



THE SPIRIT OF HOPE

Rom 15:1-13. Matthew 16:21-28

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May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Rom 15:13.

When I was younger, I didn't have much use for benedictions. They seemed to be an overly spiritualized way of declaring, "Church is over. Go home now."

I see benedictions differently now. A benediction is "a good word" spoken with faith that it will be fulfilled. Benedictions have been part of Christian worship for 2000 years, and Jewish worship for long before that. They go back to the very beginning, because one of the core tenets of our faith is that words do matter, words have power, and they can be used either to build up or to tear down.

In the beginning, God used words to build up. He created the universe with words. He made mankind in his image, with the capacity to speak, hear and understand words. God used words to direct Adam in the Garden of Eden. But then the serpent used words to tear down. He tempted Eve with words. She tempted her husband with words. Then humanity turned away from God and fell into sin.

Genesis 11 describes a time when the world banded together to build up a monument to themselves, in opposition to God, building what came to be known as the Tower of Babel. They had one common language, and instead of using it to follow God and glorify him, they used it to proclaim their autonomy. Can you imagine all of your children joining together against you, and using the resources you had given them to curse you? That's how God felt about the Tower of Babel. God intervened, tearing down their opposition to him by confusing their hate speech against him.

Words are powerful. Words matter. Think of the destructive words in your own life—whether subtle demonic lies whispered in your ear, or angry curses shouted by neighbors. To the degree that you've taken them to heart, they're eating you up inside. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but it's words that really hurt us. Hateful words turn over and over deep inside, wreaking havoc within.

With so much destruction wrought by words, it's a wonder that God didn't simply obliterate all language at the Tower of Babel. Yet to do so would have been to leave us no longer made in his image. So God did something much better. At Pentecost, when God poured out his Holy Spirit on the church, he redeemed and healed our speech. Babel's curse was reversed! Followers of Jesus were miraculously enabled to proclaim the Gospel in the languages of the world, so that all might hear the good news and be reconciled to God.

I love the symbolism of Pentecost, with its tongues of fire. Every time the Spirit descends and hovers in the Bible, it's a sign of new creation. In the beginning, in Genesis, the Spirit hovered over the waters like a dove. Likewise, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, signifying the new creation that God would bring through his Son. So at the beginning of the church, the Spirit also descended and hovered over the first Christians, signifying that they were new creatures, born again into God's kingdom. But this time, instead of a dove, the sign was tongues purified by fire, drawing attention to the Spirit's role in healing our speech. God was redeeming language so that it might be used to build up rather than tear down. From that day forward, Christians were sent forth into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit, empowered to bless the whole world with the word of the Lord.

I'm afraid that all too often the world, and especially Western culture, takes a dim view of our words as Christians. What they have come to expect from us is hate speech, words that tear down rather than build up. Imagine the difference it would make if instead they saw us as tongues of fire, speaking words of truth and encouragement and hope.

In this sermon we come to the end of our Life in the Spirit series, and we end with a good word—a word of hope from the Holy Spirit. Hope is the last and greatest gift of the Holy Spirit to us. It's what enables us to thrive in the midst of every hardship or difficulty. As we consider what Paul says in Romans 15:1-13, I pray that these words will build you up in your faith.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

THE SPIRIT MAKES US STRONG. ROMANS 15:1-3

In last week's lesson on the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12), we learned that God blesses us with specific roles or responsibilities on the team of the local church. Just as Ringo Starr was the last addition to the Beatles, and was very fortunate to receive the gift of being a member of the Fab Four, so also we are greatly blessed to be a part of something even more important than the Beatles, namely, a church congregation. Each of us has a unique role to play as we seek the welfare of the city.

However, having a unique role in the church isn't enough to keep us together. Despite all their success and fame, the Beatles didn't even last a decade together because they couldn't get along. That's why Paul talks so much about unity for the sake of mission in 1 Corinthians 12, in terms of every part of the body being essential. Paul spends even more time talking about this

subject when he writes to the Romans. After several chapters of discussion, he ends with 15:1-13 as his final word on the topic of unity and mission.

In the prior chapters of Romans, Paul has already pointed out the astounding diversity within the body of Christ; rich and poor, young and old, male and female, Jews and Gentiles. We all come to the Lord with strengths and weaknesses. Some of us are physically weak. Some have endured hardship or abuse. Some struggle with mental illness, some with addiction. All of us are tempted by sin, though our temptations are highly varied. In other words, we all have issues, but we have different issues, a diversity of issues. How are we ever to get along? How can we stick together and love one another in order to keep focused on our mission?

Paul's counsel to us in Romans 15 is right on the money. *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.* Rom 15:1. This shouldn't be a problem for us strong ones, should it? We're the kind of easy-going, generous people who, Rom 15:2, love to *please our neighbors for their own good, building them up.* We just love to love our neighbors, don't we?

