

Acts 11: 1-17; “A Correct Understanding of the Spirit” Sermon # 47
in the series –“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on August 20th, 2017, in the Morning Worship Service.

The work of the Holy Spirit in terms of the salvation of any person is not easily understood. Jesus said in John chapter 3, verse 6 – “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘you must be born again.’” “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes.” “So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus, whom Jesus was talking to, responded by saying – “How can these things be?” And Jesus said – “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?” “We speak what we know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive our witness.” “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” This shows us how important it is to come to have a correct understanding of the Holy Spirit’s work in salvation, and in living the Christian life. It was the Holy Spirit who told Peter to go with these three men who stood before the house where he was, after he received the vision. It was the Holy Spirit who fell upon all those gathered, when they heard Peter speak to them that day. It was the Holy Spirit who baptized all the hearers so that they all spoke in tongues and declared the praises of God. It was the Holy Spirit who opened their hearts to the gospel when Peter preached to them.

It is this gift of the Holy Spirit that we want to think more about, in this hour. It was the greatness of the Spirit’s working which brought salvation to Cornelius and his household that day. When we come to believe in Jesus Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, and when we receive the Holy Spirit then we begin to understand the absolute necessity of the Spirit’s working, to produce a correct understanding in our minds concerning many important truths and spiritual realities in our lives. As Christians we need to have a correct understanding of three things which are mentioned here in our text. 1st – The correct understanding of the vision given to Peter. (verses 1-12) 2nd – The correct understanding of the importance of words. (verses 13 and 14) And 3rd – The correct understanding of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. (verses 15-17) I pray that in this hour you will come to a greater appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit in regard to the way that you look at other Christians and the truths which will lead you to greater holiness in your life.

1st of all – It took the Holy Spirit’s working for Peter to correctly understand the vision which was given to him.

After Peter preached to Cornelius and his household, when he returned home to Jerusalem, he found that the churches of Judea, which were all Jewish, had all heard about his going to Cornelius’ house. And he found himself having to give an answer to the party of the circumcision for what he had done. They thought that he had done something very wrong in going to Cornelius’ house to minister to uncircumcised men, and even eating with them. This seemed to them to be a direct violation of the ceremonial law of Moses. They had somehow found out about Peter’s going and they did not approve of it at all. And so, it says, they contended with Peter about it. He explained it all to them in order; that he was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance he saw this vision of the great sheet in which there were four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.” “And he heard a voice saying to him, ‘Rise, Peter, kill and eat.’” And he said – “Not so, Lord!” “For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth,” he told them. He told them that the voice from heaven said to him – “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” He told them that this vision was shown to him three times (for confirmation’s sake) before it was all drawn up again into heaven.” He told them how the providence of God had ordered these things; that the men sent from Cornelius to inquire of him if he would come to speak with them, were at that very time standing before the gate. And so, when the Spirit told Peter to go

with them, doubting nothing, he went. It was the Holy Spirit's working that convinced Peter of all of these things.

There are some very important things that we can learn from this. Let us understand that not everyone you will meet with, who is religious, or who claims to be a Christian, will approve of the doctrines of God's free and sovereign grace. If they do not realize that the doctrine of God's election is true, or if they choose not to believe the Bible, that it is God who chooses men unto salvation, they may attempt to add something to the gospel of Christ, something of the law of Moses; something of man's doing, or something of what they think is of everlasting ceremonial significance, to what Jesus Christ has done for us, to purchase our salvation. Or, they may believe that holiness is only separation from sinners. This was the case here. These men thought that all the Gentiles were sinners. And in holding to this kind of thinking, they were deliberately trying to exclude certain kinds of sinners from coming into covenant with God, when what is the truth of the matter; that the Lord Jesus had died to break down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, and was intending to save multitudes of Gentiles.

Let's go a step farther. Some people falsely think that being a Christian is keeping to their own group of Christians and following a set of man-made rules of what holiness is. They believe that being a Christian is only for those who can hold to those rules and meet up to the expectations of the men who made them up. These rules may even come from the Old Testament Scriptures, which in this case they did. They did not know that Christ had fulfilled the whole ceremonial law, and that circumcision was not necessary to salvation. Yes, it is true that circumcision was an ordinance of God in the Old Testament times. But now that Christ had come, and shed His precious blood, the covenant of circumcision, which pointed to the circumcision of the heart, was now fulfilled in the New Testament believer's heart being circumcised. There was no longer any need of physical circumcision to show forth a person's being part of the covenant people of God.

