

*In (Christ) we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of His glory. – Eph. 1:11-14*

Tomorrow is Pentecost Sunday, celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit to all believers. This is a very important day for the church, because the Holy Spirit is a very important person in the New Testament. We talk often about the activity of the Holy Spirit: empowering us for mission, reminding us of what we've learned, convicting us of sin, and gifting us with abilities beyond our learning. We've talked this week about images of the Holy Spirit, from wind to breath to dove to flame to "shimmer" to wildling. But seldom do I hear us talk about what having the Holy Spirit signifies. And this is really important to consider.

In the Old Testament, the gift of the Holy Spirit meant you were chosen by God for a specific purpose and task. Kings, Judges, prophets, builders, weavers, and warriors all received the Holy Spirit for a time to accomplish a task, and then the Spirit would leave them. When David famously prayed, "Lord, don't take Your Holy Spirit from me," he wasn't asking God not to abandon Him – that is not God's way and David knew it. He was telling God that he wasn't finished with his task of leading his people and he needed the Spirit to help him. It was so uncommon for any common person to receive the Holy Spirit that the prophet Joel prophesied a day in the future when God would promise, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days."

At Pentecost, Joel's vision was fulfilled as God poured out His Spirit on all believers. And from then on, the Holy Spirit was a mark not of God's calling – He calls all of us to His mission – but of God's acceptance. The Holy Spirit was seen as a seal, marking someone as God's accepted child. And this was an enormously big deal. When someone committed to following Jesus, they received the Holy Spirit. And this was a big deal. Because what happens when someone we don't think should be a Christian suddenly is filled with the Holy Spirit? Peter, Paul, and the leaders of the early church had to answer this question, and it was not easy. At that time, Christianity was seen as a sect of Judaism, which means you had to be Jewish in order to follow Jesus. So what happened when gentiles – non-Jews – began to receive the Holy Spirit? Could a gentile become a Christian without first becoming a Jew? God seemed to think so.

Today, we could do with a little more thought about this. We determine someone's acceptance by their obedience to the rules, though everyone seems to have a different set of rules to follow. But what if we accepted, like the early church, that anyone receiving the Holy Spirit was acceptable to God and therefore to us? Who knows who might have to be allowed in the church, and I don't mean allowed to sit in our pews and give us their money. I mean who might be allowed to preach, teach, lead, sing...

Pentecost shares with us a lesson we might all need to learn about the difference between obedience and acceptance by God. That was what the early church had to wrestle with, and I think we are due for a good wrestle, too.

Questions to ponder.

What are the signs that someone has the Holy Spirit, God's seal of approval, in/on them?

Have you displayed these signs? What does this mean?

What is your take on those who we have a hard time accepting but have the Holy Spirit?