

“The Paraclete”
John 14:15-17, 25-27, 15:26-27 16:6-11
August 2, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

THE READING OF THE WORD:

We return again this morning to the Gospel of John, where we are still in the midst of Jesus’s final discourse with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion.

My original text at the beginning of this week was chapter fourteen, verses fifteen through seventeen. But as I dug into those verses, I eventually decided I needed to add other portions of Jesus’s discourse here in John fourteen through sixteen, to help us make sense of these verses.

Our time this morning will largely focus on one Greek word: *parakletos*, often transliterated into English as paraclete. Because that word is the focus, I have included all four times that John uses the word in his gospel, all of which occur in this discourse and refer to the Holy Spirit.

And so this morning we will hear from John chapter fourteen verses fifteen through seventeen, chapter fourteen verses twenty-five through twenty-seven, chapter fifteen verses twenty-six and twenty-seven, and then chapter sixteen verses six through eleven.

Since our focus will be on the meaning of the word *parakletos*, and since the ESV itself, with its footnote, offers three possible translations, I will do what many others have and simply use the transliteration of the word when we come to it: Paraclete.

With all that in mind, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Jesus said to them:

14:¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

[...]

²⁵ “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Paraclete, 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. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

[...]

15:²⁶ “But when the Paraclete 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. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.

[...]

16:⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not

believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, be gracious to us, your servants,
that we may live and keep your word.
Open our eyes, that we may behold
wondrous things out of your word.
Let your testimonies be our delight,
and our chief counselors.
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

WHAT DOES “PARACLETE” MEAN?:

Now, why spend a whole sermon on this one title that Jesus gives to the Holy Spirit in these chapters?

That decision is based on the conviction that the Scriptures have used this word for a reason ... and we should ask what that reason is.

The word itself is a bit of a puzzle. There can be a tendency with such puzzles to see them as mere intellectual exercises, and to assume that the solution must be of little real-life value. But the early church Fathers often saw such puzzles in the Scriptures as calls to dig deeper, and assumed that since there was something put there to get our attention, there must also be something it leads to that is worth finding.

What we are really asking this morning is: By choosing this word, what are the Scriptures teaching us about the Holy Spirit that we should know in order to benefit our Christian lives?

So we will start with the puzzle, but we won’t end there. We will end with what this all teaches us about the Holy Spirit, whom we are told here is a key source of hope for the Christian – for all, as Jesus puts it, who love Jesus and keep his commands. [Carson, 498-499; Morris, 648]

To those who so trust in him, Jesus promises “another Paraclete.”

But what does “Paraclete” mean?

Literally, the word means one who is “called to the side of” another. [Morris, 662; Carson, 499]
Though that doesn’t get us very far.

In the English translation tradition, there have been three main ways the word has been translated: as “Comforter,” as “Helper,” or as “Advocate.” [Wright, 62-63]

Luther, in his German translation, and Tyndale and Wycliffe in their early English translations, all translated it as “Comforter”, as did the King James Version after them. [Shelfer, 132]

Later scholars noted that while “Comforter” fit with another grammatical form of this Greek word, it wasn’t the natural meaning of the form used here. [Brown, 1136-1137] And so some translators have chosen the more broad term “helper.” This is not an inaccurate term, but it is fairly vague in ways that don’t tell us much and can be a bit misleading about the richer connotations of the word used in Greek. [Wright, 62; Morris, 664; Carson 499]

A much more popular translation among many modern commentators is “advocate” – with the specific sense of it referring to a legal advocate for the defense in a court of law. [Morris, 662; Carson, 499]

As Lochlan Shelfer puts it, in his twenty-page article on the meaning of this one word: a paraclete “is someone of elevated status, a patron who speaks in defense of his client before a judge” [Shelfer, 141]

One inviting thing about this definition is how well it fits with the one other use of this word in the New Testament, in First John 2:1. [Brown 1135] There John writes: “If anyone does sin, we have a Paraclete with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” In this verse the picture is the heavenly court room, with God the Father acting as judge and Jesus acting as our legal advocate. [Morris, 662; Shelfer, 145]

