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[About Us](#)[Our Work](#)[Get Connected](#)[How to Give](#)[Resources](#)[Mission News](#)[HOME](#) / [UNITED METHODIST HISTORY](#) / [THE WESLEYS AND THEIR TIMES](#) / [SERMONS](#) / [SERMON 141](#)

The Sermons of John Wesley

John Wesley (1703-1791) founded Methodism. A prolific writer, he printed several volumes of his sermons during his lifetime. The published sermons either were rewritten from ones that he had preached or were written specifically for print.

[| Numeric Index](#) | [Title Index](#) | [Scriptural Index](#) |

On the Holy Spirit

By John Wesley

Sermon 141

(text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor)

Preached at St. Mary's, Oxford, on Whitsunday, 1736.

Now the Lord is that Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:17

The Apostle had been showing how the gospel ministry was superior to that of the law: The time being now come when types and shadows should be laid aside, and we should be invited to our duty by the manly and ingenuous motives of a clear and full revelation, open and free on God's part, and not at all disguised by his ambassadors. But what he chiefly insists upon is, not the *manner*, but the *subject* of their ministry: "Who hath made us able ministers," saith he, "of the New Testament: Not of the letter, but of the Spirit: For the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life." Here lies the great difference between the two dispensations: That the law was indeed *spiritual* in its demands, requiring a life consecrated to God in the observance of many rules; but, not conveying spiritual assistance, its effect was only to kill and mortify man, by giving him to understand, that he must needs be in a state of great depravity, since he found it so difficult to obey God; and that, as particular deaths were by that institution inflicted for particular sins, so death, in general, was but the consequence of his universal sinfulness. But the ministration of the New Testament was that of a "Spirit which giveth life;" -- a Spirit, not only promised, but actually conferred; which should both enable Christians now to live unto God, and fulfil precepts even more spiritual than the former; and restore them hereafter to perfect life, after the ruins of sin and death. The incarnation, preaching, and death of Jesus Christ were designed to represent, proclaim, and purchase for us this gift of the Spirit; and therefore says the Apostle, "The Lord is that Spirit," or the Spirit.

This description of Christ was a proper inducement to Jews to believe on him; and it is still a necessary instruction to Christians, to regulate their expectations from him. But [we] think this age has made it particularly necessary to be well assured what Christ is to us: When that question is so differently resolved by the pious but weak accounts of some pretenders to *faith* on one hand, and by the clearer, but not perfectly Christian, accounts of some pretenders to *reason* on the other: While some derive from him a "righteousness of God," but in a sense somewhat improper and figurative; and others no more than a charter of pardon, and a system of morality: While some so interpret the gospel, as to place the holiness they are to be saved by in something divine, but exterior to themselves; and others, so as to place it in things really within themselves, but not more than human. Now, the proper cure of what indistinctness there is one way, and what infidelity in the other, seems to be contained in the doctrine of my text: "The Lord is that Spirit."

In treating of which words, I will consider,

I. The nature of our fall in Adam; by which it will appear, that if "the Lord" were not "that Spirit," he could not be said to save or redeem us from our fallen condition.

II. I will consider the person of Jesus Christ; by which it will appear that "the Lord is that Spirit." And,

III. I will inquire into the nature and operations of the Holy Spirit, as bestowed upon Christians.

I.

I am to consider the nature of our fall in Adam.

Our first parents did enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit; for they were created in the image and likeness of God, which was no other than his Spirit. By that he communicates himself to his creatures, and by that alone they can bear any likeness to him. It is, indeed, his life in them; and so properly divine, that, upon this ground, angels and regenerate men are called his children.

But when man would not be guided by the Holy Spirit, it left him. When he would be wise in his own way, and in his own strength, and did not depend in simplicity upon his heavenly Father, the seed of a superior life was recalled from him. For he was no longer fit to be formed into a heavenly condition, when he had so unworthy a longing for, or rather dependence upon, an earthly fruit, which he knew God would not bless to him; no longer fit to receive supernatural succours, when he could not be content with his happy state towards God, without an over-curious examination into it.

