

## PENTECOST TRANSFORMATION

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John chapters 13-17

TEXT: John 14:15-20; 16:7; and 15:5

### INTRODUCTION

Every few years, Pentecost Sunday falls on Memorial Day weekend. I've never liked that because the Memorial Day theme tends to overshadow the Sunday that is to celebrate one of our most important Christian events— Pentecost. While we make a great deal out of Christmas and Easter, often Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church is treated almost as a nonevent. Yet Pentecost, not Easter the Resurrection, was the event that transformed the disciples into exuberant messengers of Christ. Without Pentecost, there would be no life-changing power. Christianity would merely be a religion of trying to follow the teachings of Jesus without the power of Jesus to change lives. And tragically, I often find Christians are not living Spirit-empowered lives. The Holy Spirit remains to them vague and nebulous, not the pulsating power Jesus gives in the Holy Spirit.

The reason the date of Pentecost keeps moving, unlike Christmas, is because Easter moves around with Passover, which is tied to the phases of the moon. Pentecost (“penta” means five) happened exactly 50 days after Christ’s resurrection. Hence, every few years, Pentecost coincides with Memorial Day weekend. However, there is one way in which the two themes have a bit of common ground. And that’s where I want to begin.

### THE LEGACY OF JESUS

On Memorial Day, we remember with gratitude the ultimate sacrifice many paid for our freedom as a nation. It is fitting to honor them, “who more than self their country love.” We are all greatly indebted to all of them for the gift of our nation and the freedoms we enjoy that they died to preserve. Also, we remember with gratitude loved ones who have died and the gift and the legacy their lives have given us.

Also, people with significant resources sometimes establish charitable foundations to continue carrying on work that has been important to them during their lifetime. Recently, we think of the foundation combining the wealth of two of the world’s richest men, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, fighting AIDS, many other health issues, providing safe water, introducing transformative agricultural practices, and improving educational opportunities for the neediest. John D. Rockefeller was the richest man in the world in his day, making his fortune in oil. He established the Rockefeller Foundation which continues to fund important medical research that has contributed significantly to the development of penicillin, treatments for malaria, tuberculosis, diphtheria, a vaccine for yellow-fever, and the eradication in the U.S. South of the terrible scourge of hookworm. I remember in the little town I grew up in, Kalispell, MT, the building housing the library had been funded by Andrew Carnegie. And, there are many, many other wealthy people who have used their resources to continue significant service to our world long after they have died. Money has great power.

But Jesus left us with the most important legacy— greater than all the wealth the world has ever known in terms of its power to affect lives. It is the Holy Spirit poured out on believers, inaugurated at Pentecost. Through the Holy Spirit, the life of Jesus is able to be reproduced in His followers with all of Jesus’ power, character and love. I want us to look at some of what Jesus tells us about the Holy Spirit in His last night with His disciples. Jesus knows it is His last night on earth, but the disciples don’t. John tells us how it was in five chapters, John 13-17. And, the three center chapters of that section are focused upon the crucial gift Jesus is sending them, the Holy Spirit. They are conversational in style, mostly Jesus talking with an occasional question from the disciples. Five of the disciples are named and there are eight one-line questions asked. Jesus is clearly preparing them for His departure and how it is that He is going to fulfill John the Baptist’s proclamation, *I baptize you with water, but He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit* (Mk. 1:8). Jesus came so that we can be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Here I am using the summary my brother gives in Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places. Fifteen times in this conversation, Jesus is saying in one way or another, “I am leaving you.” But, in the same breath, he continually assures them that He is sending the Holy Spirit, whom He refers to as “another Counselor.” “Advocate,” “Helper,” “Comforter,” are all possible translations of this Greek word, *paraclete*, Jesus uses to describe the Holy Spirit. It literally means, “someone called alongside to help.” This Holy Spirit is designated by name or pronouns 26 times. A good summary of Jesus’ teaching is captured in Jn. 16:7,

*But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*

Jesus is saying His presence with them will be replaced by the Holy Spirit. But, even better, this Holy Spirit who has been with them will now be in them (Jn. 14:17). Then, several times, Jesus equates the Holy Spirit who will be in them as Jesus Himself, saying, *you are in me, and I am in you* (Jn. 14:20). Furthermore, elsewhere in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is also referred to as “the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7; Phil. 1:19). Jesus’ physical absence will be replaced by the Spirit’s presence in them. This Spirit is so congruent with Jesus that “the Spirit of Jesus” is another synonym for the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the phrases “in the Spirit” and “in Christ” are used interchangeably.