From there, many have concluded that when Jesus says in our text this morning that the Holy Spirit is a Paraclete, he must be saying that the Holy Spirit is also our defense lawyer before God the Father, interceding with him for the forgiveness of our sins and for God’s blessing on us. [Shefler, 146; Morris, 665; Wright, 62-63]

And while it is true that the Holy Spirit does that for us, as we’re told in Romans chapter eight [Shefler, 146; Wright, 63] ... I don’t think that that’s what’s actually being discussed in our texts this morning.

And there are at least two reasons for that.

One is that that understanding seems to cut out certain connotations of the text that those who knew Greek much better than we do saw in the forefront of this passage.

The Greek Fathers of the early church, when they came to these texts in John’s gospel, normally understood the word to mean a “consoler” or a “comforter.” [Morris, 662] That interpretation is found in Origen [Shelfer, 132], Eusebius, John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. [Behm, 805-806]

While the insights of modern language scholarship must be taken seriously, we should be hesitant to discard the interpretation of highly educated exegetes who actually spoke Greek in the

ancient world. [For the modern rejection of this understanding see: Shelfer, 132; Carson, 499; Morris, 663]

The Greek Fathers saw an emphasis not on the defense the Holy Spirit makes for us before God the Father, but the comfort the Spirit brings to us as believers. That should cause us to pause.

But the thing that should really cause us to question that interpretation is the text itself.

The idea that the focus is on the Holy Spirit serving as our advocate before God the Father when we fail and need forgiveness, just doesn't fit with the way that John actually uses the word here. [Morris, 665; Behm, 812]

First of all, a paraclete speaks to a judge, not to his client. But the focus of the Spirit's work here as Paraclete is on how he will instruct Jesus's disciples. In fact, that is the chief work that is highlighted in these verses. [Morris, 665; Carson, 505]

Second, in the passage that seems most legally focused, the framework of the Spirit defending us before God especially doesn't fit. Chapter sixteen verses seven through eleven speak of the Paraclete "convicting" the world. But as Lochlan Shelfer points out in his extensive study of the word, paracletes "are exclusively defenders and never prosecutors." [Shelfer, 141]

And so John 16:6-11 also does not fit with the idea of the Spirit being described here as our paraclete in the courts of heaven. In fact, none of the descriptions here fit with that picture.

Where does that leave us then?

Well first, we should see that a single English word is unlikely to capture the concept being communicated here. Even Jerome felt this way, and left this word untranslated in his Latin translation of the Bible. [Shelfer, 132]

And yet, I don't think the concept is impossible for us to grasp.

In fact, it seems to me that we might be able to bring together both the modern insights into the legal use of the word, the context of its use in John 14-16 itself, the implications seen by the Greek Fathers, and the ways this title for the Holy Spirit applies to our lives, if we consider and adjust just two assumptions often brought to this text.

The first is the *nature* of the legal assistance that the Paraclete provides.

A paraclete in the ancient world was not actually a professional legal adviser or defender. [Behm, 801]

In the Jewish court setting it was actually the judge who did the questioning. The paraclete was more like a *witness* for the defense, than like an attorney for the defense. [Brown, 1136]

And this makes sense in John 14-16. Again and again the Paraclete is described as one who communicates truth – who speaks as a witness. [Morris, 650]

So first, we need to make that adjustment.

But then second, we need to ask where the courtroom is, and who or what is actually on trial.

Having concluded that the term “paraclete” refers to a legal advocate or witness, many seem to simply assume that the court room in view must be the heavenly courtroom, in which believers are on trial before God. [e.g.: Shefler, 146; Morris, 665; Wright, 62-63]

But is that right? Maybe the trial Jesus has in mind is a different one. And in fact, if we look closer at the text, I think a different scene emerges.

