:15.

The New Gospel fad would have us believe that Jesus meant to say this: "I know that because of your fallen nature you can't keep my commandments, but I'm telling you to do it anyways, so that you'll believe in my Gospel even more!" This hopelessly convoluted message is an overreaction against legalism, and it ends up reframing Jesus' promises into psych outs. According to this New Gospel, whenever we hear a command from the Lord, we should understand that Jesus doesn't expect us to obey it. Because if we could obey it, then why would Jesus have had to die for us?

This New Gospel says that if we take Jesus at face value and believe that he is truly commanding us to obey him, then we're self-righteous legalists thumbing our noses at the cross.

If we're going to hold to this New Gospel, then we have to reframe Jesus' commands on every page in the New Testament, in virtually every chapter. "You've heard Jesus say, 'Do this.' But I say unto you, he doesn't really expect you to do it, he only wants you to believe the Gospel more."

This is nonsense. But of course most heresies, including this one, begin with a grain of truth, in that we do struggle with sin. We do fail to keep our Lord's commandments. And whenever we sin, we are reminded that if it weren't for the cross, we couldn't be forgiven. So all of that is true. But that's not why Jesus commands our obedience.

In John 14:15, Jesus says, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" In John 14:21, Jesus says again, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, *he it is who loves me.*" And in John 15:10, Jesus says again, "If you keep my commandments, *you will abide in my love.*" What he is saying is that obedience and love go together. Jesus doesn't command us to do things that we can't do, just to convince us of our brokenness. Rather, he wants us to keep our relationship with him close and strong and vibrant by doing what he tells us. It's not unlike the wedding vows a bride and groom make to one another. From that moment forward, "til death us do part," they must do the hard work of keeping their promises to one another. That's not unromantic; that's true love.

If a couple says that they love one another, but don't keep their vows, then their love is pure sentimentality, completely lacking in substance. Of course, conversely, a couple that keeps their vows without saying or expressing any feelings for one another are inhuman machines, behaving like slaves rather than husband and wife. But in a healthy marriage, love and obedience go hand in hand. Lesslie Newbigin says it this way: "Obedience is the test of love; love is the content of obedience." Thus, Jesus genuinely expects our obedience, as evidence of our love. And when we obey, we do so not out of fear, or pouty obligation. Love, rather, is the content of our obedience.

How, then, can we obey the Lord? How can Jesus say, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments,*" knowing that we struggle with sin? Wasn't this the story line of the Old Testament? Didn't God tell his people to obey, and when they didn't, they ended up in exile? Are we destined for the same fate?

In Ezekiel 36:22-27, God's people are in exile because of their disobedience. But God refuses to allow that to be the end of the story. He says, "I will vindicate the holiness of my great name," by gathering and cleansing them. Moreover, he says in verse 26, "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." How? The baptism of the Holy Spirit, just like Jesus offered to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5). In verse 27, God goes on to say that when he baptizes his people in the Holy Spirit, he will "cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." When the Holy Spirit is given to the church, God's people will finally have the ability to obey the Lord's commandments.

How can Jesus ask us to keep his commandments in John 14:15, knowing that we struggle with sin? He tells us in the next verse, and it points to the fulfillment of Ezekiel 36. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper.” Why will Jesus do this? Because we need God’s help to keep our promises. We need God’s help to obey him. And what Jesus asks us to do, he empowers us to do, by giving us the Holy Spirit.

HOW THE SPIRIT HELPS US

The Greek word translated “Helper” in 14:16 is παρακλητος, or “paraclete.” Only John uses this word in the New Testament. In the Gospel according to John, chapters 14-16, paraclete is used to describe the Holy Spirit; in John’s first epistle, paraclete is used to describe Jesus. For this reason, it makes perfect sense that Jesus would describe the Spirit as *another* paraclete in John 14:16, because Jesus came as paraclete first. We can also infer from this expression that the Spirit is a distinct person, different from Jesus, but nevertheless like Jesus in that he also is a paraclete.

