

How to Receive the Holy Spirit

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Do you remember the scene that took place about 1,950 years ago in that park outside the city of Jerusalem? Darkness had fallen and in one corner of the park there were a few peasants lying on the ground, sleeping. A little way off from them there was another youngish man on his knees, praying. Suddenly you heard the tramp of soldiers' feet and flickering torches shattered the darkness. A group of soldiers and religious leaders began to move towards the group of fishermen who were lying on the ground sleeping. When these leaders approached, the fishermen suddenly sprang up and ran to their leader and circled him. Then one of the fishermen decided, "I'm not going down without a battle!" He drew a sword and slashed out. He flailed off an ear of one of the servants of one of the priests. You remember how the leader remained absolutely calm and he touched the man's ear and healed it. Then he spoke to Peter and said, "Put up your sword!" Then He turned round to the attackers and said, "Are you coming against me as against a thief and a robber?"

Do you remember how He accompanied them to a whole night of brainwashing, third degree examination, beating, pressuring and questioning? Do you remember how that terminated in a stumbling, crawling, bloody journey down the Via Delarosa to a hill outside the city of Jerusalem? Yet, throughout that charade of the soldiers buffeting and striking Him and through all the insults, whipping, and spitting, even through the tearing of the hands by the nails as they put Him on to the cross, there rose from that miraculous man no anger and no resentment. He had nothing but tender love for those people who were torturing Him so that even at the very end, rather than feeling resentment against them, He actually spoke to His Father who is The Creator of the universe and He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

Now, most of us here have no difficulty imagining how Peter felt. Most of us here would have great ease in pulling out our swords and flailing away at anybody who would attack us or would attack our friend. Indeed many of us are surprised to find some of that rising within us even over the Iran crisis. Probably there isn't one of us here who would not say that we have felt that retaliatory anger and resentment rising up within us when people have shown us a far milder form of hatred than they showed to this man, Jesus.

Probably most of us would say, (when others have whispered about us in the office, said something untrue about us, something that wasn't right), we found that there rises up within us an anger and a hatred that startles even us. When the boss criticizes us unjustly, or comes to believe that we're lazy or inefficient and we aren't, there rises up within us a spirit akin to hatred at times. This also happens when we think of how unjustly we're being treated. Yet, we have incredible problems with imagining how we could possibly be spat upon and have our faces slashed with whips and be shown the contempt that was shown to Jesus. How could we ever be insulted the way He was and yet still have a tender love and kindly wellwishing for the people who were torturing us?

Probably that's true, isn't it? We have no difficulty identifying ourselves with Peter. But in our day-to-day lives we have incredible difficulty identifying ourselves with Jesus' attitude. Loved ones, the people in the first century were no different from us. They were the same. They were Jews who knew that they should behave like "a lamb or a sheep who before his shearers is dumb and opens not his mouth." They knew they should be like that. They knew they should be patient. They knew they should return good for evil. They knew they should love, even when they were cursed. They knew that. They knew what the Law said. But they found that the good that they wanted to do and they should do,

they couldn't do. The evil that they hated, the resentment and the anger that they found rising inside their hearts when anybody criticized or opposed them, that was the very thing they did.

They were exactly like that and yet those men and women of the first century ended up living and behaving exactly like Jesus - thousands of them. Thousands of them began to speak out fearlessly as He did, despite the overwhelming ability of the Roman power to utterly crush them! They spoke out courageously what they believed to be true about him even though the Roman emperors covered them with tar, lit them and used them as torches at their garden parties. These ordinary men and women continued to speak what they believed was true and to say what this Jesus had said with the same calmness as He had. They bore the opposition and the persecution and the crucifixions that He bore.