The scenes that Jesus is concerned with in these chapters is not so much one where we are on trial before God for our sins, but where the Christian faith is on trial in our lives.

In each passage Jesus mentions aspects of the disciples’ lives that will make accusations against the Christian faith – that will put the Christian faith on trial in some way in their hearts and lives.

And what Jesus promises here is that the Holy Spirit will serve as a witness to defend the faith – to defend our faith – in such situations.

In our text this morning Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come alongside all who trust in Christ, where he will serve as a witness in defense of the Christian faith.

The Holy Spirit will come alongside all who trust in Christ, where he will serve as a witness in defense of the Christian faith.

And that plays out in three areas in these verses. The Holy Spirit serves as witness in our lives against the accusations of our sufferings, of our shortcomings, and of our surroundings.

Let me say that again: The Holy Spirit will serve as a witness in our lives, in defense of the Christian faith, against the accusations of our sufferings, our shortcomings, and our surroundings.

I want to spend the rest of our time this morning considering those truths.

A WITNESS AGAINST THE ACCUSATIONS OF OUR SUFFERINGS:

First, the Holy Spirit serves as a witness in defense of the Christian faith against the accusations of our sufferings.

That link comes up in a few places in our text. Jesus says that he knows that the disciples are facing sorrow in 16:6. He says that he knows their hearts will be troubled and afraid, in 14:27. He knows that they are in need of peace. And he promises them peace – true peace, in verse twenty-seven. And how does he bring them that peace – that comfort – in response to their sorrow, and their troubles, and their fears? He says he will provide it by sending the Holy Spirit – the Spirit, whom he says in verse sixteen will be with them.

But if the Holy Spirit is presented here as a defense witness ... why would we need that in the midst of suffering? How would that provide help or comfort?

Suffering will accuse our faith. Suffering will raise doubts about the Christian faith. Suffering will often try to take our Christian faith to court in our hearts.

And when that happens, the Holy Spirit's response is to offer comfort through testimony.

What do I mean by that?

How other people respond to our suffering always says something to us. And maybe that is most clear when people respond in unhelpful ways. We've all experienced this.

Maybe when you have been suffering – when you've been going through something difficult, when you've been in pain, or when you've been grieving – maybe someone has responded by trying to solve your pain or grief like it was a simple problem. They kept your suffering at arm's length, and tried to solve it abstractly.

And they might have meant well. But what it often communicates to us – whether they mean it or not – is that they'd rather deal with a technical problem than draw close to us in our pain. And it often leaves us feeling unloved.

Others may try to minimize our pain. And again, they may mean well. But their response often communicates to us – whether they mean it to or not – that they think our grief is an overreaction, and they'd like us to get over it. And it often leaves us feeling unloved.

Still others try to figure out who to pin the blame on for our suffering, assuming that justice or revenge will be a solution for grief and loss. And that response too can leave us feeling lonely and unloved.

We are fallen human beings. And so we all too often fall into these false ways of responding to suffering and pain and grief.

But God does not treat us that way. God responds differently. God does not give superficial comfort. God does not try to heal our suffering lightly. God, by the Holy Spirit gives us more. Through the Spirit he gives a different testimony. What does that look like?

James Smith describes a movie scene in which a man is grieving. People have come by to see him, to bring flowers and food. The man, Smith writes: “notices several older ladies knitting on the couch. ‘We brought casseroles,’ one of them points out. [...] [The man] sits quietly, moving food around his plate. ‘Is there something I should be doing right now?’ [he asks.] ‘No, dear. You eat,’ one of them encourages. ‘We came over to sit,’ another says. ‘That’s what people do when tragedy strikes,’ a third offers. ‘They come over and sit.’” [Smith, 136]

One commentator puts it like this – he writes: “Comfort is a strange and wonderful thing. Have you noticed how, when someone is deeply distressed, after a bereavement or a tragedy, the fact of having other people with them, hugging them and being alongside them, gives them strength for the next moment, then the one after that, then the one after that? Outwardly nothing has

changed. The tragedy is still a tragedy. The dead person won't be coming back. But other human support changes our ability to cope with disaster. It gives us strength. When the spirit is spoken of as the 'comforter', this kind of extra strength to meet special need is in mind." [Wright, 62]

This kind of comfort is not superficial or merely sentimental. It is a testimony. Even if we never think of it cognitively, even if it never occurs to us in propositional terms, it is a testimony that we receive. It is a testimony that we are loved. The presence of others, sitting with us, being with us, coming alongside us in suffering, is testimony that we are loved.

