

THE AVAILABILITY OF THE SPIRIT

The other night I was at home, and I found myself bored. Barbara was away this week; she went off to visit with some friends of hers. My mother-in-law had gone to bed. Rachel was home, but she was doing her own thing. Daniel was doing his own thing. I had been reading a book, but I was growing bored with it. So, I started surfing the TV channels.

Now, we have three or four streaming services, including one live TV service, on our TV. We have Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV, Paramount Plus, and Google live TV. You would think it would be easy to find something to watch... not so much. The truth is I had a hard time finding something that would interest me.

I finally settled on a documentary called, Marketing the Messiah. The documentary was an attempt to debunk the gospel story, and normally I would just turn it off, but I did find it interesting on an academic level so I kept watching. The documentary highlighted some of the differences between the gospels. One of the things that I found interesting in the documentary was the discussion of early Christianity.

Our view of early Christianity is that it tended to be a largely homogenous movement. That means we tend to think that Christians were relatively unified in their practices and beliefs. I'm not sure why we think that, because we are not unified today. We believe that it was only during the Reformation and afterwards that Christianity broke into different denominations. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just as there are many different denominations today, there were a number of different sects in early Christianity; there was no one true sect after Jesus died and was resurrected. Also, just as during the Reformation- or even today, they didn't always resolve their differences peacefully.

There seems to be something inherent in humans to want to believe that they are in the right. Have you noticed this? I am right, and by extension that means that everyone else is wrong. Have you noticed people who think that way? It isn't always the case that we are "in" and others are "out", but one thing is clear- if someone is "in" and others are "out", I am definitely in the "in" group. Have you noticed that? That was true even in early Christianity.

Perhaps, the first and most significant theological controversy in the early church was the question of whether one must first be a Jew before one became a Christian. That was a big deal in early Christianity. This story addresses this controversy directly. We see that played out in the words of this story.

Now, in order to understand what's going on here, a little recap of the Book of Acts of the Apostles is in order- at least for a couple of chapters prior to the story we have here. In chapter nine of the book, we find the story of the conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to

Damascus. You probably know this story fairly well, but I'm going to tell it again anyway. Saul, who was a Pharisee was a persecutor of the followers of Jesus. He was charged by the authorities with finding and persecuting those who followed Jesus. He did such a good job of that in Jerusalem. He did such a good job that they commissioned him to go to Damascus and find Christians there and persecute them. He is on his way to Damascus to root out the followers of Jesus there, when he experiences a blinding light, and a voice from heaven saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He is then led by others who are with him into Damascus and when he arrives, it says something like scales falls from his eyes and he is then able to see. He begins to worship Jesus himself.

Initially, the followers don't know what to make of Saul's conversion. Some of them don't trust him- and that's understandable. However, the Apostle Peter becomes an early supporter of his. The bible tells us that Peter had a dream. In the dream Peter saw a sheet descending from heaven. The sheet contained all sorts of animals within it. Peter heard a voice saying, "Take and Eat." The problem with that was that the sheet contained a number of animals that were unclean according to the Jewish dietary laws.

Peter responded to the voice, saying, "I've never eaten anything that's unclean, Lord."

The voice replied, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unclean."

Peter is then introduced to Paul by Cornelius, a centurion who had converted to the faith. Cornelius had been sent by the Lord to the house where Peter was staying. He arrived just as Peter's dream was concluding. That gets us to the end of Chapter 10

We arrive at chapter 11 and the story continues. The Apostles question Peter about Paul. What does he think about Paul? Why does he accept him? Why does he trust him? Peter responds to these questions by retelling the story from chapter 10. He tells the story of his dream. He tells how Cornelius had showed up at his door at the moment that the dream concluded.

I think the real key to this passage lies in verses 15-18 of chapter 11. It says:

15And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. 16And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."¹

¹ The Lockman Foundation. Holy Bible: New American Standard Bible (NASB) (Kindle Locations 37336-37340). The Lockman Foundation. Kindle Edition.

Peter makes a strong statement. There are two points that jump out at me. The first is that it is the Lord who cleanses us. We are not made pure by what we believe. We are not somehow more special than others. We are clean, but we are clean because it is God who cleansed us.

That's good news for two reasons. It's good news because it is as clear as any statement in the scripture that we are not saved by our works. We are saved by the grace of Christ. Within that sheet in Peter's dream, there are animals of all sorts. None of them are kosher, and yet they are all cleansed- they are all holy- because God made them so.

The same is true of people. We are all sinners. I am a sinner. Yet, I am clean. I am holy to God. Why? For no other reason than I was made so by the grace of Jesus Christ. That's all it takes to make me clean. That's all it takes to make me holy.

The same is true for you. You are all sinners, and yet you are clean. You are holy to God. Why? Because the grace of Jesus Christ made you so. That's all it takes! That's all it takes to make you clean.

The second point that jumps out at me from this passage is that I am in no position to judge who has been saved. I can't tell who has been saved and who hasn't. I'm in no position to judge. God cleanses people. Not, because of any criteria that I place on God. Not because of any limitations that I place on God. God makes them clean. God makes them holy.

Peter says, "Lord, I've never eaten anything unclean." The response he gets is telling. Don't ever call anything that God has cleansed unclean. The same is true of people.

There's another point that sticks out to me, and it's about the spirit itself. Peter says he remembered the word of the Lord who said, "John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." He goes on to say, "If God therefore gave to them the same gift as he gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I say that I could stand in God's way?"

That's a big question for all of us. God chooses who receives the Spirit. It's not up to us to say who is in and who is out. But there is another aspect to this. We sometimes assume that we are not good enough- that we are on the out- that God would never choose us. That's wrong too. This thinking is also proven wrong by this passage. The Spirit of the Lord is available to everyone, including you. You have access to it, because God has made it that way. God has cleansed you, whether you believe it or not.

The Spirit is available to all of us. No matter who we are, where we've been, or what we've done. It's that way because Christ wants it that way- because he loves us. We can do wondrous things, if we will just believe that the spirit is available to us.