They kept doing it, year after year. They and their children made an impression on the pagans and the Jews of that time as a gentle, loving people who treated their Creator and trusted Him as their own dear father and who were absolutely fearless in the face of what men could do to them. Now why were they able to do that - to behave exactly like this man, Jesus -- when they were as puny and weak and fearful as most of us here? Peter explained it when he was speaking in public one day and said, "We are witnesses to these things and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him!" That was the explanation of the miraculous change in their lives. That's the secret, loved ones, to living the way we were made to live.

All of us were made by our dear Creator to live the same way as Jesus did. We are fulfilled and complete when we do that. But the key to living that way, the way we were meant to, is this Holy Spirit. We are to live by the same Holy Spirit that enabled Jesus to continue to show tender love and kindness to the Roman soldier who thrust a sword or a spear through his side. It was the Holy Spirit moving inside Jesus, who enabled Him to ask his Father to forgive the very people who were jeering at him and jibing and saying, "He saved others, why can't He save himself?"

It was the Holy Spirit who enabled Jesus to have peace and calmness in His heart, as the arresting party moved in upon him. It is the Holy Spirit that brought these things into Jesus. Loved ones, He said it Himself. He said in the temple one day, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, to free the captives." It was the Holy Spirit that did that. It was God's Spirit.

Jesus had to be willing, you see, for Him to do it! Jesus had to be willing. He had to be willing to obey God. He had to be willing to accept what God was willing to let Him face. Jesus had to be willing for that. He had to be willing to face whatever opposition God allowed him to face. He had to be willing to die in the garden or on the cross. He had to be willing to obey God. He had to put his life into the hands of the One who had made that life. He had to say, "Lord, I'll do it your way, whatever you want." So Jesus had to be willing for whatever God wanted Him to face. But once he was willing, it was the Holy Spirit who created in Him those attitudes of love and patience and courage and endurance. They were the result of the Holy Spirit within Him.

That may seem wild to you, that Jesus is actually as helpless as you and me, except for this Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that enabled Jesus to be like that. And here's the secret. He explained to his disciples, "When I go away I'm going to send the Holy Spirit to you. You wait in Jerusalem. Don't leave Jerusalem. Wait there for the promise of the Father, which you have heard from me. I told you He was going to give you another gift. You know that John the Baptist baptized you with water for the remission of sins, but you're going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and

to the uttermost parts of the earth."

That's what the disciples did. They got together and they waited for the Holy Spirit to come upon them. Every time anyone asked Peter or the other Apostles, "How do you receive the Holy Spirit?" Peter would say the same things as we quoted before. He would say, "Listen, God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him, to those who are willing to live as God wants them to."

God gives His own Spirit and His own Spirit miraculously creates in them the love that Jesus had. See, loved ones, you can't produce this kind of love, you can't! It doesn't matter what you or I do. It doesn't matter how many books we read. It doesn't matter how we try all those little tricks. Let's try to think of the good things in our dad, or all the good things in our colleague. Let's try to think about the good things in that dear woman that is always gossiping about us. We try all those little tricks. We try to think, "Oh, yes, think of the good things, like her hair, her hair looks ok. Yes, she has nice hair!" It doesn't matter. All you can produce is what Plato and Socrates produced, a willingness to accept them. But you can't produce the love of a father who wants the very best for them and who is willing to die for them. You can't produce that love!

That love is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. That's what Paul said. He said, "The Holy Spirit sheds abroad in our hearts the love of God." That love is different from mere acceptance. The old classical philosophers had no idea of forgiveness. Their idea of forgiveness was, "I blot out from my mind the face of my enemy so that I do not hate him." But this love is different. This love is patient and kind. It is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. It is not irritable or resentful. This love does not insist on its own way. It believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things and it never ends. And that's the love the Holy Spirit gave to Jesus through the entire ridiculous, murderous, brutal charade leading up to His death.

Jesus said, "This Holy Spirit will do exactly the same in all of you. He'll create that same love in you." Therefore we are able to say today, "Jesus was not jealous or boastful. He was not arrogant or rude. He was not irritable or resentful. He did not rejoice when others were wrong, but He rejoiced when others were right. He believed all things and hoped all things and endured all things."