Then he found himself forsaken of God, and left to the poverty, weakness, and misery of his own proper nature. He was now a mere animal, like unto other creatures made of flesh and blood, but only possessed of a larger understanding; by means of which he should either be led into greater absurdities than they could be guilty of, or else be made sensible of his lost happiness, and put into the right course for regaining it; that is, if he continued a careless apostate, he should love and admire the goods of this world, the adequate happiness only of animals; and, to recommend them and dissemble their defects, add all the ornament to them that his superior wit could invent. Or else (which is indeed more above brutes, but no nearer the perfection of man as a partaker of God, than the other) he should frame a new world to himself in theory; sometimes by warm imaginations, and sometimes by cool reasonings, endeavour to aggrandize his condition and defend his practice, or at least divert himself from feeling his own meanness and disorder.

If, on the other hand, he should be willing to find out the miseries of his fall, his understanding might furnish him with reasons for constant mourning, for despising and denying himself; might point out the sad effects of turning away from God and losing his Spirit, in the shame and anguish of a nature at variance with itself; thirsting after immortality, and yet subject to death; approving righteousness, and yet taking pleasure in things inconsistent with it; feeling an immense want of something to perfect and satisfy all its faculties, and yet neither able to know what that mighty thing is, otherwise than from its present defects, nor how to attain it, otherwise than by going contrary to its present inclinations.

Well might Adam now find himself *naked*; nothing less than God was departed from him. Till then he had experienced nothing but the goodness and sweetness of God; a heavenly life spread itself through his whole frame, as if he were not made of dust; his mind was filled with angelic wisdom; a direction from above took him by the hand; he walked and thought uprightly, and seemed not to be a child or novice in divine things. But now he had other things to experience; something in his soul that he did not find, nor need to fear, while he was carried on straight forward by the gentle gale of divine grace; something in his body that he could not see nor complain of; while that body was covered with glory. He feels there a self-displeasure, turbulence, and confusion; such as is common to other spirits who have lost God: He sees here causes of present shame and a future dissolution; and a strong engagement to that grovelling life which is common to animals that never enjoyed the divine nature.

The general character, therefore, of man's present state is death, -- a death from God, whereby we no longer enjoy any intercourse with him, or happiness in him; we no longer shine with his glory, or act with his powers. It is true, while we have a being, "*in him* we must live, and move, and have our being;" but this we do now, not in a *filial* way, but only in a *servile* one, as all, even the meanest creatures, exist in him. It is one thing to receive from God an ability to walk and speak, eat and digest, -- to be supported by his hand as a part of this earthly creation, and upon the same terms with it, for farther trial or vengeance; and another, to receive from him a life which is his own likeness, -- to have within us something which is not of this creation, and which is nourished by his own immediate word and power.

Yet this is not the whole that is implied in man's sin. For he is not only inclined himself to all the sottishness of appetite, and all the pride of

reason, but he is fallen under the tutorage of the *evil* one, who mightily furthers him in both. The state he was at first placed in, was a state of the most simple subjection to God, and this entitled him to drink of his Spirit; but when he, not content to be actually in Paradise, under as full a light of God's countenance as he was capable of; must know good and evil, and be satisfied upon rational grounds whether it was best for him to be as he was, or not; when, disdainng to be directed as a child, he must weigh every thing himself; and seek better evidence than the voice of his Maker and the seal of the Spirit in his heart; then he not only obeyed, but became like to, that eldest son of pride, and was unhappily entitled to frequent visits, or rather a continued influence, from him. As life was annexed to his keeping the command, and, accordingly, that Spirit, which alone could form it unto true life, dwelt in his body; so, being sentenced to death for his transgression, he was now delivered unto "him who has the power of death, that, is, the devil," whose hostile and unkindly impressions promote death and sin at once.