And further, these men needed to understand the meaning of the vision which Peter received. God had decided in His decrees in eternity past, and He had made provision for this, through the righteous life and sacrificial death of His Son, that He would now open the door of salvation to Gentiles everywhere. He would deliberately stretch forth His hand and save men from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. And He was beginning this in a formal sense, with Cornelius and his household. And so, this is why He gave Peter this vision of the sheet full of common and unclean animals, and told him to arise, kill and eat. He was telling Peter that it would be by the power of the Spirit's working, that he, Peter, would preach, and Cornelius and his household, all of these Gentiles, would be saved. These men who were of the party of the circumcision, in these Judean churches, needed to understand that it is not simply men who choose God, based upon their human desire to know Him. By nature there is none who seeks after God. Salvation is not men trying to persuade other men to be righteous and holy people without their being saved by hearing the gospel. In relation to the preaching of the gospel of Christ, God must through the Holy Spirit, come and do a sovereign work of grace in the heart even of a moral man, before he can come to saving faith in Christ.

The Holy Spirit works in relation to the preaching of the word of God, knowing what God's eternal purposes are; because He is God, the 3rd Person of the Divine Trinity. He knows God's decrees just as well as the Father and the Son, and the time in which a sinner will be brought to saving faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit told Peter to go with these Gentile men to Cornelius' house in particular, so that Peter would preach to him and to his relatives gathered with him. And then He, the Holy Spirit, would work in their hearts and open their understanding to the truth. He would fall upon them, and make them spiritually alive in relation to their believing in the truth of the word. Their salvation would be all of grace, and not of themselves. No one would boast in what they had done to come to Christ, but they would all glory in what God had done for them through Christ; in their all having been forgiven of their sins by faith, and all of them realizing that God had

given them His Holy Spirit, to abide in them and teach them, and lead them, and guide them, into all the truth.

It appears that these men who were of the party of the circumcision, felt that there was a need to hold on to the ordinance of circumcision even after they had believed in Christ. They wrongly thought that circumcision must needs be added to the gospel of Christ; to Christ's finished work of righteousness and sufferings, in order for any person to be saved. They thought, at the very least, that the ordinances and commandments of the ceremonial Mosaic law were not abrogated (that is, fulfilled and set aside) by Christ's having kept them perfectly, but they must still be observed by true Christians, and the dietary laws must be observed by them as well. They thought that Peter had defiled himself by going to them, and eating with them. They remembered Leviticus 11: 43 – "You shall not make yourselves abominable with any creeping thing that creeps; nor shall you make yourselves unclean with them, lest you be defiled by them." "For I am the Lord your God." "You shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy." "Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth." "For I am the Lord who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God." "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

But Peter's vision told him that he had not been defiled by going to Cornelius and preaching to Gentiles, because Christ's death had radically changed how the Jews were to see the Gentiles. It would be unholy and unrighteous to see them as enemies any longer. Rather they must see that God shows no partiality. This leads me to say that sometimes people hold conceptions of holiness that are not correct. These men did, and they had fallen into legalism, but they thought that they were being holy. They needed to understand that Peter's vision of the sheet full of unclean animals, was God's telling all Christians everywhere in all generations, that He could and would save even the vilest of sinners; the worse of sinners, if they come to Jesus. And He could save even the best and even the most moral of Gentile sinners; even Cornelius.

2nd – It takes the Spirit's working to come to give the correct understanding of the importance of words. (verses 13 and 14)

Peter says to these men who were contending with him: "And Cornelius told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you will be saved.'" We see here that the hearing of the words of the gospel is essential to being saved. Cornelius had given every evidence of his being a God-fearing man before this time. He was devout with all of his household, he gave alms generously to the people, and he prayed to God always. But he still needed something more to be saved. He needed the words of truth concerning Jesus Christ, and what He had done for sinners. Peter said to Cornelius in verse 42 of chapter 10 – "And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead." "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." In other words, whoever believes in Jesus will have their sin debt paid in full by Jesus; they will receive the forgiveness of all of their sins.

Never downplay the preaching of the word and the gospel in relation to the salvation of sinners. Never think that it is enough to simply let your light shine in good works, so that people might know that God is good and that he somehow accepts moral people as those who know Him and have been saved. Always remember that all people must believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved. They must all hear the words of the gospel. And it will be good if you can speak them to them. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. And how shall they hear without a preacher? Think of how it is worded here in the verses that we are studying."Peter will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved." This makes it plain that neither Cornelius nor anyone in his household was saved before they heard these words. Look at the certainty of the angel's words about these words. These are words by which you will be saved. It does not say that these are words by which you might be saved. There is the certainty of God's purpose, and the certainty of the Holy Spirit's work in saving these people.

