

“He Will Convict the World Concerning Sin and Righteousness and Judgment”

The Forty-Ninth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 16:4b-15; Isaiah 11:1-10

Jesus is leaving his disciples. He is going to a place that they cannot come. After his death and resurrection, Jesus will ascend into heaven to prepare a place for them (and for us), and he will send them the Holy Spirit (the Helper) from the Father. Although Jesus will be physically separated from his disciples by a distance we cannot fully comprehend (the distance between heaven and earth), through the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus will be closer to all of his disciples than ever before. This is why it is good (indeed better) that Jesus leave them. When Jesus leaves, the Helper will come, and through the Spirit’s person and work, Jesus will be ever present with his people until the end of the age. And when the Spirit comes, *“he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”*

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we are now in chapter 16, which includes the second half of the Upper Room Discourse, which was given by Jesus on his last together evening with the disciples. This is shortly before our Lord’s arrest, trial, and crucifixion, which occur later the same evening, and throughout course of the next morning and afternoon (Friday). There is so much yet to come for which Jesus must prepare them. Jesus has told the disciples that he is leaving them, and where he is going they cannot come—disturbing news indeed. Jesus has told them that one of their own, Judas, will betray him, and that Peter (their leader) will abandon Jesus when Jesus needs him most. The disciples are having a hard time making sense of this information, and they still have no idea of the suffering Jesus is about to endure. They are saddened by this news, as we will see, but their sadness must not interfere with the urgency of the situation. They must understand what Jesus is telling them.

As I mentioned back in John 13, when we first began to work our way through this lengthy passage, the Upper Room Discourse is a hard text to preach, because it is quite long, although punctuated by several important questions from the disciples. There is a brief interval at the end of chapter 14, when the Passover celebrations ends, and Jesus gets up to leave to go to Gethsemane, where he will be arrested. But the disciples still have so many questions about what Jesus has been telling them, that the conversation continues on until the end of chapter seventeen—even though it is time to break it off. Ideally, we should cover the Upper Room Discourse in one sermon, but time does not permit, and there is so much here of importance to us that I have broken the discourse down into a number of smaller sections so that we can carefully consider the material here. Unfortunately, we lose something when we do this. We certainly risk losing the sense of urgency—Jesus’ hour has come and he still has much to teach his disciples.

As we saw last time, when we wrapped up chapter 15, as the new and greater Moses, Jesus instituted a new commandment—that his disciples love one another. This has been a major theme of their final evening together. Jesus goes on to tell them that the love his disciples are to have for each other, will stand in stark contrast to the hatred they will soon receive the from world—which does not believe that Jesus is the Christ, or that Jesus even matters. There is a deep and fundamental divide (an antithesis) between the way Christians and non-Christians think about the human condition and the need for God’s grace. The disciples must understand this and be prepared to deal with it before Jesus departs.

Jesus tells them that the hatred from the world will be so great that the disciples will face death at the hands of the false shepherds of Israel. In the first few verses of chapter 16, Jesus tells the disciples bluntly, *“they will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor*

me.” According to Jesus, to reject him, is to reject YHWH who sent him. To hate Jesus, is to hate God. The reason why the leaders of Israel hate Jesus so much, is they do not know the Father, despite their claim to be the defenders of Israelite religion and that their outward “righteousness” is genuine. The irony is intentional as well as tragic. These men are self-righteous hypocrites who are blind to the fact that their own Messiah has come to save his people from their sins.

Jesus has a very pressing reason to divulge this difficult information to the disciples. His hour has come. His messianic mission has come to an end. The shame and suffering of the cross is just hours away. In verse 4, our Lord tells them, “*but I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.*” Jesus knows that this will be very difficult time for the disciples, and he does not want them to be caught unaware about the things to transpire later that evening and day following. By now, they knew something big was up, but they had no idea that the next afternoon Jesus would be suffering and dying on a Roman cross. By all appearances, Jesus’ rejection by Israel was complete and final when Jesus met his apparent end by crucifixion, a punishment reserved for criminals.

Jesus has also told the disciples that the reason that it was good that he was going away is because he was going to ask the Father to send them the Holy Spirit. In verse 26 of the previous chapter, Jesus tells them, “*when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.*” As we noted last time, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and will bear witness about Jesus—the Holy Spirit will confirm in the hearts of those whom Jesus has chosen to bear fruit, that Jesus is the Son of God, that his word is true (because his words are God’s words), and that Jesus is the only redeemer of sinful men and women.