Now, there is a lot more teaching Jesus gives here on the Holy Spirit and what the Spirit will do— but this is the heart of it all: Jesus will continue to work now through the bodies of believers who are filled with the Spirit, doing all that Jesus did in His earthly ministry.

Twice, Jesus assures them,

*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.* (John 14:12-14)

Jesus clearly tells us that we will be doing what He did in the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke emphasizes this for us in Acts 1:1 when he begins,

*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach...* “Began” stresses that the exciting history of the early church in Acts is actually Jesus continuing

His work through the church. And, of course, we see it. The inept cowardly disciples are suddenly bold proclaimers of the Gospel. Healings and other miracles take place through them as well as they did through Jesus. But the works are greater than Jesus did, as He promised, because Jesus is now multiplied, reproduced through His Spirit in hundreds of disciples. As the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins puts it,

*Christ was himself but one and lived and died but once; but the Holy Ghost makes of every Christian another Christ, an AfterChrist; lives a million lives in every age.*

But for this to happen, the Scripture makes it clear, Jesus had to die for our sins, be raised from the dead and ascend into heaven. There He made the perfect atonement for our sins so that, imperfect as we are, our hearts can be cleansed from sin and the Holy Spirit can take-up residence within us. He is a “holy” Spirit that cannot abide in sinful hearts. But Christ’s atonement transforms our hearts from being sinful to righteous in God’s eyes when we receive Christ within and accept His cleansing. Even though we may sin after that, the Spirit remains to convict us of sin and cleanse us afresh.

Phillip Yancey points out in his book, Reaching for the Invisible God,

*No other religion makes such an extravagant claim: that the God of the universe exists not just as an external power whom we must obey, but as One who lives inside us, transforming from the inside out and opening a channel of direct correspondence to God.*

How do we put this into practice and begin living Spirit-filled, Spirit-empowered lives?

### **SPIRIT-FILLED LIVING**

Right in the middle of all this discussion about the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives us one of His great “I am” statements from which He develops a compelling metaphor to help us understand how this works. It is the last verse on our reading, John 15:5–

*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart [cut-off] from me you can do nothing.* RSV

I still remember the time I really understood the last part of that verse, “*apart [or cut-off] from me **you can do nothing**.*” I was in my 21<sup>st</sup> year. I had been reared in a devout Christian home and had made a personal decision to make Christ my Lord and Savior at age 5. I was a good little boy, willingly going to church three times a week. I obeyed all the rules prescribed by our rather strict denomination and sincerely tried to practice my faith. I never openly rebelled. Yet, my Christian living felt dogged with failure, embarrassing compromises, and guilt over my failure to live up to what a Christian was supposed to be. Except for brief pockets, my Christian experience lacked much joy or excitement.

Then, at the beginning of my second year in college I embarked on a major reform program. I was tired of the inept me, feeling inadequate. I was going to change myself. Scholastically I dug in and decided to think like an A student and discipline myself to be one and behold, it worked. My sports career had fizzled out in 6<sup>th</sup> grade basketball. Now I decided I could run on the cross-country team and energetically launched myself into that grueling 3-hour-a-day practice

schedule. While, in one sense, I had reconstructed the old Ken and had become quite disciplined, after two years of working at this, I realized most of it was pretty external. Inside I still lacked much spiritual, moral strength. I was still cowardly and compromising about my faith. AND I had added one other major defect– I was quite proud of my reforms.

In a crisis I faced over some life choices and a career, I began seeking the Lord afresh with all my heart. Then I understood what Jesus meant when He said, *apart from me you can do nothing!* I had been trying to live the Christian life and do what I felt Christ wanted me to do. Suddenly, with perfect clarity, I saw it all. It is impossible to live the Christian life. I was never intended to live the Christian life in my strength. The Christian life is about letting Christ live in me. It is not our doing, it is making room for the Spirit to do it– the Spirit of Jesus. We are to live in His power, not our own power. Once I embraced that truth, it was incredibly liberating. I felt like a bird set free. I relaxed my intensity of trying to do all I was supposed to and there was an abiding joy that began to attend my walk in Christ. Everything about the Christian life was alive, fresh, and invigorating. What had been heavy, burdensome, and bound with duty now gave way to a lightness, even a lilting walk with Christ. I began to be surprised by fruits of the Spirit, clarity of knowing God’s will, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is what Jesus is telling us in this wonderful metaphor. Let’s transpose it from vine to the fruit trees we’re more familiar with. He is saying that trying to be a Christian, to live the Christian life is like a branch not connected to the tree trying to produce apples. It just doesn’t happen. But, when it is connected, “abiding” in the trunk of the tree, it produces apples without any real “doing it itself.” The life-giving sap with nutrients flow into the branch and, because of its DNA, it produces apples. Have any of you orchardists ever walked by one of your trees and heard a branch saying, “O, I’ve just got to produce more apples?” Under the proper conditions, the most important of which is being connected to the tree, branches just produce fruit.

