

THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 16: 8-11

by David L. Miner

I would like us to take a look at a passage in the Bible that almost certainly you have heard, possibly read, and maybe even studied, in the past. Most likely you have made reference to this passage (or at least what you believe this passage to mean) dozens, if not hundreds, of times in your desire and attempt to grow in your spiritual life.

We have all heard so many comments and even many sermons based on what people believe this passage means that many of us have stopped thinking about the actual words that are there. This "accept without thought" in believers is a pattern people fall into throughout history, and it often leads to diluted theology. And this diluted theology always leads to diluted effectiveness and spiritual frustration. The end result is frequent setback and failure in your spiritual walk with God. And I believe this pattern of "accept without thought" is especially destructive as it relates to this passage.

So let us see if we can perhaps glean further truth from this passage that might help us avoid this pattern of setback and failure.

But first, think about hiking a mountain trail. I know that the most difficult hike many of you experience takes you from one store to another in the local mall. Many of you frequently wait several minutes in a parking lot just so you can park fifty feet closer to the store. But think about hiking a mountain trail anyway, and let's see if we can find something here to use in our spiritual journeys.

You are high on a mountainside with trees all around you. Suddenly, the trail breaks through the trees and you see a deep valley on your left and a steep rise into more mountain on your right. The trail ahead of you narrows to just a few feet wide edging a near vertical drop into the valley below. The trail is well-established, so you conclude that it must be safe. Still, the steep drop-off fills you with more than just caution.

You look for handholds and you see none. You think about it and conclude that a level path three feet wide is safe enough for you to pass without problems. After all, you remind yourself, you walk down sidewalks at home all the time without stumbling or falling off, and this path is just as wide, so it must surely be passable.

Yet you cannot help but look down at the valley floor several hundred feet below. You even lean out and peer over the cliff to get a better view or to see if there might be a shelf or something to catch you if you should fall. Each step forward brings a greater fear of losing your footing and falling over the abrupt edge.

Then, maybe a hundred feet in front of you, where the trail turns away from the cliff on the left into a small field with a few trees that seems to be almost level, you see your hiking

partner. He is calling to you. "Don't look down," he shouts. "Look at me and walk towards me."

Relieved, you look away from almost certain death. Watching him carefully, you walk another twenty feet, looking intently in his face. And you are surprised at how easy it is to walk in the center of the path, almost as if there is no cliff just inches from your left foot.

Then, you are distracted by the "scree" of an eagle in the distance. You look out to the next mountain in search of the eagle, and your eyes fall to the valley that separates you from that mountain. Looking deep into that valley, you see the cliff at your feet and immediately fear the deadly fall you are about to experience. For a moment, you are dizzy as you peer over the edge. You lean even farther over the precipice. Then you suddenly experience such vertigo that you feel yourself about to fall into the void. Fear strikes at your heart, taking control of your feet. Your knees become rubber. You step even closer to that which you fear so much.

"Don't look down! Look at me!" You realize your hiking buddy is still shouting at you, almost screaming at you.

Your eyes lift from the deep chasm below, and the fall you are about to experience, and you raise your eyes to the concerned face of your friend. Mere seconds before you step into the void, you instead walk toward your hiking partner. Just hearing the voice of your friend takes away the fear. The very act of walking toward your friend takes you away from the dangerous edge.

Each time you look down into the deep valley, you get closer to falling over the edge. And each time you look back at the face of your partner, you find it easy to remain on the path. After many cycles of looking down and then looking up, you realize that it is *so much easier to look up*. Walking is simpler, and safer, when you look up at your hiking partner. You ask yourself, "Why look down and run the risk of falling when all I have to do is look up?" The answer seems so obvious.

After all, looking up is so easy to do!

Then you look down again and the answer seems to dissipate into the thin air you fear.

This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit with believers: he calls us to look up. He calls us to do exactly what we know to do, but simply need reminding from time to time.

Each time we see that valley, with its distant floor and the rocks scattered around it, we walk closer to the edge. We don't mean to; we don't want to. But we do. And each time we look down at our sin, at our failures, at what we know in our hearts we should never do but seem to do it anyway, we increase the chance of walking back into that sin.

Sometimes sin just looks fascinating, and maybe even attractive!

Yet each time we look at the face of Jesus, we find it is a simple task to walk in the path he calls us to.

Does the Holy Spirit call out to us and say, "Look at the valley and don't fall into it?" No, not at all. The Holy Spirit is constantly calling out to us, "Look at Jesus. Keep your eyes on his face, and you will always be able to walk in his path."

Again, this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit with believers: to point us to Jesus and his righteousness so we can more easily walk in that righteousness like he wants us to do.

Is this a nice story, designed to make us feel better? Is this a new theology that tends to make us focus on simplistic answers and pop psychology rather than the reality all around us? Is this a cheap technique designed to help us navigate through the dangerous and difficult minefield of life?