This being the state of man, if God should send him a Redeemer, what must that Redeemer do for him? Will it be sufficient for him to be the promulgator of a new law, -- to give us a set of excellent precepts? No: If we could keep them, that alone would not make us happy. A good conscience brings a man the happiness of being consistent with himself; but not that of being raised above himself into God; which every person will find, after all, is the thing he wants. Shall he be the fountain of an *imputed* righteousness, and procure the tenderest favour to all his followers? This is also not enough. Though a man should be allowed to be righteous, and be exempt from all punishment, yet if he is as really enslaved to the corruptions of nature, as endued with these privileges of redemption, he can hardly make himself easy; and whatever favour he can receive from God, here or hereafter, without a communication of himself; it is neither the cure of a spirit fallen, nor the happiness of one reconciled. Must not then our Redeemer be (according to the character which St. John, his forerunner, gave of him) one that "baptizeth with the Holy Ghost," -- the Fountain and Restorer of that to mankind, whereby they are restored to their first estate, and the enjoyment of God? And this is a presumptive argument that "the Lord is that Spirit."

II.

But it will appear more plainly that he is so, from the Second thing proposed; which was the consideration of the person of Jesus Christ.

He was one to whom "God gave not the Spirit by measure: but in him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and of his fulness we have all received, and grace for grace." Indeed, all the communications of the Godhead, which any creatures could receive, were always from him as the Word of God; but all that mankind now in an earthly state were to receive, must be from him by means of that body, at first mortal, like unto theirs, and then glorious "in the likeness of God," which he took upon him for their sake.

In the beginning, the heavenly Word, -- being a Spirit that issued from the Father, and the Word of his power, -- made man an image of immortality, according to the likeness of the Father; but he who had been made in the image of God, afterwards became mortal, when the more powerful Spirit was separated from him. To remedy this, the Word became Man, that man by receiving the adoption might become a son of God once more; that the light of the Father might rest upon the flesh of our Lord, and come bright from thence unto us; and so man, being encompassed with the light of the Godhead, might be carried into immortality. When he was incarnate and became man, he recapitulated in himself all generations of mankind, making himself the centre of our salvation, that what we lost in Adam, even the image and likeness of God, we might receive in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Ghost coming upon Mary, and the power of the highest overshadowing her, the incarnation or Christ was wrought, and a new birth, whereby man should be born of God, was shown; that as by our first birth we did inherit death, so by this birth we might inherit life.

This is no other than what St. Paul teaches us: "The first man, Adam, was made a living soul, but the Second Adam was made a quickening spirit." All that the first man possessed of himself, all that he has transmitted to us, is "a living soul;" a nature endued with an animal life, and receptive of a spiritual. But the Second Adam is, and was made to us, "a quickening spirit;" by a strength from him as our Creator, we were at first raised above ourselves; by a strength from him as our Redeemer, we shall again live unto God.

In him is laid up for us that supplement to our nature, which we shall find the need of sooner or later; and that it cannot be countervailed by any assistance from the creatures, or any improvement of our own faculties: For we were made to be happy only in God; and all our labours and hopes, while we do not thirst after our deified state, -- to partake as truly of God as we do of flesh and blood, to be glorified in his nature, as we have been dishonoured in our own, -- are the labours and hopes of those who utterly mistake themselves.

The divine wisdom knew what was our proper consolation, though we did not. What does more obviously present itself in the Saviour of the world, than an union of man with God? -- an union attended with all the propriety of behaviour that we are called to, as candidates of the Spirit; such as walking with God in singleness of heart, perfect self-renunciation, and a life of sufferings, -- an union which submitted to the

necessary stages of our progress; where the divine life was hid, for the most part, in the secret of the soul till death; in the state of separation, comforted the soul, but did not raise it above the intermediate region of Paradise; at the resurrection, clothed the body with heavenly qualities, and the powers of immortality; and at last raised it to the immediate presence and right hand of the Father.