We’ll come back and unpack what paraclete means more in a moment. But for now, let’s run with the way the ESV translates it, as helper. Just as the disciples have enjoyed several years of life together with Jesus, having come to depend upon his help daily, now they are being assured of the same kind of help through another paraclete, or helper.

Continuing on in 14:16, Jesus says the Spirit will be “with you forever,” which is pointing to the epochal change that will take place at Pentecost when the church is born. Just like Good Friday and Easter are historical events that changed the world forever, so also Pentecost is a turning point in history. Before that time, the Spirit wasn’t poured out on all believers. Ever since Pentecost, anyone who believes in Jesus is baptized in the Holy Spirit, and according to John 14:16 it will be this way forever. All of us who are Christians will always have the Spirit living within us, world without end.

The Helper is also “the Spirit of Truth,” (14:16) which we’ll also come back to momentarily when we talk about the meaning of paraclete. Also in 14:16, the unbelieving “world cannot receive the Spirit, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you do know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.” In other words, since Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, when the Spirit came down like a dove, the Spirit has been upon Jesus. Therefore, the disciples know the Spirit, because he dwells with them. But at Pentecost, instead of dwelling *with* them, he will be *in* them. Meanwhile, the world doesn’t see or understand any of this, because it doesn’t believe in Jesus. In order to receive the Holy Spirit, you have to start by believing in Jesus (as we learned from John 3 in the first sermon in this series.)

Consequently, Jesus says in 14:18, “I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you.” This will happen on Pentecost, when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to indwell each of his followers. “In a little while the world will see me no more” (14:19) because I will ascend to sit at the right hand of the Father. But “you will see me,” because you’ll have the Spirit enabling you to do so, in the Scriptures and in the people of God. “Because I live, you also will live,” because I will be victorious over the grave, and share my victory with you.

Finally, “in that day,” (14:20) i.e. Pentecost, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” In other words, Jesus’ followers will come to know and experience the mutual love that is shared between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

WHAT DOES PARACLETE MEAN?

How will the disciples know and experience the love shared within the Trinity? And how can we know it as well? This is where the meaning and significance of “paraclete” becomes so important. Let’s do the etymology first. Paraclete is derived from a very common Greek verb, καλεω, or “kaleo,” which means to call. The prefix παρα, or “para,” means beside. Putting these two ideas together, paraclete describes *one who is called to another’s aid*. That’s just how Jesus has characterized the ministry of the Spirit. The Lord Jesus calls the Holy Spirit to the aid of his followers, so that as Christians spread out across the earth, no matter where they go, the Lord goes with them, aiding them in their life and mission.

We can infer a bit more about how the Spirit aids us, on the basis of how other people used the word paraclete and its cognates during that time period. Some used it in a very general sense of aiding another person, in which case we might translate paraclete simply as comforter. And this describes a hugely important aspect of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives, as comforter. This doesn’t mean that out of the three persons of the Trinity, it’s the Holy Spirit who is the nice one, soft and warm as a down comforter. People often mistakenly believe that God the Father and Jesus the Son are intense, and maybe a bit austere, but the Spirit is soft and warm like mom. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all demonstrate a wide range of emotions in the Bible, and no one is “harder” or “softer” than another. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who mediates God’s comfort to us, e.g. giving us joy in the midst of difficulty, or giving us courage in the face of danger, and so on. This comfort comes from God the Father, by the grace of Jesus the Son, through the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit within us. I know from personal experience that the Spirit brings me comfort in times of difficulty and discouragement, and I’m so thankful for this gift.

Beyond this general sense of comfort, paraclete is used in other ways with more specific meanings, usually having to do with help mediated through speech or communication. For instance, think of the kinds of help that might be spoken by a loving authority figure in your life, whether a parent, or a mentor, or a coach. Sometimes the paraclete is someone who says a good word on your behalf, like a good reference, or like an attorney representing you in court. Sometimes the paraclete speaks words of encouragement directly to you. Sometimes the paraclete speaks words of welcome and inclusion. Sometimes the paraclete speaks words of rebuke or challenge, in order to redirect. All of these are kinds of aid involving *helpful speech*.