As we noted last time as well, the disciples are having trouble understanding how there could be only one true God, in light of the fact that Jesus claimed divine prerogatives, used divine titles of himself, accepted divine titles from others, as well as worship. Jesus even told Philip in John 14:9, “*whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*” So, when Jesus spoke of another “Helper,” he was introducing to them the third person of the Holy Trinity, the blessed Holy Spirit. The disciples believed that Jesus was in some way to be identified with YHWH, in addition to being Israel’s long-anticipated Messiah. When Jesus spoke of the Helper he described him as the “Spirit of the Father,” (i.e., that he too was God). This means there are three divine persons, and yet only one God. The Trinity is a difficult doctrine even with two millennia of Christian reflection—imagine hearing of this for the first time it was revealed to them by Jesus.

The fact that Jesus is about to depart changes everything. Jesus will no longer be present to speak for the disciples when the going gets rough—and the going is about to get very rough for the disciples. But they will not be left on their own after Jesus ascends into heaven. As I pointed out earlier, the impending departure of Jesus raises a number of difficult theological issues for Christians living after Christ’s ascension—i.e., in the current era in redemptive history. How do we as Christians on earth relate to our Savior who is in heaven, and whom we cannot see, touch, or hear (audibly)? The way in which Christians answer this question determines where they will go to church, how they live their Christian lives, and where they place their hope and confidence.

Do we relate to Jesus through the institutions of the church as Rome claims? Rome’s answer to this dilemma is to affirm that although Jesus has departed from the earth, he has left behind his chosen representative (the Pope), his physical body is still present in the Mass (transubstantiation), and the institutional church remains his spiritual body (the church as the continuation of Jesus’ incarnation). This proposed solution makes the doctrine of the church absolutely central to the Christian life.

Or do we relate to Jesus as certain Pentecostals (and Anabaptists) insist? According to these groups, after Jesus ascends into heaven, we commune with him directly through the work of the Holy Spirit. This occurs in our hearts completely apart from means (the word and sacraments) and from the church (and its offices). In this proposal, the stress falls upon the immediate religious experience—feeling the presence of Jesus in our hearts, experiential activities like speaking in tongues, listening to prophets who are moved directly by the Spirit to speak for God, or even as we listen to the still small voice within us.

Or, does the Holy Spirit unite us to Jesus through very specific means—the preached word of God, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as through various gifts of the Spirit which unite God’s people together into one body so that we love one another as Jesus has commanded? The emphasis in this proposal falls upon the Spirit working through the word of God in revealing the saving work of Jesus Christ to us from Genesis to Revelation. This latter emphasis is taught throughout the New Testament (especially in John’s Gospel), and is affirmed by the churches of the Reformation in opposition to both Rome and the Anabaptists. It is good that Jesus depart, because he will send the Holy Spirit. It is through these prescribed means that the Holy Spirit ordinarily works in the hearts and minds of sinners.

Thankfully, Jesus himself answers this dilemma beginning in verse 4, when he tells the disciples, *“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.”* As long as Jesus is physically present with the disciples, he speaks the words YHWH gave him directly to the disciples. Jesus personally shows them how to read the Old Testament, and he personally explains his messianic mission to them. Now that Jesus is about to depart from them, going to a place they cannot follow, the disciples will no longer have Jesus to speak to them (directly), nor will he speak for them when they encounter those hostile to their cause who do not believe the gospel as taught by Jesus. Since Jesus will send them the Helper, it is the Holy Spirit who will enable the disciples to do these things, for he alone can give life to those dead in sin, and he alone can create saving faith in the sinful human heart.

But the disciples are still struggling with Jesus’ words and have, once again, completely missed the point of what Jesus is trying to tell them. In verses 5-6, Jesus confronts them, saying *“but now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.”* Many readers of John’s Gospel catch the apparent contradiction between Jesus’ words in verse 5, in light of what was said earlier in John 13:36 (*“Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, where are you going?’”*) and John 14:5 (*“Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’”*).

Verse 6 provides the answer to the apparent contradiction. The disciples did indeed ask Jesus twice where he was going, but both times were shocked and confused by the news that Jesus was leaving them. They felt such deep sorrow upon learning this news, that they really were not concerned about the reason “why” Jesus was leaving them. The reality is that they were focused only upon the sad news that they were losing their friend and leader (or so they thought). Jesus is now challenging them to stop focusing upon their sorrow, and carefully consider what he is about to tell them regarding the work of the Helper. They may have asked him twice, “where are you going?” but they have never truly pondered why he was leaving them, and what this means theologically for them from this moment going forward. Jesus tells them because sorrow has filled their hearts (understandably so) they are missing the point. There is not time to feel sorrow. There is only time to listen carefully to the things Jesus is about to tell them.