This is the way that it always is in the salvation of any sinner who has the capacity to hear the gospel and understand what is being said; you most certainly will be saved by believing in these words of the gospel of Christ, when they are accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit opening your eyes to the truth; taking away the resistance of your heart to it. And so, you need to see, that when you believe in Christ you will be saved immediately. And you will not lose this great salvation sometime in the future, if this glorious work of grace is done by the Holy Spirit. I hope that you are a Christian who believes in this great and true doctrine of Justification by faith alone. Faith receives the word of God, and believes in the words that they hear, and they are justified. They are declared righteous by God because they have believed in Jesus. Because of the Holy Spirit's working they, there and then, pass from death into life. "He who hears my word and believes in Him who sent Me, has eternal life," says Jesus, "and will not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life." You do not receive Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit and then lose it. But it is because the Spirit is with you forevermore, that you cannot walk away from His work.

People are not saved and then unsaved. They are not saved by their own works; they are not saved by their own perseverance after they have believed in Christ. They are saved by faith in the gospel, and in accordance with the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts; giving them a new heart. When a person is saved by being given a new heart and being justified by faith, then they will go on, by grace, to follow Jesus and to live in accordance with God's word. This is holiness. The reason that you will persevere in the faith, and continue in doing righteous things, and loving people with God's love, and engage in good works, is because Christ is in you, Christ is with you, and Christ is giving you grace to continue in the faith. He does this by the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit with you and working in you. "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to do, according to His good pleasure. (Philippians 2: 13) Ah, this is the importance of words. Dear Christian, hold fast to God's words, and do not believe in any modification of them to please men or to accommodate erroneous or false doctrine. Your salvation depends upon it, and certainly your joy and peace will be established if you will hold fast to the words of God in the Bible, and the words of the one who preaches to you, if he is faithfully and accurately teaching you the word.

3rd – It took the Holy Spirit's working for Peter to correctly understand the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 15 says – "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning." "Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" Now, I want you to see Peter's clear delineation of the doctrine of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit which he gave to the party of the circumcision. He said – It was God who did these marvelous things in salvation, and the Holy Spirit confirmed this by giving to each one who believed, a special gift. Toward the end of his gospel message to Cornelius and his household, Peter saw and heard those, who he preached the word to, speaking in tongues. It says in Acts 10: 44 – "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word." "And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also." "For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God."

There are certain truths that we ought to take more notice of, in regard to Peter's words concerning the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is a work of the Holy Spirit which places the person who believes in Jesus into the Universal Body of Christ and He gives to them a spiritual gift or gifts. This Baptism of the Holy Spirit into the Universal Church should be followed by the believer's having the desire to join a local church of believers who they can identify with doctrinally. In relation to their joining that local church, they will want to confess Christ by submitting a testimony of their faith, and engaging in the ordinance of water baptism; to show forth their faith in Christ and their intent to walk with Christ as a part of that particular local

church. The local church is the local representation of His Universal Body, which they were already baptized into, when they first believed.

Water baptism and joining a local church are intended to go hand in hand. Water Baptism is an ordinance which belongs to the local church and is required of every believer who would join the local church, according to the Scriptures. “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved.” It is to be engaged in by every believer who is serious about following Christ. Water Baptism is that ceremonial and sacramental action, which is participated in, because the believer wants to identify themselves with Christ, in showing forth what Christ has done for them. In being baptized in water in the name of the Triune God, they are spiritually, by faith, consciously identifying themselves with all that Christ has done for them in His death, burial, and resurrection. Spiritually speaking, they have died with Christ, and they have been buried with Christ. And this is symbolized by their being lowered into the water, and in their being raised up out of the water. In submitting to this, they are signifying that they have been spiritually raised up together with Christ; being raised from their death in trespasses and sins, to newness of life, by Christ’s resurrection power, in their regeneration by the Spirit.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit, since the days of the early church, has normally been something that the Spirit does at the time of conversion to Christ. This is confirmed for us in 1st Corinthians chapter 12, verse 13 – “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.” The exception to that was the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit had not been formally given to the whole Church until that day. The apostles and disciples had already been regenerated and called in salvation, quite a while before that Day of Pentecost. They received the Holy Spirit and His working, at numbers of points before the Day of Pentecost. But they were all baptized together on that glorious Day of Pentecost because it was on that Day that the Universal Church of Jesus Christ was formally established in the sight of all men and nations. The Baptism of the Spirit places us spiritually into that one body with all Christians in all generations. This is explained for us in Ephesians 4: 4 – “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

It is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, at the beginning of the Christian life, which also seals us with the Spirit of Promise, as it says in Ephesians 1: 13 – “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.” What Paul is saying here is that when you believed in Jesus, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit; you were actually given the Holy Spirit to dwell with you forever, so that you would know the certainty of His being with you to teach you and lead you into all the truth and into the reality of what it means to be holy. John Gill says that, “it is to be understood of the confirming, certifying, and assuring the saints, as to their interest in the favor of God, and in the blessings of grace, of every kind, and their right and title to the heavenly glory.”