Let’s then put all of this together as we consider how the Spirit ministers to us through *helpful speech*. First, Jesus promised he wouldn’t leave us as orphans, but he would come to us by way of the Holy Spirit. Second, every true follower of Jesus is baptized in the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, who comforts us in many ways, but especially in helpful speech. And third, as we saw earlier, Jesus also describes the Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. This is then fabulous news: If you’re a Christian,

the Spirit dwells inside you, and is speaking helpful and true words to you now, and for the rest of eternity.

What we need, therefore, is to learn how to listen. We need to distinguish the Spirit's voice from all the others. We begin by focusing on the many comforting words of the Spirit that the Scriptures teach us he is saying to us all the time. We'll come back to these in a moment. Beyond these certain and expected messages, we can be assured that since the Spirit always speaks the truth, there's nothing the Spirit will say to us today that in any way will conflict with what the Spirit has said in the past through the Scriptures. In other words, no new and revised messages from God, changing what is revealed in his Word. And then finally, we listen in community together, sharing with one another what we believe we're hearing from the Lord, and seeking confirmation in the discernment of the body and the church. We'll talk more about that in the weeks to come.

THE COMFORTING WORDS OF THE SPIRIT.

Finally, here are a few of the true messages that you absolutely, positively should be hearing from the Spirit if you're a Christian. Each of these is a word of comfort from the Comforter, the Paraclete, the Helper.

First, the Spirit tells us "No." In John 16, Jesus discloses that one of the messages the Spirit brings is conviction of sin, which is something we need in order to follow the Lord. Talking about sin in this way may feel a bit old fashioned, but let me suggest that a god who wouldn't confront and challenge our wrongdoing is much scarier than a god who would. How do you know whether you're on the right track in your studies at school? You get your tests and papers back and you see what you missed, and then you learn by making corrections. It's the same at work, with various performance reviews. We need this kind of feedback to do our jobs. The Spirit ministers to us in the same way, by convicting us of sin. A god who doesn't say anything when we sin isn't worth following.

Second, and closely related, the Spirit tells us, "Yes, that you can have victory over sin. Yes you can obey the Lord." What God promised through Ezekiel has come to pass: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." So we *can* stand before the church during a wedding, or a baptism, or an ordination, and we *can* make "so help me God" promises before the entire congregation without lying or crossing our fingers. Then after making those promises in good faith, we can be assured of the Spirit's help. The Spirit of Truth says, "I'm here to help. You can do this. I'll help you keep your promises." Any New Gospel that teaches otherwise, assuring you that sin will continue to reign in your life, is no gospel at all.

By the way, recent information on church planting movements around the world have shown that wherever the church is growing exponentially, there is the expectation that Christians grow in holiness through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Wherever this expectation is absent, the church is stagnant or dying.

Third, the Spirit also assures us, saying "I forgive you." In John 8, Jesus says this about the devil: "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies." One of the perennial ways that the devil tries to murder Christians is by lying to them about their status with God. He says, "You're not one of Jesus' people. You're too dirty." So whatever your struggle with sin, the devil tells you that you're already so dirty that you might as well just give in to it all the way. Listen to the Spirit who says, "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). If you'll truly listen to the Spirit telling you that you're forgiven and you're clean, you'll begin to believe it and sin will lose its grip on your life. As this happens, you'll know experientially more and more that God is real and powerful and dynamically present in your life. In other words, you'll become increasingly aware of your move from independence to dependence on the help of the Spirit.

Finally, listen to the Spirit say, "I love you." More than anything else, the devil wants to keep you from hearing this. But if you give your allegiance to the Lord Jesus, then you're his. He has adopted you into his family. And now because of Pentecost, Jesus' promise from John 14:20 has come true: "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." Listen to what the Spirit is saying: You are so valuable to God, he loves you so much, that he sent his Son to die on your behalf. You are my beloved son or daughter, and I love you.