

The Power of Unity in the Holy Spirit

Acts 1:4-9, John 16:6-7, Ephesians 3:16-17, Ephesians 4:2-3, Colossians 3:12-14

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This morning, I'm going to focus on one of the powers we receive from the Holy Spirit: the ability to live together in unity.

Like all the things we do by the power of the Holy Spirit, the kind of unity that God desires His people to have is not humanly possible.

It requires supernatural enablement because it requires doing things that don't come naturally to sinful human beings.

Unity requires forgiveness. It requires granting one another grace. It requires longsuffering, forbearance and tolerance.

Since this series is about the power of the Holy Spirit, I want to begin with Acts 1:6-8. This is forty days after Christ's resurrection.

Acts 1:6-8, "Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you." That's the promise Jesus not only made to His disciples, but to those of us who follow in their footsteps.

Ten days after Jesus spoke these words, on the day of Pentecost, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit which enabled them to be His witnesses.

But the promise wasn't limited to the original twelve disciples. It was made to us also. We know this, because the original Twelve couldn't go to the *"ends of the earth."*

They couldn't cross all of the world's oceans, mountains and jungles in order to bring the Gospel to every people group on the planet.

But those who followed them over the centuries could do that, have done that, and are doing that.

We have the same Holy Spirit the Apostles had. The Holy Spirit indwells us from the time we first put our trust in Christ, and since we have the same Spirit as the Apostles, we have the same power as the Apostles.

Understand there was nothing special about these Apostles. They were just ordinary, unschooled men.

Acts 4:13, "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

But with the power of the Holy Spirit, they changed the world. We have that same power; the same power as Peter, James and John. Christ's promise, and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, belongs to us as well.

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Jesus promised the Apostles the power of the Holy Spirit just before He left and ascended into heaven. This gift was the alternative to Jesus remaining with them.

Instead of His personal presence with them going forward, they would have His Spirit. In John's gospel, before Jesus' crucifixion, He talked about this substitution.

John 16:6-7, *“Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things. But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”*

The disciples didn't want Jesus to leave. They were filled with grief when He told them He was going away.

Because of this Jesus told them that it was better for them that He leave, since He would send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

The same is true for us. As much as we might wish to have Jesus here present with us, it's better for us to have His Spirit. The Spirit lives in each one of us; and the Spirit comes with power.

Now, I want to make it clear that the Holy Spirit's power is not separate from Jesus' person or His presence. His power isn't some kind of supernatural energy that we can direct or manipulate as we wish.

Jesus is in control of His power, not us, but His power is available to us because He lives within us through the Holy Spirit.

Because of this, we have the ability to act, think, speak, and respond in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's pretty amazing when you stop and think about it.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and so we literally have Jesus Christ in us; we literally have God in us. That's the good news.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; it means that the Holy Spirit lives in us; He inhabits us; He dwells in us.

But the challenging part of that equation is that we have that power because we need it. Why do we need it? Because we can't live the Christian life without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Following Christ; obeying Christ; witnessing to Christ; forsaking sin; seeing others coming to faith through our witness and then being transformed by faith: all these things would be impossible without the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Now, let's look at the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian church.

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1 Corinthians 12:12-13, *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”*

The Christian church as a whole, and this Christian church, Grace Fellowship, was formed by the Holy Spirit.

Our very existence as the body of Christ is due to the Holy Spirit and, because of that, He has a vested interest in keeping us together.

He has a strong desire to support us in maintaining the bonds of love and fellowship that keep us united. He will do that if we follow His instructions and draw on His power.

Ephesians 4:2-3, *“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*

Paul calls it *“The unity of the Spirit,”* because it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we're able to remain united.

Our unity is critically important. So important that we are to “*make every effort*” to maintain unity and peace in the body.

But our efforts must be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, or they won't be enough. Why?

Our human sinfulness makes unity difficult. Not only that, we also have the constant pressures of this fallen world, which is pushing against us, seeking to conform us to its own corrupt image.

Satan is doing whatever he can, every hour of every day, to undermine our unity, because a unified church is more difficult for him to attack and destroy. A unified church is a threat to his dominion and power.