And the Spirit's presence is the same. When tragedy strikes, our sufferings often make accusations. They question our faith. They accuse the promises of God of being false. They try to put the Christian faith on trial in our hearts.

And when they do, the Holy Spirit comes alongside us, and by his presence he testifies to the fact that we are loved by God. For God himself is with us. God himself, through the Holy Spirit, is with us in our hearts. He does not leave us when suffering comes – he does not dismiss our pain, or make light of our situation, but he sits with us in it. And by dwelling with us he testifies to us that we are loved – and not just by anyone, but by God himself.

This is the peace God offers – not superficial peace as the world gives, but deep peace rooted in the love of God. [Carson, 506] And it refutes the accusations of our suffering.

So first, by being with us and giving comfort, the Holy Spirit serves as a witness in defense of the Christian faith against the accusations of our sufferings.

A WITNESS AGAINST THE ACCUSATIONS OF OUR SHORTCOMINGS:

Second, the Holy Spirit serves as a witness in defense of the Christian faith against the accusations of our shortcomings.

The passages we are looking at this morning both contain and are surrounded by the weighty callings that Jesus puts on his followers.

We saw that last Lord's Day as we considered the passage right before this one – where Jesus calls them to greater works than he did.

We see it in our text this morning in chapter fifteen verses twenty-six and twenty-seven, where Jesus reminds his disciples of their calling to bear witness to him even as they face persecution from the world.

We see it in the verses in between the passages we are considering this morning, where Jesus tells the disciples what they are called to.

When we hear the calling of Christ, we immediately see our own shortcomings, and our own sins, and those sins and shortcomings begin to make accusations in our hearts. They begin to tell us that the calling Jesus gave us is impossible, and that the Christian life is not something we can really do, and that Jesus has placed an impossible burden on us just to mock us.

And as those accusing voices begin in our hearts, Jesus tells us in 15:26 is that he will send the Holy Spirit – the Paraclete. And the Paraclete will bear witness – he will testify – to the truth of Jesus Christ. And that testimony of what we have been given by Christ will strengthen and enable us to do the things he calls us to, that we never could on our own.

When we come to the end of our own strength – whether in ministry, or in temptation, or in our perseverance in the faith, then the Spirit reminds us that when we see our shortcomings and come to the end of our strength, Jesus offers us his strength to do what he has called us to do.

When we are tempted to doubt our faith and to believe the lie that God has left us to ourselves to live the Christian life, the Spirit testifies in our hearts to all that is offered to us in Christ.

The question is: Do we turn to the Holy Spirit in those moments when we need to?

Theologian Wesley Hill writes of a professor he had at Wheaton who spoke of doing just that. He put it like this – he said “I once faced a temptation that was so persistent and so overwhelming that I literally believed my whole world would go dark if I refused to give in to it. [...] All I could do was scream to the Holy Spirit to keep me from it.” [Hill, 47]

When you face discouragement and despair – when you see your sins and your shortcomings, and the Christian life seems impossible, do you, in the same way, turn to the Holy Spirit for help?

You should. Because in that moment, the Holy Spirit will testify to you about what is true.

When temptations and our own sins and shortcomings accuse our faith and tell us that God has not given us what we need to obey, the Spirit tells us that he has. The Spirit testifies to the truth. The Spirit tells us that God has given us his Son and his Spirit, and with God all things are possible.