That’s the essence of the Christian life. Can you see how this reduces the pressure on us to perform and restores the joy? Our responsibility is essentially one– **ABIDING** in Christ, remaining in the Spirit. “Abide” is the key word in this section, used nine times in seven verses. Now I’m using the RSV translation that follows the KJV in the word, “abide” rather than “remain” as some more recent translations. “Remain” seems too passive. The word here in the Greek is not static or a state of repose in which we do nothing. It is active and imperative, a command. I could be translated, “Keep on continuously abiding in me!”

How do we abide in Christ?

### **ABIDE**

“Abide” is a relationship word. So when Jesus tells us to “abide in me” He is speaking of a relationship– abiding in His Spirit that He has given us at Pentecost. Relationships are built through speaking, listening, spending time together, and giving of ourselves to each other. I want to start with this attitude of giving ourselves to each other, for that defines how everything else works. It reaches its most eloquent expression in Mary when the angel Gabriel announces to her that she has been selected to be the mother of Jesus. He tells her,

*"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ... Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:35 &38) NRSV*

The life of Christ literally is implanted in her through the power of the Holy Spirit and her role is to simply accept Him— "let it be..." This attitude of surrendering ourselves to the will of God, modeled for us by Mary, is foundational to abiding in Him. It means letting go of our agendas, our striving, and our shaping our lives the way we want them shaped. This is the end of our pressing to make things happen in our way and our time. It is just letting go and abiding in the presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

The bookends of this discourse on the Holy Spirit give further guidance to us. Jesus begins with washing the feet of His quarreling disciples in John 13. It's an object lesson that he concludes with,

*Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

*"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:14-15; 34-35)*

Here we see the divine humbling of our Lord, serving His disciples— letting go of His position to show them how we love. Love is not ethereal feelings, but what we do.

At the other end of this discourse, in John 17, we see Jesus in prayer. Here this abiding comes to full fruition where we have phrases like, John 17:21

*...Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us... (21)*  
*...I in them and you in me. (23)*

Prayer is vital in this abiding relationship. This is careful, listening prayer, honest prayer where we share the deepest part of ourselves with God. As we talk things over with Him, we also listen to the Spirit within to discern what He is saying to us. This is not prayer as duty as in "I ought to pray more." No, this is prayer that's part of a love relationship, just enjoying God's presence and referring every experience , every event to Him— learning what He may think or reveal to us in it. This kind of prayer, a living in God's presence brings new potential to any and everything in our lives.

The other way of listening to God is through His Word. Again, this is not duty as in "I ought to read the Bible more." It is pondering, letting the truths and phrases work within us. Jesus emphasizes this in the Vine and Branch metaphor by saying in vs. 7, *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.* This is His Word shaping our lives and desires so that even all our wishes are according to His will. That is an exciting adventure in learning to flow perfectly in the will of God. I'll be talking more about the role of God's Word next Sunday as we continue the series on 1 Thessalonians.

So, the Word of God, prayer as relationship, and surrendering to His will which includes acts of service, are all keys to abiding in Him.

## CONCLUSION

Our granddaughters have a goldfish with the creative name “Goldie.” She is just in one of those glass bowls with none of the fancy filters or aeration devices modern aquariums are equipped with. So, in the couple of days between water changes, the water gets rather cloudy looking and I feel sorry for Goldie because I suspect she’s feeling toxins building in the water and the oxygen is getting used up. Now, being a good grandpa, I stay out of things, because I gather my son and his wife aren’t too keen on the fish anyway, so I don’t go out and buy an aquarium that would inevitably lead to more fish.

But as I’ve looked at that cloudy, toxin-laden water some mornings as I’ve had my devotions near Goldie, it is a picture of my life when I’m not abiding in Christ. The Holy Spirit keeps me fresh, filtering toxins, providing oxygen to my soul. My spiritual life thrives then. But, when I pull back and begin doing it my way, life gets heavy with duty and the joy and vitality evaporates. When I’m trying to live the Christian life it is just the opposite of the Spirit-empowered life. I get tired of myself, my attitudes, all **my** stuff– the excretions of self polluting my soul. I need a fresh inflow of the Spirit to wash all that pollution away. It is a call to let go again and return to that awareness of His presence– the Holy Spirit He has given. He is the source of all our spiritual life. That’s why the Holy Spirit is given to us. Our job is to merely abide in Him and the life, the character, and the power of Jesus will begin to be reproduced in our lives.