Christ is not only God above us; which may keep us in awe, but cannot save; but he is Immanuel, God with us, and in us. As he is the Son of God, God must be where he is; and as he is the Son of man, he will be with mankind; the consequence of this is, that in the future age "the tabernacle of God will be with men," and he will show them his glory; and, at present, he will *dwell* in their hearts by faith in his Son.

I hope it sufficiently appears, that "the Lord is that Spirit." Considering what we are, and what we have been, nothing less than the receiving that Spirit again would be redemption to us; and considering who that heavenly person was that was sent to be our Redeemer, we can expect nothing less from him.

III.

I proceed now to the Third thing proposed, viz., to inquire into the nature and operations of the Holy Spirit, as bestowed upon Christians.

And here I shall pass by the particular extraordinary gifts vouchsafed to the first ages for the edification of the Church and only consider what the Holy Spirit is to every believer, for his personal sanctification and salvation. It is not granted to every one to raise the dead, and heal the sick. What is most necessary is, to be sure, as to ourselves, that we are "passed from death unto life;" to keep our bodies pure and undefiled, and let them reap that health which flows from a magnanimous patience, and the serene joys of devotion. The Holy Spirit has enabled men to speak with tongues, and to prophesy; but the light that most necessarily attends it is a light to discern the fallacies of flesh and blood, to reject the irreligious maxims of the world, and to practice those degrees of trust in God and love to men, whose foundation is not so much in the present appearances of things, as in some that are yet to come. The object which this light brings us most immediately to know is ourselves; and by virtue of this, one that is born of God, and has a lively hope may indeed see far into the ways of Providence, and farther yet into the holy Scriptures; for the holy Scriptures, excepting some accidental and less necessary parts, are only a history of that new man which he himself is; and Providence is only a wise disposal of events for the awakening of particular persons, and ripening the world in general for the coming of Christ's kingdom.

But I think the true notion of the Spirit is, that it is some portion of, as well as preparation for, a life in God, which we are to enjoy hereafter. The gift of the Holy Spirit looks full to the resurrection; for then is the life of God completed in us.

Then, after man has passed through all the *penalties* of sin, the drudgery and vanity of human life, the painful reflections of an awakened mind, the infirmities and dissolution of the body, and all the sufferings and mortifications a just God shall lay in his way; when, by this means, he is come to know God and himself, he may safely be entrusted with true life, with the freedom and ornaments of a child of God; for he will no more arrogate anything to himself. Then shall the Holy Spirit be fully bestowed, when the flesh shall no longer resist it, but be itself changed into an angelical condition, being clothed upon with the incorruption of the Holy Spirit; when the body which, by being born with the soul, and living through it, could only be called an animal one, shall now become spiritual, whilst by the Spirit it rises into eternity.

Everything in Christianity is some kind of anticipation of something that is to be at the end of the world. If the Apostles were to preach by their Master's command, "that the kingdom of God drew nigh;" the meaning was, that from henceforth all men should fix their eyes on that happy time, foretold by the Prophets, when the Messiah should come and restore all things; that by renouncing their worldly conversation, and submitting to the gospel institution, they should fit themselves for, hasten, that blessing. "Now are we the sons of God," as St. John tells us; and yet what he imparts to us at present will hardly justify that title, without taking in that fulness of his image which shall then be displayed in us, when we shall be "the children of God, by being the children of the resurrection."

True believers, then, are entered upon a life, the *sequel* of which they know not; for it is "a life hid with Christ in God." He, the forerunner, hath attained the end of it, being gone unto the Father; but we can know no more of it than appeared in him while he was upon earth. And even that, we shall not know but by following his steps; which if we do, we shall be so strengthened and renewed day by day in the inner man, that we shall desire no comfort from the present world through a sense of "the joy set before us;" though, as to the outward man, we shall be subject to distresses and decays, and treated as the offscouring of all things.

