

THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT

Acts 17:22-31; psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

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May 5, 2002

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

How do you define love? Ask a teenager and you'll very likely get a different answer than if you asked two people who've been married for 50 years. A group of professional people asked some 4 to 8 year-olds, "What does love mean?" Eight-year-old Rebecca said, "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." Samantha, age 6, said, "Love is when someone hurts you. And you get so mad but you don't yell at them because you know it would hurt their feelings." Danny, a seven year old, said, "Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK." What all their answers have in common is that love is not just a feeling. Love is feeling in action. Love without action is sheer sentimentalism.

Obedience without love is deadly legalism. Jesus reinforces that insight about love and obedience when he says to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

I realize that for most of us obedience is not our favorite word. We think obedience involves a lot of *dos* and *don'ts*. And if we try to reduce our relationship to Christ to obeying a bunch of rules and regulations, we'll miss the point of what Jesus means when he says, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." But for Jesus obedience is a way of expressing love. We want to keep Christ's commandments, not in order to be loved, but because God first loved us.

Think of what happens in a family. When we were children, we learned that if we were very good, it made Mom and Dad happy, and if we were bad, it made them upset. But in a

healthy home, children discover that Mom and Dad love them even when they aren't happy about something bad we've done. And as we mature we want to be good not in order to make our parents love us, but because our parents have already made it clear that they love us unconditionally. Being good is one way we express our love for our parents. Keeping Christ's commandments is the way we express our love for Christ.

When couples planning to be married sit in my office to discuss their marriage I sometimes ask, "How do you know he really loves you?" She invariably answers, "Because of how he treats me. He treats me like a queen." And if I ask the prospective groom he often responds, "She'll do anything for me." In other words, we recognize love by the actions it performs. We don't perform those actions in order to earn love, but to express our love.

Years ago we stopped asking brides to obey their husbands. I'm glad we did. We dropped that vow because so many men abused their wives and expected them to obey every selfish whim. Nothing could be further from the Spirit of Christ's words. Nowadays the vows are identical but I sometimes wonder if what we should have done was to ask both the husband and the wife to obey each other because obeying is one of the purest forms of love. When your wife says, "Honey, take the clothes off the line, fold them and put them away" we obey, not because we have to, and hopefully not out of fear, but because love constrains us to.

Something wonderful happens when we obey the commands of someone we love and trust. We're filled with the spirit of joy. And when we obey Christ's commandments out of love rather than out of fear or obligation we're filled with his Spirit. Jesus said, "If you love me you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth. He abides with you, and he will be in you."

Think of what Jesus said this way. If we feel love for someone and never express it we become frustrated and depressed. On the other hand, if we obey commands of people we don't love or trust we grow resentful and angry. In either case we become dispirited. We become dispirited if our love has no obedience. We grow dispirited if our obedience to commands has no love. But when we obey out of love we're filled with a spirit of exhilaration. And when we love Christ and obey his commandments His Spirit fills and empowers us to be and do far more than we ever thought we could.

Finally, notice what Jesus says about the world God loves. He says that the world cannot receive (the Spirit of truth), because it neither sees him nor knows him." Those words deeply disturbed me when I read them. What Jesus says about the world sounds so hopeless. "The world *cannot* receive the Spirit because it neither sees Christ nor knows him." Christ's words puzzled and confused me. I pondered them. The Bible makes it clear that God loves the world. But if the world cannot receive him because it neither sees or knows him won't God's love for the world be frustrated? Won't Christ have died in vain? Won't the world perish?

I thought long and hard trying to understand Christ's words. I asked God to help me understand. I believe the Holy Spirit gave me a mental picture of a man and his sick wife. A mental picture of Willis Johnson came to my mind. Some of you knew Willis. Willis used to visit his sick wife every day at Ware Presbyterian Village. In fact, he sold his house in West Grove and moved to Oxford so he could be closer to her. His wife had Alzheimer's disease. She became forgetful. She became so forgetful that she no longer recognized Willis anymore. He'd visit her every day. He'd sit with her. He'd talk with her. He'd feed her. He'd stroke her hair. He'd kiss her, weep over her, and tell her how much he loved her but she could neither see nor recognize him.

I see in Willis's love for his wife, something of God's love for our world. Like a person suffering from Alzheimer's disease, the world cannot receive the Spirit of truth because it neither sees him nor knows him. Nevertheless, God visits the world in Jesus Christ. He gives the world life and breath. He's the source of all the world's pleasure, the source of all love and goodness. He visits the world daily through his life giving Holy Spirit. He restores the health of people who don't recognize or see signs of his presence. He fills their lives with love and meaning even though they don't receive or recognize Christ. Yet God continues to love the world that cannot receive him.

And yet I do not believe God's love for the world is in vain. I believe God's love for the world will one day awaken it. And the risk of mixing metaphors, the world is like Sleeping Beauty. You remember the fairy tale. Sleeping Beauty takes a bite of a poisoned apple and dies. One day Prince Charming comes to her. Sleeping Beauty cannot receive Prince Charming because she neither sees him nor knows him. She can't because she's dead. Nevertheless, Prince Charming, bends over

And gives
To Sleeping Beauty
One long kiss,
She opens her blue eyes and wakes,
Forsakes
Her sleep and shines for ever,
Beautiful in bliss.

And because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ I see the Holy Spirit bend over the world God loves and, with one long kiss, awaken it to new life.

Almighty God, you gave the law to guide our lives. May we never shrink from your commandments, but, as we are taught by your Son Jesus, fulfill the law in perfect love; through Christ our Lord and Master, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.