It is possible for you and me to be described like that. Now, could you say that? Could you put "I" in the subject position in that sentence and could you say at the moment, "I am not jealous or boastful. I am not arrogant or rude. I am not irritable or resentful. I do not insist on my own way. I am not glad when others are wrong, I am glad when others are right. I believe all things, I hope all things, and I endure all things?"

We were made to be like that! That's what God made us to be. Forget the cynicism; forget the mess and monstrosities we've made of ourselves. Forget the ridiculous norm that we've lowered society to. That's what we were made to be like. The tragedy is, most of us only get a glimpse of it -- when we fall in love -- and even that is only momentary. Even that is only a momentary self-forgetfulness, as we fall head over heels in love with somebody. Isn't that terrible? Isn't that a tragedy that we were made to live that way throughout our lives but we experience only a moment of it? Even the phrase is known, "Oh, he's in love, because he is different from all the rest of us. Soon he will get back down to a miserable life like the rest of us!"

Isn't that a shame? Isn't there something tragic that we human beings look at a wedding -- we think of the fun and the evening they'll have together, we think back to maybe the evening we had and say, "Oh, that is not real life!"

Now, loved ones, real life is full of tenderness and love and kindness and understanding. It's a monstrosity of life that is filled with bickering, irritability, anger, criticism and conflict. You see, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would create that love in you and me. If you sit there and say, "Well, I'm not like that at all." That's right, nor am I like that on my own. The Holy Spirit creates that love in us. All you and I have to do is to be willing, but we do have to be willing. Now, if you say, "Well, I'm not willing to depend on God alone, I'm not! I like to depend on myself. I like to get some of my 'kicks' from the good things that happen to me. In fact, I am pretty dependent on the things that happen to me for my happiness. I am pretty dependent on the things I own for my feeling of safety and security. I do like to call a halt to any pain that might be coming my way. I do like to control my life."

Unless you identify yourself with Jesus and are willing to trust God the way Jesus did for those things, the Holy Spirit cannot come into you. There is a miracle that happens if -- you are willing to be identified with Jesus, if you're willing to forget what your possessions do for you, what your stocks and shares do for you, what the approval of your friends do for you, what the acknowledgment of your peers does for you, what the approval of your relatives do for you -- and are prepared to turn your eyes for a minute away from those things and simply deal with Jesus. You must decide, are you willing to be identified with Him? Are you willing to say to Him, "Lord, You do seem to be the Son of God. You apparently have made all things and without you nothing was made that was made. It's just logical that you made me. Your position on the cross does not seem very safe or happy to me but I can see that if You're the origin of the universe I'm better with you than with anybody else. Lord, what does it mean for me to be identified with You? What will it mean for me to be crucified with you?"

If you are willing to begin to discuss that with Jesus, then you will find a miracle taking place inside you. You will find that old nature of yours, that wants to depend on people and things -- that old nature passes away and a new nature comes into you. Old things are passed away -- the way you think of other people and the way you depend on other people -- that passes away and you'll find a new spirit coming inside you. That Spirit is the Holy Spirit because He makes you holy. He makes you like God in an appropriate way in your situation and your job. That's what happens. You do have to be willing. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey, to those who yield to God, to those who are willing to live the way Jesus lived.

So that's what you have to deal with, but you don't have to produce the love. You must see that all the attempts at producing love that we do with the help of the help-yourself books are foolishness. They're not real love, they're not the real character of God. The Holy Spirit produces those and He is the only source. You don't even have to go into all kinds of ascetic practices to try to enter into Christ's death. You don't have to do any of that. You don't have to try autosuggestion to reproduce the death of Jesus in you, you don't! You simply have to deal with Jesus and settle, are you willing to be identified with Him? Are you willing to die with Him to the things that He wants to die to in you?

