

## **Dwelling: Conviction John 16:5-11**

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When I was in high school I had a fantastic baseball coach. There were two things about him that made him a great coach. First, it was obvious that he really cared about us as people and as players. He wanted us to excel both on and off the field. Second, he excelled at helping each of us develop as players. He would watch me in batting practice, see something amiss and correct it, things like my stance, the position of my hands or the pivot of my hips. Under his guidance, I became a much better ball player.

But I also had a math teacher in high school who wasn't so fantastic. From the moment I walked into her classroom, I got the distinct impression that she didn't like me. Actually, it wasn't just me. She just didn't seem to like students. She knew math and was really quite good at explaining complex concepts in ways that we could understand, but she seemed to take delight in pointing out our mistakes. That woman loved her red pen. No matter how well I did on a test, there seemed to be more of her red ink than my number 2 pencil. Most days I left her classroom feeling dumber, not smarter.

I'll bet you've had people in life like that. Some people who cared about you, invested in you, and did all they could you make you better. And some people who seemed to delight in pointing out your failures, seemingly more for their own enjoyment than your development.

Now here's my question: Is your image of God more like my baseball coach or my math teacher? Hold onto that question as I read today's Scripture reading from John 16:5-11:

<sup>5</sup> *"But now I am going away to the one who sent me, and not one of you is asking where I am going.*

<sup>6</sup> *Instead, you grieve because of what I've told you.* <sup>7</sup> *But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you.* <sup>8</sup> *And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness,*

*and of the coming judgment.* <sup>9</sup> *The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me.* <sup>10</sup> *Righteousness is available because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more.* <sup>11</sup> *Judgment will come because the ruler of this world has already been judged.*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We're in a worship series entitled "Dwelling." We're talking about the ways in which the Holy Spirit, God's living presence, dwells in us and how we dwell in the Spirit. And in today's Scripture reading, Jesus says something about the work of the Spirit that could either be comforting or concerning, depending upon your image of God.

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of its sin. To convict means to be found guilty or proven to be in error. In John's Gospel to "convict the world of sin" primarily means that the Spirit will confront those who don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah and show them that they are wrong. But throughout Scripture we see that part of God's work, and therefore the Spirit's work, is to search our hearts and show us when we're wrong. Here is just one example:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you and lead me along the path of everlasting life. – Psalm 139:23-24*

The question is, is that good news or bad news? Well, it depends upon your image of God. If you think that God is like my high school math teacher, delighting in pointing out your faults and marking your life with a red pen, then it isn't good news at all. But if your image of God is like my high school baseball coach, someone who cares about you and wants you to thrive, then it is good news indeed. And today I want to proclaim to you that the God we worship, the God who is revealed in Jesus, is like my baseball coach.

God doesn't convict you of your faults and failures to diminish you. And God certainly doesn't convict you in order to create a record of your wrongs so that there's proof of why you don't deserve to go to heaven. When God's Spirit convicts us, it is to warn us that we're headed in a direction that will not bless our lives, and to steer us back in a direction that will. That's what King David was saying in Psalm 139. He said, "Search me and if anything in my life is out of alignment with your will, put me back on the right path."

Think about all the “sinners” that Jesus “convicted.” He didn’t do it to condemn them. He did it to set their lives back on a path of blessing so that they could experience the fullness of life that Jesus promised. That’s why the Scriptures say, *“There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.”* The Spirit doesn’t condemn us. The Spirit convicts us, corrects us so that we experience more abundant life.

Have you ever seen a parent following around a child who is just learning to walk? As the child toddles along the parent stays close, and if that child gets too close to danger, the parent redirects. Too close to that electrical outlet? Let’s go this way. Too close to those stairs? Let’s go that way. All in an attempt to bless and protect that beloved child. I would suggest that that’s not unlike what the Spirit does in our lives. As we toddle along through our days, the Spirit is as close to us as the air we breathe and whispers to us, “Not that way; this way. There is danger that way. There is blessing and life this way.”

So, how does that work? How do we hear the whisper of the Spirit? How do we learn to hear the Spirit’s conviction and redirection? I’ve experienced it in three ways.

**The first is through our conscience.** We all have a conscience. It’s that inner feeling or voice that helps us determine the rightness or the wrongness of our behavior. The more we learn to listen to and obey that inner voice, the more often we’ll avoid bad decisions before they take us to bad places. Now, while I believe that our conscience is informed by the Holy Spirit, psychologists also tell us that our conscience is informed by other voices, like the voices of our parents. And that means we may need to weigh carefully what we hear our conscience saying. For instance, I have a friend whose parents told him that he should always put the needs of others before his own, and that voice has shaped his conscience. While it has made him a kind and generous person, it has also led him to make decisions that don’t always honor healthy boundaries. So, if you’re wrestling with what your conscience is saying, I’d encourage you to check it with a trusted friend or a professional counselor.

**The second way I hear the Spirit speak is through daily reflection.** While hearing our conscience requires that we get quiet, daily reflection requires that we slow down. At the end of the day, or perhaps at the very beginning of the day, sit still and replay the previous 24 hours in your mind. Did you say something that you wish you could take back? Did you

do something that you regret? Or did you fail to say or do something that you wish you had? What could you change so that the next time a similar circumstance presents itself you do the right thing? Invite the Holy Spirit to be a part of that reflection process and you’ll be amazed by what comes of it when you practice it regularly. One of the greatest gifts that God gives us is that God uses our failures, not as cause for condemnation but as opportunity for learning and growth.

**The third way I hear the Spirit speak is through Scripture.** Hebrews 4:12 says, *“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* And I have found those words to be true over and over again. For instance, I’ll be doing my devotions in the morning and I’ll read a verse like this from Philippians, *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others”* and seemingly out of nowhere I’ll become aware of a moment the day before when someone walked into my office to tell me something, and rather than stopping what I was doing and giving them my full attention, I gave them half an ear and continued typing. Boom! Conviction! Now, I don’t believe that the Spirit brings moments like that to my mind to make me feel bad, but to raise my awareness that if I do that too often I’ll lose that person’s trust and our relationship will suffer. Maybe I need to apologize to that person. I certainly need to get back on a path that will bless me and my co-worker by giving them my full attention next time.

The Holy Spirit is like GPS. When you get on the wrong path it alerts you so that you can get back on the right path. Why? Because this is God’s Spirit we’re talking about. The Advocate. The Helper. The Encourager. The One who loves us, dwells in us, and like my high school baseball coach, gently points out what we’re doing wrong so that we can be all that we were created to be and enjoy all that God has in store for us.

So, here’s what I want you to do this week. Pick one of the ways I mentioned that help us to hear the Holy Spirit: learning to listen to your conscience, reflecting on your daily, and spending time in Scripture. And this week listen for that voice of conviction. Don’t be afraid of it. It isn’t the dreaded red pen of my math teacher. It’s the loving hand of our loving God leading us back onto the pathway of blessing. Let’s pray...