

# The Holy Spirit in Relation to the Unsaved World

by John F. Walvoord

---

*The Holy Spirit works in the unsaved world to restrain sin and reveal the Gospel to those who are unable to comprehend it on their own.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 6:3, John 6:44, John 16:11, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Ephesians 4:18, 2 Peter 3:9

**Topics:** "Holy Spirit", "Evangelism"

---

## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the unsaved world, emphasizing how the Spirit restrains sin and reveals the Gospel to those who are spiritually dead and unable to comprehend the truth of God. The Holy Spirit's ministry in restraining sin throughout history, from the Old Testament to the present age, is crucial in maintaining order in the sinful world and allowing for the preaching of the Gospel. Additionally, the Holy Spirit's work in revealing the Gospel to the unsaved is essential for enabling them to understand the message of salvation, the righteousness of God, and the judgment and victory of Christ over Satan.

---

## Transcript

[Author's Note: In previous articles the Person of the Holy Spirit, His work in the Old Testament, and His relation to the Person and work of Christ have been considered. We begin now the study of the present work of the Spirit, in this article discussing the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the unsaved world. The doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation and in the spiritual life of the Christian will be treated in future articles.]

Introduction.

The doctrines of providence and of the sovereignty of God demand that the power of God be effective not only in the saved but also in the unsaved world. While the ministry of the Holy Spirit is ever primarily directed toward the Christian, it is evident that He is working in the world as well, bringing to pass the will of the Father and the Son. The Scriptures reveal that it is characteristic of the Holy Spirit to minister in scenes of disorder and sin. The chaos of the primeval earth as described in Genesis 1:2 was not without His presence. The wicked generation of Noah's day was opposed in its mad course by the striving of the Spirit (Gen 6:3). The degeneracy of the period of the Judges had its Samson who was empowered by the Holy Spirit. The prophets of the period of Israel's decadence before the captivities were living examples of

the power of the Holy Spirit to minister in the midst of sin and unbelief. We are reminded in the New Testament that God is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). It should therefore be expected that the Holy Spirit should have a special ministry to the unsaved world in every age, particularly in the age of grace during which the Holy Spirit is resident in the world in the Church.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit in relation to the unsaved world falls into two categories which are not necessarily independent. The Holy Spirit is given the ministry of resisting evil and restraining the world in its manifestation. To the Holy Spirit, also, is committed the task of making known the way of salvation to a race which has no natural capacity to receive it with understanding. Most of the attention of theologians during the Christian centuries has been directed to the latter ministry, that of revealing the message of salvation to the lost and providing enablement for saving faith. The ministry of the Holy Spirit in restraining sin in the world is most important, however, though few direct references are found in Scripture.

The work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the unsaved world is most important for a number of reasons. In view of the power of Satan and his evident hatred of Christians and the truth, the work of the Holy Spirit in restraining sin is required to explain the relative freedom allowed the Christian in the world and the preservation of those conditions which make possible the preaching of the Gospel and the maintenance of some order in the sinful world. The work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the Gospel to the lost is essential to the whole program of completing the purpose of God to call out the Church in this age. It provides for the inability of man and makes possible the salvation of souls. The doctrine is, therefore, important in its significance and necessary to a full appreciation of proper Gospel preaching.

## I. The Work of the Holy Spirit in Restraining Sin

### 1. The Restraining Work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.

The work of the Holy Spirit in restraining the world from sin is found in every age, except during the period of unprecedented sinfulness during the great tribulation, when it is God's purpose to demonstrate for the first time what unrestrained sin is. The character of this work of restraining sin varies slightly in different ages, however. In the previous discussion of this work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament,<sup>1</sup> it was shown that the Holy Spirit undertook to restrain sin throughout the Old Testament period. The striving of the Holy Spirit against sin in Noah's period is definitely stated (Gen 6:3). While Isaiah 59:19 is not as clear a reference, it infers a similar ministry of the Holy Spirit. The many other ministries of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament tended to restrain sin. His work in revealing truth through the prophets, particularly the warnings of judgment to come, and the work of inspiration of the Scriptures with their power helped to restrain sin. The judgments which followed rejection of His striving against sin (Isa 63:10-11) had their effect. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit by virtue of His holy character was conducive to restraint of sin. Throughout the Old Testament, then, the power of the Holy Spirit guided human events into the path of divine providence.

### 2. The Restraining Work of the Holy Spirit in the Present Age.

The work of the Holy Spirit in restraining sin as found in the Old Testament continues in the present age. Further confirmation of His ministry is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, "For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work: only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way" (American Standard Version). The subject of the passage is the coming day of the Lord in which the man of sin will be revealed (2 Thess 2:3). According to the passage, the man of sin will not be revealed until the one who restrains is

removed. The present age enjoys the ministry of this restrainer whose presence and ministry make impossible the manifestation of the man of sin. The question concerning the identity of this one who restrains sin, in the light of the Old Testament, is easily settled by referring it to the Holy Spirit.