It's a fact of life that relationships in the church can fray and fracture over time because of human sinfulness, the pressures of a fallen world, and spiritual warfare.

The good news is that we have a remedy. By the Holy Spirit's power, we have a way to strengthen relationships so that fractures don't develop.

But, when they do, we have a way to repair and renew those relationships. We find that remedy in Paul's letter to the Colossian church.

Colossians 3:12-14, “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Paul's telling us how to live in harmony and unity with other believers. He writes that we should clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Now, maybe you're a person of action, a person who says just tell me what I need to do and I'll do it. Actions are important, but the "softer" aspects of fellowship that Paul describes are also important; in fact, they're critical.

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Look at that passage from Colossians 3 a little more closely. First, from where do these character qualities come? Not from ourselves. Not from our innate goodness or strength of character.

These qualities don't come naturally to us, but they do come naturally to God. He has given us His Spirit so that we can exhibit these qualities of His character.

Galatians 5:22-23, 25, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

These qualities are the "fruit" of our ongoing relationship with God through His Spirit. Our ability to live this way and treat other believers in this way comes from the power of the Holy Spirit.

By referring to these qualities as "fruit," Paul's saying that they are the natural outgrowth of our relationship with God.

The more we're in close fellowship with God, the more we'll see ourselves living out these qualities.

We need to be communicating with God in prayer and listening to what the Spirit is saying to us as we read and hear the Word of God.

These are important means by which we remain in fellowship with Christ and access His Spirit's power.

The more we do those things, the more natural these character qualities and behaviors will be to us.

Now, if this idea of walking by the Spirit seems a bit vague or mystical, let me offer an analogy that may help. Think of it like the power steering on your car.

You know it's there, but you don't have to consciously engage it. You simply steer your car and the hydraulics or electric motor supply whatever power is needed to actually turn the wheels.

It's the same way when we depend on the Holy Spirit to help us love and serve one another, or to do anything that requires spiritual power.

We simply obey God and do what He calls us to do, and the Holy Spirit supplies the power.

We know that it's the Holy Spirit which is enabling us to do it, just like we know that our car has power steering, but we don't have to consciously think about it or do something special to make it happen.

But we still need to pray. Prayer reminds us from where the power is coming. Just obey God. Let the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit support and enable our obedience.

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Another thing Paul tells us in Colossians 3:12-14, that strengthens our unity, is that we're to "*Bear with each other.*" This word "*bear*" means forbearance. It's different than forgiveness.

Forgiveness is needed when someone sins against you. Forbearance is what you need when someone is displeasing to you; when someone acts or speaks in a way that you find offensive or tiresome.

You may not know it, but many people have habits, opinions, or behaviors that we don't appreciate. This is inevitable because people are different.

People have different ways of talking, thinking, and living. When Paul tells us to "*bear with each other*," he doesn't mean that we're to try to change people to make them more pleasing to us.

We're not to avoid them because of whatever it is we find disagreeable about them. We shouldn't criticize them. We are to simply put up with them, graciously, and with good humor.

Not taking offense; being a little less brittle. That's forbearance. Accepting people for who they are, not trying to make them more like us.

How do you do this? By keeping in mind that there are probably things about us which gall people. You may have opinions, habits, or ways of speaking or acting that some people find offensive.

Of course, this is highly unlikely here at Grace Fellowship because you're all lovely people, but it's possible!

If you keep this in mind, it'll be easier for you to put up with the quirks and eccentricities of other people.

Now think about this: God puts up with us. Yes, He loves us, He forgives our sins, but He also puts up with all our oddities and imperfections.

No matter how many rough edges we may have; God never avoids us, shuns us or judges us.

He never grows tired of our company. He accepts us like we are and is glad to fellowship with us in spite of everything.

Therefore, extend one another the same grace. Put up with each other because God puts up with us.

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Paul also tells us in Colossians 3:12-14 that we're to forgive: *"forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."*

This one is more difficult. This isn't for the times when we find other people a bit irritating or tiresome.

This is for the times when another believer sins against us; when we feel that they've wronged us. You need to understand that to be in fellowship with other human beings is to be sinned against.