You don't have to take a thousand sins upon you or two million sins. Probably all of us here are unlike God in a million ways. Jesus will probably only deal with you on two of those issues today. And maybe he'll deal with another issue tomorrow and another the next day. What He requires from us is a willingness to say "yes". Then the Holy Spirit who made Jesus what He was will begin to move in you. It is really simple! Even as I've been talking there are some things that have come up in your consciousness. You've thought to yourself, "Well, sure I have felt resentment not only against

Ayatollah Khomeini (the Iranian leader) but I've felt resentment against the people in my office. I feel some resentment even at this moment against somebody who has criticized me."

Now ask Jesus how He wants you to enter into Him in regard to that. What attitude does He want to take in that situation? Ask Him. Jesus will show you the attitude that He wants to take towards that person. Of course, immediately there will crop up in your mind, "Well, if I don't have this resentment which holds them off and controls them, they'll mow me over and tear me apart!" Well, that's what being on the cross with Jesus is. It's saying, "Alright Lord, it seems dumb. You could have called thousands of angels down and yet you trusted Your Father to call them off whenever He chose. Lord, I see that's what you're saying to me. Am I willing to open myself to them possibly destroying me? Now, loved ones, that's what obedience means.

Don't go way off into that silliness, "Oh, do we have to be doormats?" Just look at Jesus walking through the temple and throwing over the tables of the moneylenders - of course you don't have to be doormats. But you do have to react only as the Holy Spirit moves you to react - only as He would react. It's not that you have to be passive in His hands; you have to cooperate with Him!

The truth is, He can only come into you if you're willing to live the kind of life that Jesus lived. That means depending on God and not society any longer. There are many of us here who act like silly little pups! They stroke us the right way, and we beg like mad. They stroke us again and we beg again. Some of us are just silly little puppy dogs! We're just at the mercy of what people think of us. Somebody criticizes us and we're utterly cast down. Somebody praises us, and we're delighted. Well, dying with Jesus means dying to what the Roman soldiers think of you, dying to what your supporters think of you, dying towards everything but God alone and what He thinks of you. It means depending on His approval in your life.

Many of you will say to me today, "Well, I do get annoyed when people criticize me, I do! I do care what people think of me." Obedience means being willing not to care. Obedience means dying to what opinion they have of you. That means thinking through what can they do. They can destroy your job, they can destroy your reputation -- would you be willing for that? If Jesus wants that in your life, would you be willing for it? That's what it means. It means leaving the judgment of how far your life will suffer up to Him.

Now if you are willing for that, there is a sweet Holy Spirit that will come into you. He is a dear person, like ourselves, who will come into you and begin to beget in you a love that is beyond anything that you've ever experienced. He'll beget in you a kindness and a wisdom and a discernment about things. He'll begin to direct your life in a way that you cannot produce yourself.

Do you remember how the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus? Well, we all do remember. We can't imagine anything more gentle than the little dove. We can't! You can imagine how a little dove just flutters down on a lamb. Only on a lamb -- something as gentle as a lamb, something as much in the Father's hands as a lamb. The dove can come down upon that kind of person.

You manly men and you courageous women who think, "Oh, we've got to be doormats!" Don't be silly. Jesus was no doormat. Being a lamb does not mean being a lamb in men's hands, but being a lamb in God's hands. It's being willing for whatever God wants for your life. And if you are willing for that, if you are willing to obey God, God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him. So every one of us here has some area that God has already spoken to us about in our consciousness.

Loved ones, your place is to obey. Not to try to obey, but to obey! There is no such thing as trying to obey. Remember I told you about the English restaurants when we first came out with the "non-smoking" thing? We were over in London one summer and in this restaurant was the notice, "Try not to smoke!" That was the British polite way of asking for obedience. That is no obedience. Trying not to smoke isn't obedience. "Try not to smoke!" "Oh, I'm trying, I'm trying!"