Or is this a map through that minefield, drawn by the Creator to make it easier for us to walk down his path?

Is it better to look down and hope we don't walk off that cliff? Or is it better to look up at our Guide and know where to walk?

Let's take a closer look at the Bible and see what it says about this issue. Turn to the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, starting with the eighth verse and continuing through the eleventh verse.

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regards to sin, righteousness, and judgment; in regards to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regards to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. [John 16:8-11, NIV]

And when he comes, he will reprove the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment; of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. [John 16:8-11, KJV]

In this passage, Jesus tells us why it is important for him to die here on earth and enter back into heaven: so the Holy Spirit can come to men in a new way and with a specific ministry that will benefit everyone.

Jesus further tells us that the Holy Spirit has three functions on earth, depending on the recipients of that ministry.

The first group of recipients is *unbelievers*. The ministry of the Holy Spirit to unbelievers is to *convict* or *reprove* or sometimes translated into *correct* unbelievers of their sin. The Greek word used here is addressing the *state of sinfulness*, and not individual acts of sin, or individual transgressions.

With unbelievers, the Holy Spirit shows them their need of Jesus.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. [II Peter 3:9, NASB]

This calls into question sermons against alcohol, or drugs, or infidelity, or pornography, or all the many subjects and topics of our evangelical efforts aimed at convincing unbelievers to switch directions and follow Jesus. Perhaps there is value in these efforts, but Jesus here seems to say that the Holy Spirit doesn't do that, seems to say the Holy Spirit is only involved with unbelievers to the extent that he points to their need for Jesus. I find no other function spoken of by Jesus where the Holy Spirit interacts with unbelievers. He seems to be concerned with pointing them to Jesus, convicting them of their need for Jesus, and nothing else.

The second group that is the focus of efforts by the Holy Spirit is *believers*. His ministry with us is to convict or reprove or correct believers concerning the righteousness of Christ. In so doing, we can see more clearly where to walk and how to live. Jesus is no longer physically with us so we can watch how he lives and moves and acts and touches lives. Therefore, the Holy Spirit has to constantly draw us back to what we have already seen and heard and learned about how we should live and move and act and touch others, as written in his Word.

With believers, the Holy Spirit shows us the righteousness of Jesus, so we can walk in it more easily and more consistently.

I have yet to read where Jesus or any biblical writer tells us that the Holy Spirit points *believers* to their sins, or to their failures, or to the short but terrible victories that Satan wins in their lives. According to Jesus, as recorded in the 9th Chapter of John, the Holy Spirit does not seem to convict believers of sins, but instead points us toward the life of Jesus for an example of how to live and respond to others. It is in seeing Jesus that we become aware of how we have failed him, that we FEEL like we are convicted, and it is only in seeing Jesus that we can keep our eyes on him and not look down or behind us to the path where we stumble so close to the edge.

With believers, the Holy Spirit shows us where to walk, not what to avoid.

For we walk by faith, and not by sight. [II Corinthians 5:7]

It is Satan that tricks us into looking at the sin, falsely telling us we can avoid stepping in it if we focus on it, if we rebuke ourselves for stepping in it in the past, and if we see the edges of sin clearly enough that we can step ever closer to sin without actually stepping in it. We can avoid this deceptive trap by reminding Satan that he has already lost the war, and then, without looking down at the path at our feet, we turn to Jesus and look into his face, where we can see love and forgiveness and righteousness; where we can see where to walk.

Does it really matter if the Holy Spirit points us at our sins, or points us to the holiness and righteousness of Jesus? Think about it for a few minutes, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to you.

The more we allow the Holy Spirit to minister to us by reminding us to look into the face of Jesus and see his righteousness, the easier it will be to walk in his path. The more we allow Satan to focus our attention on the sin we have committed or we might commit, the easier it is for Satan to get us to look over the edge, down into the valley where the rocks await our failures.

Tony Robbins is not the only one to tell us to look up and see the positive things in life. The Holy Spirit tells us to look up, see Jesus and his righteousness, and we WILL walk in his path – we WILL receive power to walk like Jesus walked!

For the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. [Romans 8:2, KJV]

...because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. [Romans 8:2, NIV]

And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. [Galatians 5:25, KJV]

Spiritually speaking, we walk where we are looking. We can have "victory in Jesus" only if we see Jesus before us. And it is the Holy Spirit's job to point us to Jesus at all times. When we are looking at our "hiking partner" it is a simple thing to walk in the middle of the path. But when we see the edge of the cliff, when we see our past failures, when we see where we MIGHT walk, we will usually get dizzy with Satan's lies and tricks, and walk off that cliff once again.

There is therefore no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. [Romans 8:1, KJV]

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
[Romans 8:1, NIV]

When we keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, we can and will walk in the path he has laid out for us.

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [Philippians 3:7-14, NASB]