The second thing we see is that the Holy Spirit comes alongside all who trust in Christ, where he will serve as a witness in defense of the Christian faith, against the accusations of our sins and shortcomings.

A WITNESS AGAINST THE ACCUSATIONS OF OUR SURROUNDINGS:

Third, and finally, the Holy Spirit serves as a witness in defense of the Christian faith against the accusations of our surroundings.

We see this in chapter sixteen, verses seven through eleven. Let me read those verses again. Jesus says: “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”

This is the passage that can cause confusion because while a “paraclete” is one who speaks for the defense, Jesus here speaks of the Paraclete “convicting” the world. [Carson, 535; Shefler, 141]

How does that work?

Well, D.A. Carson helpfully points out that the Greek word that is translated “convict” here in the ESV also means to cross-examine, to test, or to refute, and is often used to describe exposing the true nature of someone. [Carson, 534]

And so what seems to be in view here is that the Paraclete, as a defense witness, is testifying against the trustworthiness of the world that is accusing Christ and the Christian faith. [Discussed in Carson, 536, though Carson disagrees with this interpretation.]

And this highlights our need for the Spirit if we are to persevere in the Christian faith in a world that rejects the faith.

For us, the point here is not so much that the world rejects or hates Christ or Christianity as they are presented in the Scriptures, but that the world *accuses* Christ and Biblical Christianity.

Such accusations may be subtle or direct – but they are accusations, nonetheless.

And they are often accusations made on the assumed basis that the world is superior to Christ and the Christian faith.

The world presents itself as more rational than Christianity, as more sophisticated than Christianity, as more realistic than Christianity, as more accepting than Christianity, as more successful than Christianity. And far too often we Christians believe those claims. We accept the premise of their superiority to the Christian faith without even thinking about it. And then on that basis, we hear their accusations against Christ and Christianity.

And when that happens, we need the Spirit’s testimony in our lives – not only so that we can see Christ as he truly is, but also so that we can see the world as it truly is.

The Holy Spirit testifies to what is really motivating the world’s accusations against the Christian faith. And it is not greater rationality, or greater sophistication, or greater love for others, or any of those things. It is, as Jesus puts it, that they have rejected Jesus ... and not primarily on the level of their minds, but on the level of their hearts. It is because they have rejected Jesus’s status with God the Father. It is because they deny that Jesus really is the judge of this world.

The Holy Spirit reminds us – he testifies to us – about the true spiritual landscape of this world. And that puts the accusations of the world against the Christian faith in its right perspective.

And so, the third thing we see is that the Holy Spirit comes alongside all who trust in Christ, where he will serve as a witness in defense of the Christian faith, against the accusations of our surroundings.

CONCLUSION:

Our sufferings, our sins or shortcomings, and our surroundings. Each can set itself up as a prosecutor against the Christian faith in our hearts and our lives.

Which one is shouting particularly loud in your heart and in your life right now?

Jesus has not left you to answer its accusations alone. He has sent you a Helper – a Comforter, a Friend, an Advocate. He has sent you a Paraclete: the Holy Spirit.

And the Spirit will bear witness in our hearts. In the midst of suffering, he will testify to God's love for you by his very presence. In the midst of your shortcomings and sins he will bear witness to the power of Jesus in your heart and life, no matter how far short you fall on your own. In the midst of your surroundings that challenge your faith, he will testify to truth of the spiritual landscape of the world around you.

We are not alone. We have the Holy Spirit. Let us turn to him. Let us rely on him. Let us ask him for his help. Let us give thanks for him. Let us be strong and courageous before the challenges of this life because we know that he is with us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Behm, Johannes. “παράκλητος” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume V. Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967. Pages 800-814.
- Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*. The Anchor Bible. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970.
- Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting*. Updated & Expanded Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.
- Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971.
- Shelfer, Lochlan. “The Legal Precision of the Term ‘παράκλητος’” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. Volume 32.2 (2009). Pages 131-150.
- Smith, James K.A. *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019.
- Wright, N. T. *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004.