When that happens, we're to forgive them. That's easy for me to say, but it's hard to do. Especially when the hurt comes from someone you've trusted and fellowshiped with, perhaps for many years.

So, let's be clear about what forgiveness is, and what it isn't. First, five things that forgiveness is not:

- Forgiveness doesn't mean the hurt goes away. It means you give the hurt to God, rather than seeking revenge.
- Forgiveness doesn't excuse what they did. You can say that it wasn't okay, that they were in the wrong, and still forgive them.
- It doesn't mean that they deserve to be forgiven. They probably don't. Neither did you, but God forgave you anyway.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean that you should immediately and fully trust people who have sinned against you.
- Finally, forgiveness doesn't mean that we accept abuse.

There are bad actors out there who will use our desire for Christian unity against us; who will demand that we immediately trust them after a transgression or insist that we allow them to continue in patterns of abuse.

That is not what God's calling us to do.

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So, what does forgiveness mean? Forgiving someone means that you:

- Don't hold what they did against them; in other words, don't hold a grudge.
- Don't treat them with anger, or contempt. Don't speak ill of them or try to damage their reputation.
- Don't shun them or cut them out of your life.
- Don't take vengeance or try to get back at them.
- Don't attempt to harm them or take any action toward them with malicious intent.

You're to seek their good; to seek to bless them and help them. You're to desire their well-being. But it's difficult to know the right thing to do when there's been an offense.

In addition to praying over the matter and considering what the Scriptures teach, you may need to seek the counsel of someone who's mature in the faith. Forgiveness can take time, depending on the nature of the offense.

I don't want to imply that it can be, or should be, immediate, but you must start somewhere. We must try and keep trying, even if it takes years. That sounds hard, because it is hard.

In fact, if we didn't have the Holy Spirit, it wouldn't even be possible. But we do have the Holy Spirit, and we do have His power living in us. So, by the grace of God, it's possible.

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But we must understand that to forgive as Christ forgave us means two things.

First, that we're to forgive because Christ forgave us. His forgiveness is the motivation and the reason for us to forgive one another.

If God can forgive everything we've done, said and thought, no matter how vile, or destructive, or shameful, then we can forgive one another.

Also, forgiving as Christ forgave us means that we forgive in the same way that He forgave us, freely and completely. Not reluctantly, not grudgingly. Not harboring bitterness or resentment, but completely.

Micah 7:19, *"You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."*

God has cast all our sins into the remotest part of the ocean, never to resurface. That's the model for our forgiveness of one another; to forgive fully and completely.

But what if we don't? What if we refuse to forgive others for their sins against us? What if we hold on to our grudges and resentments; what if we nurture our pain and hurt rather than turning it over to God?

Then we'll not experience the joy that God desires us to have. Resentment and unforgiveness will be like chains dragging us down. We'll never be free of them.

The unity of the church, the unity of the body of Christ will be damaged, but there's an even more serious consequence of failing to forgive.

Jesus taught that we should ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. What does the Lord's Prayer say? *"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."*

Jesus makes this connection between our forgiveness and God's forgiveness even more clear in the verses immediately following the Lord's Prayer.

Matthew 6:14-15, *"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

"But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." That statement makes the importance of forgiveness very real. Forgiveness isn't optional. Forgiveness is essential to who we are as followers of Christ.

If someone refuses to do that but persists in hardening their heart; if they refuse to do the difficult spiritual work of seeking God's grace and power to forgive, then Christ is saying that they're not truly one of His followers.

Why? Because they're rejecting the very thing that's at the core of the Gospel, which is forgiveness. In other words, if we refuse to extend forgiveness to others, we can't have God's forgiveness for ourselves.

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Conclusion

Lastly, Paul tells us in Colossians 3:12-14, *“And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”*

“Over all these virtues put on love.” That is the glue that binds together all the rest. Love is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 1:7, *“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”*

That’s the core, the central unifying principle. If we love one another as we’re loved by God, then we’ll bear with one another, extend grace to one another, and forgive one another.

Our relationships with one another will be characterized by joy, and peace, and harmony, as we serve Jesus and worship Him together.

Let’s pray that God will give us the grace to do that by the power of the Holy Spirit Who lives within us.