In verse 7, Jesus says more about the resolution of his apparent absence from his people. He tells them, *“nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”* The work of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the coming of the Messiah was foreseen by the prophet Isaiah, as we read in verses 1-5 of

Isaiah 11, our Old Testament lesson. *“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.”*

The Messiah (the shoot from the stump of Jesse) will possess the Spirit of the Lord, which occurred when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. The Spirit of the Lord, of which Isaiah speaks, is the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus has been speaking as the Helper. A major shift in redemptive history is about to occur. The disciples understand that the way YHWH relates to his people has changed dramatically with the coming of Jesus and the dawn of the messianic age. Jesus has come as God in human flesh to fulfill all of the promises made throughout the Old Testament regarding God’s promised redemption. From the moment Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin, the old covenant was coming to a close, and the new covenant era was beginning to dawn.

What the disciples must now comprehend during their final moments with Jesus is that this new covenant era cannot be understood in geopolitical terms. The Jews of Jesus’ day were sick and tired of Roman military occupation and wanted their land back. This is what the people of Israel expected the Messiah to do when he came. This is what Palm Sunday was all about—or so they thought. Even the disciples saw things in this way until Pentecost. Jesus would enter Jerusalem in triumph, claim David’s throne, and then lead Israel to freedom and a victory over the godless Romans. Once victorious and free again, the Messiah would then lead the people of Israel to rebuild and expand the old Israelite empire which existed under David and Solomon. Instead of being some downtrodden backwater nation, Israel would be the envy of the whole earth. The faithful among them, tied the geopolitical expectations to theological ones—the people of the earth would serve Israel’s God, YHWH. The nations would bow before Israel’s Messiah just as the prophets foretold. This was correct, but there was another phase in redemptive history yet to come before the end of the age. This is what the disciples were missing.

It was clear to the disciples that Jesus has all the messianic credentials set forth in the Old Testament—just look at his mastery of Scripture and the miracles he performed. But Jesus repeatedly spoke of a spiritual kingdom, not a political one. They did not grasp why. After the events of this night and the next day, the disciples will begin to understand that the Messiah’s mission was to destroy the power of sin and the curse by dying on a cross for us and in our place, and then to be raised from the dead to overturn the sentence of death which falls upon all of us. After the Helper comes at Pentecost, this will be clear. The Holy Spirit will bear witness about Jesus, and will equip the disciples to bear witness about Jesus, as in the Book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit calls people to faith in Jesus through the preaching of the Gospel.

Jesus’ death and resurrection will usher in the fullness and glory of messianic age. But the cross and the empty tomb was not the end of history (as they soon came to expect), this was only the beginning of the end, as the world was entering the final phase of human history. Once Jesus has died for our sins, was raised for our justification, he then ascended into heaven where he remains until he returns again at the end of the age. The new covenant era is one in which Jesus is physically absent from his people, while he remains ever-present with us through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why it was good (indeed better) that Jesus depart from them, return to his Father in heaven, and then send the Helper.

In verse 8, Jesus speaks directly to the question of the person and work of the Helper. He informs the disciples, *“and when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”*

These are three of the things which the Holy Spirit will accomplish, and Jesus explains this in more detail in verses 8-11. According to Jesus, when the Holy Spirit, comes He “*will convict the world . . . concerning sin, because they do not believe in me.*” Just as Jesus has convicted the world that it does not believe in him (and is therefore guilty before YHWH for rejecting the Savior), once he departs, the Spirit will continue this work—only in greater measure. In verse 22 of the previous chapter, Jesus told the disciples, “*if I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.*” This reflects his earlier comments in John 7:7 (“*the world . . . hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil*”). The reality which people do not wish to face is that apart from faith in Jesus, we are estranged from God and under his hand of judgment.

In the age of redemptive history about to dawn, the Holy Spirit will expose, examine, and accuse the world (unbelievers) regarding its collective guilt before the Holy God for rejecting Jesus, for failing to heed his word, and by preferring to remain in darkness. This not only refers to a legal “guilty” verdict in the heavenly court, but also to the acknowledgment of personal guilt before God.¹ When people hear the gospel and refuse to believe, it is the Holy Spirit who convinces the world that it is in rebellion against God—a rebellion which is personal and willful. This is why it is good that Jesus depart and return to the Father—the work of the Spirit is not tied to a single place or time, as Jesus is in his incarnation. His work will be world-wide and extend until the time of the end, when Jesus returns in the final judgment.

