

8. The Work Of The Holy Spirit

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Summary

The work of the Holy Spirit is to kill you. To receive the Holy Spirit is to die. To follow Jesus is to die. To *be* Jesus is to die. Jesus' way to life is by means of the cross. It is no different for you. The good news is not that you get to escape from suffering. The good news is that Jesus is with you throughout your suffering, and the Holy Spirit intends to give you new life on the other side of it. But there is no new life without death.

You can see this in the Lord's Prayer itself: it is a series of requests to be put to death. To call God "Father" is to cut loose from all the earthly things you depend on. Ultimate security and safety don't depend on place and relationship, but on God.

"Hallowed be *your* name" may sound like the prayer of a religious person, but it is actually the death of a religious person. Asking God's name to be holy is death to your religious illusions about yourself and your desire for a good and pious reputation.

Everyone is working toward a kingdom: the small kingdom of your home, or an ideal world out there, but such kingdoms will always leave you disappointed, because they are not God's kingdom. Praying "Your kingdom come" means closing the door on your false kingdoms.

Most people want so much more than daily bread, but in the Lord's Prayer, you are allowed to pray *only* for daily bread, letting go of everything else, dying to all your greedy desires.

There is probably no bigger death than forgiveness. That's why forgiveness is so central to the message of the Gospel: it is the internal version of what happens to you externally in death. Forgiveness is a great gift to those who *want* to be forgiven. But not everyone wants it. Accepting forgiveness means admitting all that is wrong and bad about yourself. Sometimes repentance is talked about this way: If you do *your* job and repent, then God will do *His* job and forgive. But repentance is actually giving up on everything you could do or contribute to your salvation. It's realizing that your hands are empty, and that God doesn't care if they're empty—in fact, He prefers it that way, because He can fill empty hands. Being forgiven is accepting death. But forgiving is death, too. Because if you forgive, it means that you are saying openly to another person: "Yes, you did me wrong. Yes, I suffered because of you. And yet—I have to let the anger go. I have to let you go, into God's hands, and let Him do the final judging, not me. It's death to categorizing myself as better than both God's justice and God's mercy."

And then: lead us not into temptation. This is the last death—the death of control over your own life. You don't know how much of what has gone right in your life is good genes, or good luck, or good environment, or good you—or for that matter, how much that's *wrong* in your life is due to all these things. All you know is that if, in this life, you face an ultimate test and pass it, that will only be because the Holy Spirit is sustaining you. Yet in the face of death you can take comfort in the fact that you have already died once: you died with Christ in baptism. And only the dead can rise again!

That's what we learn from the strange parable that follows the Lord's Prayer in Luke's Gospel. A neighbor refuses to "rise up" for his friend who needs bread at midnight. Daily bread is not the same as midnight bread! It's only when the friend is willing to show his "shamelessness"—his complete lack of help, hope, or excuses—that the neighbor will "rise" to help him. Amazingly, in this story, the three instances of the word "rise" employ both of the New Testament's verbs for rising from the dead (ἀναστὰς and ἐγερθεῖς). Jesus will not arise for your self-justifications and excuses, but he will rise for your total helplessness.

So, when midnight comes, you can trust that God will give you what you ask for, even if you are evil—yes, evil! That's what Jesus says. Even to those who are evil God will give the Holy Spirit, if only they ask, seek, and knock. When Jesus came to his own midnight, the Holy Spirit caused him to rise. And just as Jesus rose to answer your desperate and shameless need, you will rise, too, by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Knowing that, maybe the hours between now and midnight will look very different for you!

Questions for reflection and discussion

- What are your favorite excuses for your thoughts, words, and behaviors?
- What would it look like to lay down your self-justifications and instead accept your total dependence on Christ's mercy?
- In what ways have you already experienced spiritual death?
- What parts of you resist dying?
- In what ways have you already experienced spiritual resurrection?

Bible verses

- Luke 11:1-13