

A Gift Promised and Unclaimed

Acts 1: 4-8

I Thessalonians 5: 12-22

John 10: 1-10

A recent article on CBC news noted that nearly a million Canadians have old forgotten bank accounts in which more than \$320 million lies unclaimed. Some of these accounts date back to 1900 and belong to people who have died. The executors of those estates obviously had no knowledge that those funds ever existed, so those dollars remain forever lost. Yet the majority of those nearly one million unclaimed accounts belong to people who have simply forgotten about them. By law, banks must hold onto unused account balances for up to ten years before turning it over to the Bank of Canada, which tries to reconnect those dollars with their actual owners. While some \$12 million was paid out in claims last year, as I said, \$320 million remain unclaimed.

It is not just bank accounts that get forgotten. More commonly, for birthdays, weddings or holiday times, people are giving gift cards instead of presents. Yet according to the Consumer Reports National Research Center, one out of every five gift-card recipients never used their cards last year. Retailers must love this as that represents just under one billion in unredeemed gifts. How many of you are just itching to check your wallets, because you're suddenly thinking, do I have a card for "Timmy's" or Starbucks that I've been forgetting to use?

As to why people don't use their gift cards, researchers found that fifty percent say they haven't had time; 37 percent say they haven't found what they wanted; 14 percent admit they lost the card; while another 12 percent took so long before they tried to use redeem it that the card had expired. Nearly a billion

dollars unredeemed. It is hard to imagine a gift this size unclaimed.

Yet there is an even more precious treasure that is left untouched, untapped, ignored, discarded and forgotten. This treasure was itself made possible only through the greatest love offering and terrible sacrifice, yet it has often lain unrecognized, undesired and untaken. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit is the gift which many Christians and most churches have left unclaimed and undiscovered. All the power of heaven that was released at Pentecost is still available to God's people in all its mystery and majesty, in all its wildness and wonder, in all its empowering glory and world-changing potential. It's been promised.

Before returning to heaven, Jesus told the disciples to wait "for the gift my Father has promised, which you have heard me speak about. John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." That promise was not just for the apostles long ago. Nor was the promise only for an elite group of super-Christians who have merited it by good deeds, good luck, good looks or goodness knows what. The promise of the Spirit is for every believer and every church of Jesus Christ on the face of the earth, for every heart and fellowship that looks to his mercy and calls him Lord. We can take this to be the bank because the Father promised.

Let me remind you of the promise. In the book Joel in the Old Testament, God said the day would come when he would pour out his 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." Not dribble my Spirit. Not sprinkle sparingly or grudgingly mete out. Not dipped, dampened or lightly misted. No, God said he would pour out the Holy Spirit, like a mighty torrent, on all his people that they might walk in the presence and power of God.

The essence of that promise is repeated in Isaiah, 44:3, as God told Israel that he would “pour water on the thirsty land and streams on dry ground; and pour out my Spirit on your offspring and by blessings on your descendants.” In Ezekiel, God affirmed he would put a new heart and Spirit in his people, that he would remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh and put his Spirit within them.

John the Baptist prophesied that the messiah would come and baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). When in prison, John also affirmed that in Christ, God would give the Spirit without limit (John 3:44).

Jesus, through the whole of his ministry, taught and performed miracles of healing only through the power of the Spirit – he was, scripture says, full of the Spirit. Speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, (as recorded in chapter 4 of John’s gospel) or again to the Jews in Jerusalem (John chapter 7) Jesus said that whoever drank of the living water he would give would never thirst again – it would become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. That spring was nothing less than the indwelling presence of the Spirit. So when the Spirit fell on the disciples at Pentecost, Peter and the apostles immediately understood the promise was being fulfilled, and that the gift was not merely for them, but for all and any who put faith in Christ.

Let me say it again: the Holy Spirit is the gift which the Father has promised. The Spirit is the living presence of our Lord who promised to be with us always. The Spirit is lavished upon us first of all because of God’s astonishing, extravagant love for us. But the gift is given as well because it is by the Spirit’s presence with us that we are to be known as belonging to God. It is by the Spirit that we are empowered to live and serve him effectively, exuberantly and joyfully. The gift is given because, as promised in Ezekiel, we need heart transplants if we are to live totally and truly in freedom and faith as the children of God and the redeemed of the Lord which we are. This is not something we

can pull off on our own – otherwise our discipleship is reduced to our own human performance and will power, and God knows our utter inadequacy not only to save ourselves but to grow ourselves into any resemblance of holiness and grace. We need the bountiful outpouring of the Holy Spirit not just to help but to transform us. We need the Spirit to enable us to see and live out the glory and truth of the redeemed life to which we are called.