In fact, says Jesus, the Holy Spirit “*will convict the world . . . concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer.*” The Spirit will continue the work of Jesus in exposing human “righteousness” as nothing but self righteousness. We might be good people when we compare ourselves to others (and this is easy to do because we can always find people whom we think are not as righteous as we are and then compare ourselves to them). There is probably an echo here from Isaiah 64:6, where Isaiah writes, “*we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.*” Because Jesus is going to the Father, the world will be convicted of true righteousness—in the sense that those in the world do not possess the perfect righteousness required by God. To put it yet another way, when Jesus ascends into heaven, the Spirit will convict the world that those who live in darkness are not truly righteous despite all denials to the contrary.

And then in verse 11, we read, the Holy Spirit “*will convict the world . . . concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.*” Even though the final judgment has not yet come to pass (and it will), Jesus’ return to the Father after finishing the work of redemption (which includes his resurrection and glorification), means that Satan (the “ruler” or prince” of this world) already stands condemned along with those whom he has deceived (i.e., those who refuse to believe in Jesus). It is the Spirit who will convict the world of the fact that a final judgment is sure to come. In chapter 20:7-10 of the Book of Revelation, John describes this as follows: “*And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.*” Even though that day depicted in Revelation 20 is yet to come, the Holy Spirit convicts the world that this coming day of judgment is as certain as the sunrise tomorrow.

But Jesus is not finished, and time is quickly slipping away. He tells them in verse 12, “*I still have many*

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 536.

things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Jesus knows how difficult all this is for the disciples—yet he also knows the power of the Holy Spirit. Recall that when discussing the Holy Spirit earlier (John 14:26), Jesus said to them, *“but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”* The things Jesus has told them are difficult to grasp, no doubt. So, he reminds them again in verse 13 that he will not give them all of this new information and then depart, leaving them to figure it out on their own. The Helper will grant them understanding. *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”* Jesus may be departing, but the Holy Spirit is soon to come.

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth, who will guide the disciples (and us) into all truth (which is tied to the remembrance of the things Jesus has told them, i.e., his word). In doing this, the Holy Spirit, will not bear witness to himself, but to Jesus, a point which Jesus makes emphatically in verse 14-15. *“He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”* As J. I. Packer once put it, the Holy Spirit illumines the person and work of Jesus just as flood lights illumine a great building at night. The floodlights are usually hidden from sight (so as not to call attention to the light fixtures) so that what they illumine receives our attention. This is what the Holy Spirit does in regard to the person and work of Jesus. The Holy Spirit does not speak on his own authority, but he illumines and confirms the truth of the words which Jesus has spoken, and which we now find in the pages of Holy Scripture, which the Spirit breathed forth through these same apostles, or through those within their circle (like Luke and Mark).

Why then, is it good that Jesus depart? Because the Holy Spirit (the Helper) will come. And what will the Holy Spirit do? He will convict the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment, because the world does not believe in Jesus (and indeed cannot apart from the work of the Spirit). The Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth, and will not speak on his own, but he recalls to mind the things which Jesus has told his disciples. This leads to the words of Jesus being written down by the disciples in and through the process of the inspiration of Scripture, as the Holy Spirit is the one who breathes forth the words of God which we now find in our Bibles through which the Spirit speaks to us, even now. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit will glorify Jesus, by taking what is his (Jesus’) and declaring it to those who trust in Jesus. Like a great flood light, he will illumine the person and work of the Savior.

Because of the work of the Holy Spirit who indwells us, and who unites us to Jesus (in heaven), in a profound sense, we are closer to Jesus now than if he were present on earth and walking among us. It is the Spirit who takes ink and paper and makes them the words of life through which we hear God speak. It is the Spirit who takes ordinary bread and wine and through them gives to us the true body and blood of Christ which nourishes our souls—when received in faith. It is the Holy Spirit who prays for us when we do not know how to pray, ensuring that our prayers are always heard by our Father in heaven. It is the Spirit, who gives us life, and saving faith, and then unites us to our risen and ascended Savior, who is even now preparing that place for us in the presence of the Father. This is why it is good that Jesus depart and send us the Helper, the blessed Holy Spirit. Amen.