Well may a man ask his own heart, whether it is able to admit the Spirit of God. For where that divine Guest enters, the laws of another world must be observed: The body must be given up to martyrdom, or spent in the Christian warfare, as unconcernedly as if the soul were already provided of its house from heaven; the goods of this world must be parted with as freely, as if the last fire were to seize them to-

morrow; our neighbour must be loved as heartily as if he were washed from all his sins, and demonstrated to be a child of God by the resurrection from the dead. The fruits of this Spirit must not be mere moral virtues, calculated for the comfort and decency of the present life; but holy dispositions, suitable to the instincts of a superior life already begun.

Thus to press forward, whither the promise of life calls him, -- to turn his back upon the world, and comfort himself in God, -- every one that has faith perceives to be just and necessary, and forces himself to do it: Every one that has hope, does it gladly and eagerly, though not without difficulty; but he that has love does it with ease and singleness of heart.

The state of love, being attended with "joy unspeakable and full of glory," with rest from the passions and vanities of man, with the integrity of an unchangeable judgment, and an undivided will, is, in a great measure, its own reward; yet not so as to supersede the desire of another world. For though such a man, having a free and insatiable love of that which is good, may seldom have need formally to propose to himself the hopes of retribution, in order to overcome his unwillingness to his duty; yet surely he must long for that which is best of all; and feel a plain attraction towards that country in which he has his place and station already assigned him; and join in the earnest expectation of all creatures, which wait for the manifestation of the sons of God. For now we obtain but some part of his Spirit, to model and fit us for incorruption, that we may, by degrees, be accustomed to receive and carry God within us; and, therefore, the Apostle calls it, "the earnest of the Spirit;" that is, a part of that honour which is promised us by the Lord. If, therefore, the earnest, abiding in us, makes us spiritual even now, and that which is mortal is, as it were, swallowed up of immortality; how shall it be when, rising again, we shall see him face to face? When all our members shall break to forth into songs of triumph, and glorify Him who hath raised them from the dead, and granted them everlasting life? For if this earnest or pledge, embracing man into itself, makes him now cry, "Abba, Father;" what shall the whole grace of the Spirit do, when, being given at length to believers, it shall make us like unto God, and perfect us through the will of the Father?

And thus I have done what was at first proposed: I have considered the nature of our fall in Adam; the person of Jesus Christ; and the operations of the Holy Spirit in Christians.

The only inference I will draw from what has been said, and principally from the account of man's fall, shall be, the reasonableness of those precepts of self-denial, daily suffering, and renouncing the world, which are so peculiar to Christianity, and which are the only foundation whereon the other virtues, recommended in the New Testament, can be practised or attained, in the sense there intended.

This inference is so natural, that I could not help anticipating it in some measure all the while. One would think it should be no hard matter to persuade a creature to abhor the badges of his misery; to dislike a condition or mansion which only banishment and disgrace have assigned him; to trample on the grandeur, refuse the comforts, and suspect the wisdom of a life whose nature it is to separate him from his God.

Your Saviour bids you "hate your own life." If you ask the reason, enter into your heart, see whether it be holy, and full of God; or whether, on the other hand, many things that are contrary to him are wrought there, and it is become a plantation of the enemy. Or, if this is too nice an inquiry, look upon your body. Do you find there the brightness of an angel, all the vigour of immortality? If not, be sure your soul is in the same degree of poverty, nakedness, and absence from God. It is true, your soul may sooner be re-admitted to some rays of the light of God's countenance, than your body can; but if you would take any step at all towards it, to dislike your present self must be the first.

You want a reason why you should renounce the world. Indeed you cannot see the prince of it walking up and down, "seeking whom he may devour;" and you may be so far ignorant of his devices, as not to know that they take place, as well in the most specious measures of business and learning, as in the wildest pursuits of pleasure. But this, however, you cannot but see, that the world is not still a paradise of God, guarded and ennobled with the light of glory; it is, indeed, a place where God has determined he will not appear to you at best, but leave you in a state of hope, that you shall see his face when this world is dissolved.