God not only offers us the incomparable gift of the Spirit. Receiving the Spirit is also an order. When Paul told the Ephesians that they were to be filled with the Spirit, it was not a suggestion but a command. Being filled was also not to be a one-time event but a drawing to and drawing forth again and again and again from the well of the Spirit. He meant we are to be filled and to keep on being filled with the Spirit. We are not only to cash in the gift coupon and not leave it unclaimed, but are to draw relentlessly from the heaven’s bank account whose riches can never be exhausted and from which we may have never made a single withdrawal. Friends, it is the Father’s pleasure to give us the Spirit. He has promised us, and it is to his glory when we call out: “Abba, Father! I want to be known as yours, one of the people of the Presence. For this is all about your wonderful grace that you want me to have in abundance. So Lord, pour out your Spirit on me. As you promised.”

So why are we so reluctant to ask for and receive the gift? One writer has suggested that we have chosen to be people of the latest teaching program or people of the power point rather than letting the Spirit make us into the people of the Presence. We worship before the idols of fads, gimmicks and technology, or else we bind ourselves to the false comforts of exhausted traditions and our nostalgic whining for how things used to be, or else we invest all our hope into the lifeless rigidities of our theological absolutes, in which we trust more in our doctrines than we do in the living God.

Let me suggest some other reasons why we are so reluctant, resistant and slow to claim the promised gift of the Spirit for our lives.

One problem is simply ignorance, not unlike the situation described in Acts 19, in which Paul met believers in Ephesus who had never heard of the Holy Spirit. We may use all the right religious language, but in many churches, there has been so little teaching about the Spirit that people are quite unaware of the promise the Father has made. Some traditions so minimize the place of the Spirit they virtually discount the reality of the third person of the Trinity, sometimes arguing with incredible intolerance that the work of the Spirit ceased with the death of the apostles and that first generation of Christians. What is especially sad, is that if we so ignore the empowering work of the Spirit, we in essence return to a works-based religion in which my salvation and growth in grace is utterly dependent on me – on my strength of belief, study and performance.

Friends, if my salvation or sanctification in any way depends upon my paltry faith, my weak discipleship, my feeble brain, my pathetic prayer life or anything else about me, then I am toast! Only by grace am I saved. Only by the transforming power of the Spirit can I grow in intimate relationship with my Lord. Only by the supernatural work of the Spirit can I be made more and more to look like Jesus and bring him glory. So if we dismiss the Spirit and ignore the gift, or indeed, are never taught about the amazing riches of grace and power that are available to us, why should we be surprised to see the church and our witness so ineffective and invisible in the world?

If ignorance is part of the problem, so is what Charles Kraft calls our unbiblical worldview. Kraft contends that the church in the western world was so impacted by the Enlightenment that we have ever since let ourselves be schooled to question and even deny the presence of the supernatural. Our lens for viewing reality filters out the spiritual dimension of life.

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Reason, empiricism and the intellect have become the gold standard of knowledge and belief. The consequence is that we have relegated God out of daily existence.

Let me add this qualification: to have a biblical worldview does not mean we shutter off all rational intelligence, scientific insight or capacity to reason and question. To believe that the tomb is empty, does not mean our minds must be. But there is more mystery and reality to this world than can be grasped by mere rationalism on its own.

Scripture takes seriously the understanding that we live in a midst of profound spiritual forces, which includes not only the sovereign power of heaven's love but also those forces of darkness which oppose and despise that same love. Paul called them the principalities and powers. They represent the hatred of the evil one who, as Jesus said, seeks only to kill, steal and destroy. Indeed, one of the most effective strategies of the Devil is to convince us that there is no real supernatural dimension to life, thereby causing us to be blind to the very real spiritual battle being waged for our souls and worse, to leave us unarmed for the battle. God has not only made us more than conquerors through the spiritual victory that is ours in Jesus Christ, but has made possible for us to put on the full armor of God in the Holy Spirit that we may indeed stand firm.