No we don't. Or at least I don't. It's not my natural inclination. My first thought is usually about what pleases me, and then secondly of what pleases those who please me. Then, only after that might I think of pleasing those who don't please me.

When Paul writes of "the strong" and "the weak," he's making an appeal to his readers, both in ancient Rome and here in Washington today. It's an invitation to move from weakness to strength in the way that we treat one another. Paul isn't suggesting that we become strong in the way that the world understands strength and weakness, i.e. a will to power over others. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Paul is inviting us to become strong *Christians*, whose strength isn't measured in terms of how many people we command, but rather how many we serve. Take a look again at 15:1 and see how strong Christians behave toward one another: *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

Are you a Christian? Have you been baptized and pledged allegiance to Christ? If so, here's a simple test of your maturity in the faith: are you willing to not please yourself? If you're a strong Christian then you'll put the needs of others before your own.

Who can do this? Who can live this way? One man did it better than all the rest: the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the strongest. For, (Romans 15:3) *Christ did not please himself, but as it is written (Ps 69:9), "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."*

Jesus lay down his life for the sake of others, including his enemies, including selfish people like you and me. God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to live and die as one of us, choosing not to please himself, but to suffer on the cross in our stead so that we might experience restoration and peace with God.

We could never have done what Jesus did for us. But once we give our allegiance to him, he invites us to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him (Matthew 16:21-28). He calls us to love him by loving our neighbors with an others-centered love. We bear with those who are

struggling, those who are different, those who are irritating or unattractive or otherwise hard to love, because of the same kind of love that Jesus himself has shown to us.

How can we change and become strong? Think back to the first message in this series, The Spirit of New Life (July 6, 2014). How do we give our allegiance to Jesus and follow him? Through rebirth via the Holy Spirit. It's what Jesus calls being born again, or elsewhere described as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, whereby we give our lives to the Lord, and he puts his Spirit within us as a down-payment on eternal life with him.

We are weak, but he is strong, and when we become Christians the Lord strengthens us with his Spirit. We can't deny ourselves and take up our crosses on our own. But through the indwelling Spirit, we can practice the same others-centered love as Jesus.

THE SPIRIT GIVES US SUPER-VISION. ROMANS 15:4, 8-12

The Spirit makes us strong Christians like Jesus, whom Paul says in 15:3 did not please himself. This sort of altruism was a bee in the bonnet of Ayn Rand, the Russian-American novelist and philosopher who is enjoying a bit of a revival these days as libertarianism is on the rise. Rand called altruism immoral, and argued for what she described as the "virtue of selfishness." She asked, "Why is it moral to serve the happiness of others, but not your own? If enjoyment is a value, why is it moral when experienced by others, but immoral when experienced by you? If the sensation of eating a cake is a value, why is it an immoral indulgence in your stomach, but a moral goal for you to achieve in the stomach of others? Why is it immoral for you to desire, but moral for others to do so?"¹

These are valid questions, and I believe that Christianity offers a very good answer, though sadly I fear Rand died either having never discovered it, or having closed her heart to it. I believe that the good news of Christ is what she truly was looking for all her life.

Christianity doesn't teach that desire is immoral. Rather, we understand from the Scriptures that desire in and of itself is neutral. It is something God gave us when he created humanity in his image. When we desire good things, we are like the Lord. However, because mankind fell into sin, our hearts are deceived such that we tend to desire what is evil instead of what is good.

When God sent his only Son into the world, he didn't strip Jesus of all desire. Rather, because Jesus was born into the world without sin, his desires were only good. It's clear from the Gospels that Jesus didn't desire death, especially death on the cross, and he longed for God to provide another way. There were many times throughout his life when Jesus could have walked away from this calling. But at the right time he offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins. Why? Because of desire.

For the joy that was set before him, [He] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2.

¹ Ayn Rand. *For the New Intellectual*. New York: Penguin Signet, 1963. p. 144.

How did Jesus do it? The Spirit shifted his gaze to the horizon, to the best and greatest desire, namely, the redemption of the whole world. The Holy Spirit gave him telescopic vision to see beyond Good Friday to Easter, beyond the cross to the resurrection. In other words, *by the power of the Holy Spirit [Jesus] abounded in hope.* Romans 15:13.

Likewise, when you become a Christian, it's not as if God strips you of your desires; it's the opposite. As you come to know God and to enjoy the world as his creation, your desires come alive. It's like a desire upgrade. You're no longer satisfied with what the Bible calls "the fleeting pleasures of sin" (Heb 11:25), and instead you long for something more substantial and satisfying. The Spirit gives you "super-vision" for the Kingdom come.

Let's take this a step further and see how the Spirit does this. How does the Spirit give us super-vision? Through Holy Scripture. *For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* Romans 15:4.

