

Down and Dirty

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

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Genesis 3:1–6 (CEB)

The snake was the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say that you shouldn’t eat from any tree in the garden?”

²The woman said to the snake, “We may eat the fruit of the garden’s trees ³but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, ‘Don’t eat from it, and don’t touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴The snake said to the woman, “You won’t die! ⁵God knows that on the day you eat from it, you will see clearly and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶The woman saw that the tree was beautiful with delicious food and that the tree would provide wisdom, so she took some of its fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

Genesis 4:13–14 (CEB)

¹³Cain said to the LORD, “My punishment is more than I can bear. ¹⁴Now that you’ve driven me away from the fertile land and I am hidden from your presence, I’m about to become a roving nomad on the earth, and anyone who finds me will kill me.”

1 Corinthians 2:12, 12:4–7 (NRSV)

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

⁴There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are different ministries and the same Lord; ⁶and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. ⁷A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.

God’s Spirit empowers us to work for his kingdom!

Last week, we saw that God made a world that is good, though not perfect, and then placed the humans in a good garden. They were to live and work in this garden, doing all the things we do in our own gardens: tilling, sowing, harvesting. We often forget that the work in the garden was given by God before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. We were created to work, to get involved in this world, to get our hands dirty in God’s good world.

Sadly, this God-given work changed with the rebellion of the humans. The dirt would be hard, weeds and thorns would infest the ground. What had once been undiminished joy would become hard and difficult labor. So it still is with much of the work in our world; thus, it isn’t surprising that work too often gets a bad rap. Like so many of the difficulties in this world, work ends up being something from which we want to escape. I wonder how truly we grasp all that was lost when Adam and Eve were cast from the garden and Cain was exiled out into the world.

It is understandable that hardships and suffering in this life cause people to reach for the “spiritual” and forget how the story begins: God makes a material world which the humans are to joyfully master and work. Too often we imagine that the Christian story is one of escape, leaving this troubled world behind as we make our way to the heavens. But the incarnation of Jesus, God-made-flesh, and his resurrection point us to the goodness of God’s material creation and our own need to get down and dirty in this world, not to escape from it.

Working for the kingdom

Christians too often take from all this the notion that because of rebellion and sin, they aren't "worthy" or even able to do genuine good. Many of us look at our own failings and conclude that the work of the kingdom is better left to others. We have little grasp of how the Spirit of God is working in our life. We fall back on our own power, resources, and authority. When we consider what goes on, or should go on, in our church we often think of it as we would in our schools or businesses.

But the church is formed by and led by the Holy Spirit, as is every Christian. The Spirit dwells in us all and works with us to build for God's kingdom. Do you feel and see the Spirit moving at St. Andrew? I do. And we are all part of it. One church, many parts, as Paul put it. A variety of gifts, yes, but the Spirit undergirds and empowers all we do. We can know these things from Scripture, but Paul also wants us to rely on our experience of the Holy Spirit: "Did you experience so much for nothing – it is really was for nothing" (Galatians 3:4, NRSV). As Richard Hays put it:

Galatians 3:1–5 highlights the experience of the Holy Spirit as the sign and proof of the new life in Christ. . . . The formerly pagan Galatians have been caught up by the power of the proclaimed gospel into a new life in which they continually experience the outpouring of God's Spirit and see the Spirit's mighty works in their community . . .

Paul's line of argument here should be startling to Christians who insist on going strictly "by the book" of traditional teaching—as startling as it was to conscientious Jewish Christians of Paul's day. Where the Spirit breaks in and brings new life, we should acknowledge it gratefully as God's doing and not worry too much about whether all the proper rules and ecclesiastical proprieties are being observed. The preacher who follows the message of this passage will call the congregation to remember and reclaim their identity as God's people solely on the basis of their living experience of God's grace and power; no one should "bewitch" them into thinking of themselves as second-class Christians or as spiritually deficient because they have not undergone some discipline or ritual . . .¹

One body, many parts

In Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians, he addresses house churches that fail to grasp well the work of the Spirit in and among them. Most of us quickly grasp several of Paul's points. First, God has given his Spirit to us all, so that we can understand the gifts God has given us and put them to work for his purposes. Second, we know that God has given us a variety of gifts. Whether we call them gifts or talents, we know that some are good at one thing, others at another. Third, we understand that these various gifts make our community stronger. To use Paul's body metaphor (see 12:14-26), the eye needs the hand which needs the foot. The body needs them all. Our diversity is a benefit – so long as it is lived out in love and in unity of purpose.

So, let us be ready to get down and dirty as we work to build lives, families, and communities that reflect Christ's love and faithfulness, always letting others see the Spirit's work in us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

It can be very hard for us to grasp and to know that God's Spirit works in each of us. Sometimes we can allow ourselves to "tune out" God's Spirit so completely it is as if we are tone-deaf! You see, this is not magic. The Holy Spirit works with each of us, but not as if we are mere puppets. This is about cooperation and will and discipline. What can we do to help each other and ourselves to trust in God's Spirit and to embrace the power, passion, and purpose that is God's gift to us? Here's a hint. The immediate follow-up to Pentecost was this: "They (the believers) devoted themselves to the

¹ Hays, R. B. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Galatians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 11, p. 253). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Jesus disciples did not sit around passively waiting for the next ecstatic experience. They went to work.

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on the Spirit and the gifts given us all

Monday, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20 Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that collectively and individually they are God's temples.

Tuesday, 1 Cor. 12:27-13:13 None of the gifts we are given by God for the work of the church are superior to the others.

Wednesday, 1 Cor. 14:1-25 Using gifts wisely. A case in point.

Thursday, 1 Cor. 14:26-40 Using our gifts for the good of the community not for ourselves.

Friday, Philippians 1:3-11 Living in the body of Christ

Saturday, Acts 4:32-37 The first community of believers

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Paul's letter 1 Thessalonians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Beginning this week: *Paul: A biography*. This will be a fresh look at the life and ministry of Paul.