But I think there is another barrier to receiving the gift and to our growing in the power of the Spirit, and that is our own deep fear. I had originally intended to preach primarily about the issue of speaking in tongues, because that is a phenomenon that has often confused believers and divided churches. I've had people tell me they are really unsure about praying for the Spirit because on one hand they sense this pressure to prove themselves a top notch Christian by speaking in tongues – even if only pretending to do so. At the same time, they are reluctant to pray for the Spirit because they don't want to feel "out of control." They have heard of people falling down

in a swoon or laughing uncontrollably or acting in otherwise weird ways, and they don't want to look foolish or be carried away with extreme emotionalism.

Which is fair concern, but only to a degree. Sadly, as evidenced in I Corinthians, the gift of speaking in tongues has been arrogantly misused by some as a mark of super spirituality or abused by others as a sort of essential proof of one's faith. Equally, our own emotional immaturity can lead us to respond to the Spirit's coming in ways that are more about attracting attention to ourselves than glorying in the Lord's grace.

But the bottom line is that often we resist the Spirit largely because we like things to be under control – our control. We want everything in worship to be done decently and in good order, and if we just keep a good worldly harness on everybody's behavior – especially anyone who might be prone to crazy extremes – then we don't have to worry about church getting messy, unsettling and decidedly less than tame. It's been said that anytime revival breaks out, three things come: God, the flesh and the evil one. The temptation in face of the latter two is to shut everything down, but sadly that means shutting out God as well. Where revival breaks out we need prayerful, discerning leaders who are ready to pastor the flesh, stand firmly against what is of darkness, but also, to go with God in trust and expectation that the gifts which the Father promised are too precious ever to treat as undesirable or leave unclaimed, merely because they would push us outside our comfort zone.

To the church in Thessalonica, Paul gave warning about quenching the Spirit's fire or grieving the Holy Spirit. Paul intimated that we grieve the Spirit by any form of division within the church or as we sin against our brothers and sisters in Christ. Most certainly a barrier to the Holy Spirit moving in power within the life of the church is division, dissension and disrespect towards each other. Such ugly behavior or lack of love grieves the Spirit because hardness of attitude and coldness of action

towards one another is the very opposite of the life of humility, compassion and ministry to which Jesus calls us.

But I also believe that grieving the Spirit includes simply our fearful resistance to letting God be God. We grieve the Spirit when we are unwilling to invite him into our lives. We grieve the Spirit when we ask for the gift of his grace but demand it on our terms. We grieve the Spirit when we tell the Lord what his gifts should be and how they should be given, rather than being prepared to let God pour out his presence and grace with all the abundant generosity, tender goodness, wise insight and extravagant love with which the Father longs to bless his children.

Friends, do you think for one moment that God overpromised? Do you think he promised us the Spirit or that he promised us his joy and peace, only to refuse to deliver? When Paul prayed for the church at Ephesus, he rejoiced in the majesty of God who, he said, is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, accordingly to his power that is at work in us. That power is God's own Holy Spirit, who wants to fill us with kingdom authority and heaven's joy. That power is the Spirit of our Saviour Jesus Christ who desires to empower us to live in the fullness and freedom that belongs to the redeemed and chosen of the Lord. That power is the Spirit of the Living God who seeks to turn us into those fearless and released Christians that turn this hurting world upside down with the wild daring and outrageous majesty of Christ's love and mercy. That power is the Holy Spirit who wants to do in and through us immeasurably more than anything we can imagine for the healing of broken hearts, for the comforting of grieving souls, for the saving of frightened lives. That power is the Holy Spirit of God who is ready to empower us with tongues and talents, with vision and strength, with courage and love, to win afresh this world for Jesus and bring glory, glory, to his name.

Let us pray:

Come, Spirit, come. Over every fear, triumph; over every resisting impulse, conquer. Over everything in us that would keep us from giving our everything and all to you. Have your way with us; release, transform and fill us with power to live for Jesus and to be the blessing of Jesus wherever he sends us. Come, Spirit come, and bring your church alive. We would claim heaven's gift in all its beauty and wonder. Come, Holy Spirit. We welcome you. Amen.