When we immerse ourselves in God's word, we see the bigger picture and those better things that are worthy of our affection. Our hearts are drawn away from present sufferings to the future hope of glory. Instead of focusing on the now, we anticipate the not yet. As Paul writes, the word of God encourages us, so that we might have hope.

In fact, Paul models this for us in vv 9-12, by quoting four Old Testament passages that he has been meditating on. First David, then Moses, then the Psalmist, then Isaiah all promise a day that will come when Gentiles join with Jews in praising the Lord. Why has Paul been meditating on these verses in particular? Because he was called to be a missionary to the Gentiles. In the midst of shipwrecks and imprisonment and beatings and rejection and so many, many other setbacks and hardships, Paul didn't give up. Rather, he went back to the Scriptures, back to the original vision of that future day when every tribe and tongue is gathered into the family of God. That's Paul's greatest desire, and the reason why he puts up with so much hardship.

Those of you who are blessed with children know that delayed gratification is a foundational lesson that we pass on to our children. We don't scold them for having desires; rather, we try to shift their desires to better things. "Don't waste your money on that. Save it, and then use it for something better." But this never works unless I go from the generic to the specific, showing them what the something better could be. In the same way, we must go back to the Scriptures in the power of the Spirit, to reorient our desires toward the Kingdom come.

A favorite hashtag of teenagers right now is #YOLO—you only live once. It encourages us to go ahead and take that risk, grab that immediate pleasure, because life is fleeting and the good life comes from living in the moment. This frantic hedonism in the face of future annihilation is the opposite of the Gospel.

The good news of the Gospel is #YOLF—you only live forever. A spirit-filled view of time gives us a new perspective to prepare now for eternity, and Scripture gives us a specific vision for what this will look like. How can we endure the hardship of sending out friends from our church as missionaries? Because the Scriptures promise us that we'll be together forever in eternity. Our

great consolation in a transient city is that we'll only be apart for a brief while, and then we'll be reunited in Christ forever. The Spirit gives us super-vision so that we may abound in hope.

THE SPIRIT BINDS US TOGETHER. ROMANS 15:5-7

In vv 5-7, Paul pulls these two concepts together to explain how the Spirit of Hope binds us together in the church. By strengthening us not to please ourselves, and by giving us super-vision, the Spirit enables us to love and serve one another within the church so that together we might seek the welfare of the city. This looks like two things: harmony (vv 5-6) and hospitality (v 7).

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15:5-6.

Here I believe Paul is making a direct reference to Pentecost, when the church was born and united in proclaiming the Gospel to all nations in many languages yet one voice. As I've already mentioned, Pentecost initiated the reversal of the tower of Babel. But as people of all sorts come to faith, and as they're jumbled together in church family, it gets messy real fast. Because of sin, it's really humanly impossible for such different people to get along with one another. What happened to the Beatles is pretty typical.

But the Holy Spirit makes all the difference. When we deny ourselves, pick up our crosses, and set our eyes on the Kingdom come, we're able to accept one another and love them with the love of Christ. And so our unity and commitment to one another, our common voice rejoicing and glorifying God, becomes a miraculous sign in an otherwise hostile and splintering world. The world knows that we're Christians by our love.

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 15:7

Again, apart from the Spirit, we are weak and selfish. But with the strength of the Spirit, we're able to deny ourselves and welcome others, especially those who may be difficult to welcome for one reason or another. We put up with one another's weaknesses through the power of the Spirit.

And apart from the Spirit, we tend to be tyrannized by our immediate desires. But with the Spirit of Hope, we're able to desire the Kingdom Come and seek the welfare of the city, by showing hospitality to one another. We can be patient with others and accept them for the glory of God.

CONCLUSION

Finally, we know that eternal life with God will be wonderful and perfect. The Bible promises that God will wipe away every tear. Justice will roll down like waters. Violence and bloodshed and disease and famine will all come to an end. And we will have joy and peace forever and ever. I don't want to miss it, and I don't want you to miss it either.

We also know that life today routinely falls short of being wonderful and perfect. In fact, there are days when its difficult to even get out of bed, because life is so very hard. What we need is real hope. Not just in the abstract, but a strong sense that our future life with the Lord is so certain that we can press on with the present.

We find this hope in and through the Holy Spirit. On three different occasions in the epistles (2 Cor 1:22, 5:5; Eph 1:14), Paul writes of the Spirit as God's downpayment, or guarantee, or deposit to us of the promised Kingdom Come. The Spirit gives us a foretaste of what is yet to come. And God isn't stingy. He isn't short on resources, minimizing the downpayment that he shares with each of us. Rather, he wants *fill* us with his Spirit, so that we might be *filled with all joy and peace in believing*, so that we might abound in hope and give him all the glory.

If you haven't already done so, ask him to fill you. The Lord loves to pour out his Spirit upon his people.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. Amen.