However, there is a way to rescue ourselves, in great measure, from the ill consequences of our captivity; and our Saviour has taught us that way. It is by suffering. We must not only "suffer many things," as he did, and so enter into our glory; but we must also suffer many things, that we may get above our corruption at present, and enjoy the Holy Spirit.

The world has no longer any power over us, than we have a quick relish of its comforts; and suffering abates that. Suffering is, indeed, a direct confutation of the pretences which the flattering tempter gains us by: For I am in human life; and if that life contains such soft ease, ravishing pleasure, glorious eminence, as you promise, why am I thus? Is it because I have not yet purchased riches to make me easy, or the current accomplishments to make me considerable? Then I find that all the comfort you propose is by leading me off from myself; but I will rather enter deep into my own condition, bad as it is: Perhaps I shall be nearer to God, the Eternal Truth, in feeling sorrows and miseries

that are personal and real, than in feeling comforts that are not so. I begin already to find that all my grievances centre in one point: There is always at the bottom one great loss or defect, which is not the want of friends or gold, of health or philosophy. And the abiding sense of this may possibly become a prayer in the ears of the Most High; -- a prayer not resulting from a set of speculative notions, but from the real, undissembled state of all that is within me; nor, indeed, so explicit a prayer as to describe the thing I want, but, considering how strange a want mine is, as explicit a one as I can make. Since, then, suffering opens me a door of hope, I will not put it from me as long as I live: It helps me to a true discovery of one period of my existence, though it is a low one; and bids fairer for having some connexion with a more glorious period that may follow, than the arts of indulgence, the amusements of pride and sloth, and all the dark policy of this world, which wage war with the whole truth, that man must know and feel, before he can look towards God. It may be, while I continue on the cross, I shall, like my Saviour, put off "principalities and powers;" recover myself more and more from the subjection I am indeed in (which he only seemed to be) to those wicked rulers, and to "triumph over them in it." At least, it shall appear, in the day when God shall visit, that my heart, though grown unworthy of his residence, was too big to be comforted by any of his creatures; and was kept for him, as a place originally sacred, though for the present unclean.

But supposing that our state does require of us to "die daily," -- to sacrifice all that this present life can boast of, or is delighted with, before we give up life itself; supposing also, that in the hour we do somewhat of this kind, we receive light and strength from God, to grow superior to our infirmities, and are carried smoothly towards him in the joy of the Holy Ghost; yet how can a man have such frequent opportunities of suffering? Indeed, martyrdoms do not happen in every age, and some days of our lives may pass without reproaches from men; we may be in health, and not want food to eat and raiment to put on; (though health itself, and nutrition itself, oblige us to the pain of a constant correction of them) yet still, the love of God and heavenly hope will not want something to oppress them in this world.

Let a man descend calmly into his heart, and see if there be no root of bitterness springing up; whether, at least, his thoughts, which are ever in motion, do not sometimes sally out into projects suggested by pride, or sink into indolent trifling, or be entangled in mean anxiety. Does not he find a motion of anger, or of gaiety, leavening him in an instant throughout; depriving him of the meekness and steady discernment he laboured after? Or, let him but conceive at any time, that unfeigned obedience, and watchful zeal, and dignity of behaviour, which, is suitable, I do not say to an angel, but to a sinner that has "a good hope through grace," and endeavour to work himself up to it; and if he find no sort of obstacle to this within him, he has indeed then no opportunity of suffering. In short, if he is such an abject sort of creature, as will, unless grace should do him a perpetual violence, relapse frequently into a course of thinking and acting entirely without God; then he can never want occasions of suffering, but will find his own nature to be the same burden to him, as that "faithless and perverse generation" was to our Saviour, of whom he said, "How long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer you?"

I will conclude all with that excellent Collect of our Church: -- "O God, who in all ages hast taught the hearts of thy faithful people, by sending to them the light of thy Holy Spirit; grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour; who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen."

Acknowledgements

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