You can't try to obey! You obey or you don't obey! That's it! You're willing to obey or you're not willing to obey. That's it! We all know that. That's why there's such a clear-cut distinction between the defeated Christians and the victorious Christians. One group just pretends that you can try to obey. The other group knows that you either obey and you're willing to obey, or you're not obeying and you're not willing to obey.

The beauty of it is that those of us who are willing to live like Jesus, receive this miraculous person of the Holy Spirit, who changes us from the inside. The Holy Spirit is likened in the Old Testament to the oil that they used to anoint the kings and prophets. The oil that was used in the Old Testament has several ingredients and it's interesting to follow it through.

One of the ingredients is myrrh. You remember it was mentioned as a gift that was given to Jesus. Myrrh is used to take the soreness out of a bruise. When the Holy Spirit comes into your life, He takes the soreness out of the bruises that people give to you. He takes the soreness out of the criticism that people offer. You don't have to do it yourself! The Holy Spirit actually takes the pain out of those things, so that you don't feel the pain the way you used to.

Another ingredient is calamus. Calamus is used to counteract the acid in the stomach. When the Holy Spirit comes into you, He takes that acid feeling out of you -- that irritability and resentment that you feel against people who oppose you. He takes that out of you so that you've never met a 'sourpuss'. You see everybody as beautiful in Jesus. You actually see them that way. The Holy Spirit enables you to see them that way. So don't say, "Oh, I couldn't, I can't overcome these things!" You don't have to. The Holy Spirit who did this in Jesus will do it in you. He will change you from the inside!

Another ingredient was cinnamon. It's a spicy, fiery substance that gives energy and stimulation. When the Holy Spirit comes into you, what was lumpish, heavy, slow and ponderous becomes light and agile and filled with energy. The Holy Spirit gives you a new energy, a new facility in your thinking, a new agility in your mind, a new flexibility in your feelings. The Holy Spirit does these things in you.

Another ingredient is olive oil. It's used to take the wrinkles out of skin. It takes out all the things that distract people from the beauty of the person. When the Holy Spirit comes into you He takes all those idiosyncrasies away. You know the way that we're all elbows? "Oh, I want to do God's will, but I want to do it so that they see it's me -- doing it in my version so they remember me!" The Holy Spirit takes away that desire for individuality and that show of your own personality and yet He fills your personality with more variety and more diversity than ever before.

Loved ones, this is why Christianity is different from all other religions. It's not just that Islam has the ayatollah and we have somebody else. It's not that. It's not even simply Jesus' death. But it's that Jesus' death enabled God to send the Holy Spirit to us. The Holy Spirit is the one who enables us to be what God made us to be and He is yours -- really.

Jesus changed my life when I came to know Him. He changed my life from that of an intellectual who was trying to make these things real by the power of my own mind and self-discipline, into a person who received a gift from God, who began to make me like God. Now, that Holy Spirit is for you. Jesus has sent Him here this morning and you can begin to receive Him if you will obey.

Let us pray. Dear Father, I would pray for my dear friends this morning. I pray especially for those who may be as I was -- respecting the truthfulness of all these things, seeing the logic of them, but unable to live them -- crying out "the good that I would, I cannot do. The evil that I hate is the very thing I do." Lord, I would pray for my brothers and sisters that You would show them that what you've given us to share this morning is true. Dear Holy Spirit, you are real and alive here and it is because of you that Jesus was able to be what He was. That doesn't make Him any the less wonderful. He has poured you forth upon us.

You Holy Spirit are a real person, a counselor able to come into our lives -- to think, explain and show us things that we have not been able to see. Above all, you are able to take of the things of Jesus -- his love, his humility, his forgiveness, his compassion -- and you're able to make them real in our own hearts. At last God's Law is written into our inward parts and we are good because we feel good. We are loving because we feel loving. We are at last as pure within as well as without. Holy Spirit, I would trust you to continue to counsel each of us here in this room and to begin to run our lives and be our dear friend and Lord.

And now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with each one of us now and ever more. Amen!