

When the Spirit of Truth Comes

One of the most remarkable promises ever made is the one by Jesus that promises us that when the Spirit of truth comes he will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). It tells us that even when we are feeling confused and unsure, muddled, even just plain stupid, the Spirit of truth will – in some sense – still make things clear to us. And that of course is great good news.

This promise is part of a sustained teaching section by Jesus that we find in John 13-17. It's Jesus talking at length to his closest circle of disciples the night of his betrayal and arrest; he knows the next day he will die. And he's looking for some way to reassure them, something to get them through the horror of the next twenty-four hours, and then to prepare them for his eventual departure some weeks later. For three years they've been the closest of traveling companions, together day and night, always talking, always there for one another, but all that will end in just a few weeks. And what he says to them and through them to us is: I will not leave you alone.

In 14:16 he tells them, "God will give you another counselor – the Holy Spirit – to be with you forever." The Spirit of God will be with you when you're lonely and feeling abandoned, when life turns dark, when you're down and out, and confused and weak, and you don't know what to think or believe. In fact, that's precisely when he will be with you. But you will never be alone.

I want you to picture yourself alone in a big room maybe as afternoon shadows fall, or laying in bed in the middle of the night wide awake because you can't sleep. You're worried and confused. Life has thrown another curve at you. And you don't know what to do or what to think. And you feel very alone in all this. I want you to picture the Spirit of God entering that room, at first, maybe way up high in the corner of the room. Sense the Spirit spreading through the room, bathing the room in warmth, coming closer and entering you. Feel the love, the peace, the wellness, something that feels like strength, right there in the center of you. Sense the Spirit healing whatever is hurting in you. Be still and aware of God's presence now within and all around. Feel the healing, the warmth, the cleansing, the companionship of God. You are never alone.

And now in that context Jesus promises that when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide us into all truth. But what does it mean to be guided into all truth? First, what it doesn't mean. It's not just talking about back then. It's not just talking about something that only a very few can experience. It's not just talking about knowing some more cold, hard facts. The world has more than enough know-it-alls already. There are more than enough smartest people in the rooms of our lives. If you're one, just as an aside, quit!

Jesus is talking about heart knowledge, knowledge that makes sense down on heart level, because that's always what's most important in Scripture. And, yes, that truth will come to us in many ways, through Scripture, yes, emphatically through Scripture, but also through other scholarly pursuits, through wise reflection on life, through life experience, and from listening to our hearts. But wherever it comes from, it all comes from God.

And it can all be attributed to the Spirit of God who is, in fact, the Spirit of truth. Now the first Christians were masters at this: they attributed all that was good, all that was truthful, and all that was beautiful to the Spirit of God, and that perspective changed everything. So now they could live their lives confidently, expectantly, with flashing eyes and untiring enthusiasm. They lived every day surrounded by grace, and with this heightened state of consciousness, they could always see – and know – so much more than those who do not believe.

And of course we want this. We want to be like this. We want the Spirit of God to be with us and to guide us into all truth, and especially when we're lonely and feeling abandoned, when life turns dark, when we're down and out, and confused and weak, and we don't know what to think or believe. And that same night – the night before his crucifixion – Jesus told us how. It's recorded in John 15:1-17. Jesus says three things in this section.

First, he says, You'll have to remain in me (vs. 4,5,7). Embody me. Stay in me. Absorb me. See things with my eyes, Jesus says. Take outcast women seriously. Treat even the woman caught in adultery with respect. Hold off on condemnation. Wash the feet of others, even those who you know intend to betray you. And when you're at your wit's end, trust God. And the Spirit of truth will guide you into all truth.

Second, Jesus says, My words will have to remain in you (v. 7). Take my teachings in. Trust what I am saying. For us, this means to devote ourselves to understanding Scripture, taking in these timeless archetypal stories and words, reliving them, wrestling with them until we have grasped their wisdom, like Jacob that night by the brook Jabbok not letting go until we have been blessed, drawing from Scripture the way things really are, taking these words, these Jesus words, not as prooftexts but as the living structures of our lives.

Third, he says, You'll have to remain in my love (vs. 9,10). I've talked, Jesus says, about obeying my commands. And I don't want you to get confused about this. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you (v. 12). This is my command: Love each other (v.17). Don't get confused. In the end, only love will guide you into all truth: listening to one another, learning from one another, staying in spiritual community with one another, having spiritual companions to run your ideas by, letting your ideas meld and merge, caring about one another. Jesus is saying that we have to have some people to "know with," because learning and knowing are, in the end, communal experiences, social experiences. It's what the word "consciousness" suggests, from "com," meaning "with," and "scio," meaning "to know." You have to have some friends, some spiritual friends, some people who know God, you can reliably know with.

Here's the key: It will be love that will guide you into all truth. And in your heart you will always know whether what you are thinking or saying or doing is loving. Tying it all together, this is what Jesus is saying: If we remain in him, if his words remain in us, and if we remain in his love, we will be guided into all truth. If we embody Jesus, if we seek to understand his teachings, if we wrestle with Scripture and let Scripture wrestle with us,

and if we stay in loving spiritual community with others, we can increasingly trust our intuition, trust our “hunches,” trust our grasp of reality, and trust our hearts.

The Spirit of truth will guide us into all the truth, not infallibly, not perfectly, not privately (only in community), but surely and confidently. But do not miss that the heart is a very, very fine place to find truth, if you factor God in, if you act with integrity, if you go down deep, to the kind of knowledge the heart knows, like: What is really loving? What is really honorable? What is really driving me? What is really in the best interest of others? For that matter, what is really in my best interest? And if this were done to me, if what I’m about to do were being done to me, would I find it to be kind and caring?

And it’s all pretty basic stuff. It’s for this reason that Jesus often began his teaching with words that imply, “Who of you doesn’t already know this?” In the timeless words of Deuteronomy 30:11-14), it’s very near you. It’s in your mouth and in your heart. It’s what you already know to be true in your heart. Be still and aware of God’s presence within and all around.

– Dale Pauls