And he further says; “The seal of these things is not circumcision, nor baptism, nor the Lord’s supper, nor even the graces of the Spirit; but the Spirit Himself, who witnesses to the spirits of believers the truth of these things, and that as a “spirit of promise”: so called, both because He is the Spirit promised, whom the Father and Christ had promised, and who was sent by them; and because He usually seals, or certifies believers of the truth of the above things, by opening and applying a word of promise to them: and which He does also, as the “Holy” Spirit; for this sealing work of His leaves a greater impress of holiness upon the soul, and engages more to acts of holiness; wherefore the doctrine of assurance is no licentious doctrine; no persons are so holy as those who are truly possessed of that grace; and as for such who pretend unto it, and live in sin, it is a certain thing that they in reality know nothing of it.” (end of quote)

Holiness is living a life of separated obedience to God (that is, that we are going to obey God rather than man) in accordance with the truth of His word. This truth that the seeds of righteousness and holiness are planted in the believer's heart at the time when they are born of the Spirit, and then the fact that they are sealed with the Holy Spirit's promise, this is the true Biblical way that holiness is to be understood. It is the Spirit's working in connection with our new nature, that sanctifies us progressively. It is the Spirit's work in the believer's heart and life, all through their life, which will help them to keep the commandment – "Be holy, even as I am holy". This doctrine of a progressive sanctification ought to show us what the true doctrine of Biblical holiness consists of. It begins with the Baptism of the Holy Spirit which takes place at conversion. And then the Spirit works in us, and with us, all of our days here upon the earth. During that time we do battle with the flesh, our indwelling remaining corruption, and we strive to do what is right at every point; being led by the Spirit into the practical realities of what it means to keep the commandments of God, love other people, and become more like our Lord.

We do that, not by obtaining the Baptism of the Spirit through entire consecration of ourselves by faith, but rather by believing in the promises of God and acting upon them. Galatians 5: 17 – "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. Let us recognize the spiritual realities of the Christian life. We are saved by grace through faith, and it is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God. When we believe in Christ, we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, and we then pursue peace with all men, and the holiness without which, no one shall see the Lord. Let us glory in the precious truth that God sees us in Christ, as His saints. He sees us as perfectly complete in Christ. That is our standing. We are justified and we are sanctified in that we have been baptized by the Spirit. There will be no further baptisms of the Spirit, but there will be many fillings. And it will be the Spirit's work in us, all of our days, to make us holy. "Having been set free from sin, and having become slaves to righteousness, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life." (Romans 6: 22)

Footnote:

I want you to understand that there have been some denominations of Christians who believe that entire sanctification can take place in this life, and that it comes about through the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. As your pastor I would like to warn you against this doctrinal error. Let me read to you the doctrinal statement of those who believe this. "We believe that entire sanctification is that act of God, subsequent to (which comes after) regeneration, by which believers are made free from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God and the holy obedience of love made perfect. It is wrought by the baptism with the Holy Ghost and comprehends in one experience the cleansing of the heart from sin and the abiding, indwelling presence of the Holy Ghost, empowering the believer for life and service. Entire sanctification is provided through the blood of Jesus, is wrought instantaneously by faith preceded by entire consecration, and to this work and state of grace the Holy Spirit bears witness."). We further believe that original sin continues to exist after regeneration, though suppressed, until crucified (eradicated) and destroyed by the baptism with the Holy Ghost (Acts 15:8 9; I John 3:8). (end of quote) (Taken from the Wesleyan Nazarene Confession of Faith. Articles 5 and 11)

Brethren, I want to warn you against this doctrine because it is not taught in the word of God that there is a Baptism of the Holy Spirit following conversion which takes sin entirely out of your heart and life. It is simply not taught in the Scriptures. The true formula for the Spirit's working is one Baptism and many fillings. The commandment of the Scripture in Galatians 5: 16 is this: "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." It does not say – "Be baptized in the Spirit, and the flesh will be eradicated; it will be removed. No, a great part of our Christian life is going to be taken up with this daily battle between the flesh and the Spirit. And we must learn by grace to walk in the Spirit; to live out our life of obedience to God's commandments and by cleansing ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