Interpreters of Scripture have not all agreed on the identity of the one restraining lawlessness. A popular view of this passage is that human government is this restraining force. Human government, however, continues during the period of tribulation in which the man of sin is revealed. While all forces of law and order tend to restrain sin, they are not such in their own character, but rather as they are used and empowered to accomplish this end by God. It would seem a preferable interpretation to view all restraint of sin, regardless of means, as proceeding from God as a ministry of the Holy Spirit. As Dr. Thiessen writes: "But who is the one that restraineth? Denney, Findlay, Alford, Moffatt, hold that this refers to law and order, especially as embodied in the Roman Empire. But while human governments may be agencies in the restraining work of the Spirit, we believe that they in turn are influenced by the Church. And again, back of human government is God Who instituted it (Gen 9:5, 6; Rom 13:1-7) and controls it (Ps 75:5-7). So it is God by His Spirit that restrains the development of lawlessness."<sup>2</sup>

Some have advanced another view which contends that Satan himself is restraining sin lest it manifest its true character. This idea is hardly compatible with the revelation of Satan found in the Scriptures. Satan is nowhere given universal power over the world, though his influence is inestimable. A study of 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10 indicates that the one who restrains is removed from the scene before the man of sin is revealed. This could hardly be said of Satan. The period of tribulation on the contrary is one in which Satan's work is most evident. The Scriptures represent him as being cast into the earth and venting his fury during those tragic days (Rev 12:9). The theory that Satan is the great restrainer of lawlessness is, accordingly, untenable.

If it be conceded that the Holy Spirit undertook to strive with men to restrain sin in the Old Testament, it is even more evident that a similar ministry will be found in the present age in which the Spirit is present in the Church. While it is not in the purpose of God to deal finally with the world while the Church is in the world, the sovereignty of God overrules the wickedness of men and the power of Satan to make possible the accomplishment of His purpose to call out a people to His name. While the restraining hand of the Holy Spirit is little realized by the church at large, His protection and power shield the Christian from the impossible task of living in a world in which sin is unrestrained.

### 3. Contributing Factors in the Work of Restraining Sin.

The Scriptures do not enlarge upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit in restraining sin. Reason would point, however, to a number of contributing factors all of which are used of God to check the course of sin. The presence of the individual Christian, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, constitutes a force to hinder the world in its sin. The church corporately has done much to influence the world, even though it has failed to measure up to Biblical standards itself. The Bible, wherever it has gone, has produced its attendant effect not only on those who believed it but also indirectly has influenced the thought and action of the unsaved world. Human governments, ordained of God, are a means to divine ends. While these many factors in themselves are not the work of the Holy Spirit in restraining, they are means used by the Holy Spirit in accomplishing His purpose. The work of the Holy Spirit in restraining sin is seen, therefore, to be an important work of God, essential to divine providence, and a part of the work of God for His own.

## II. The Work of the Holy Spirit Revealing the Gospel to the Unsaved

## Introduction.

The entire work of the Holy Spirit on behalf of the unsaved world is sometimes given the terminology common grace, including in its scope the restraining work of the Holy Spirit in addition to the work of revealing the Gospel. Charles Hodge, for instance, states in reference to common grace, "The Bible therefore teaches that the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth good.... This is what in theology is called common grace."<sup>3</sup> The work of the Holy Spirit revealing the Gospel to the unsaved is, therefore, an important aspect of a larger program of God in dealing with the need of a lost world. It is founded on a desperate need for enablement to understand the Gospel. It is designed to articulate the preaching of the Gospel and the plan of God to give a universal call to faith in Christ. It is antecedent to the effectual call of God to the elect. The doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the Gospel to the world is most important not only in its relation to the plan of God but also in carrying out effectively the preaching of the Gospel. The Christian desiring to win souls for Christ should study this subject carefully, for in it lie the principles which God has revealed concerning His methods of dealing with the lost.

### 1. Man's Need of Grace.

The fall of Adam was full of tremendous consequences. Because of it, sin was imputed to the race; men are spiritually dead apart from Christ; men possess a fallen nature which issues in manifestation; and, important to our present study, men are unable to comprehend the truth of God. The Scriptures bear constant witness to the inability of man. It is stated flatly in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him." Again in 1 Corinthians 1:18, the Gospel is declared to be foolishness to the lost, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." The unsaved Gentiles are declared to walk in spiritual darkness, "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" (Eph 4:18). According to Romans 8:7, the natural mind is not capable of being subject to the law of God: "because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." Christ bore witness to the inability of natural man to come to God when He said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). In addition to natural inability is the work of Satan blinding the hearts of the lost to the light of the Gospel (2 Cor 4:4). The condition of man is hopeless apart from divine intervention.

Inability on the part of man has its rise in ignorance of God and His grace due to corruption of man's whole being, perversion of his sensations, feelings, and tastes, and blinding of his understanding. In the fall, man did not lose his moral determination. He is still accountable and relatively remains a free agent. He retains ability to understand natural things and may rise in this realm to unusual heights. Even his aversion to the good and inclination to the evil, while springing from his fallen nature, has its origin in his utter inability to appreciate the Person of God and the inherent loveliness of righteousness. The real reason for man's hatred of God is his ignorance of what God is. The will of man, however, in itself has no power to transcend its natural ability as found after the fall any more than it had power to transcend its natural ability before the fall. Man in himself is utterly unable to understand the truth of God. The answer to the problem, therefore, is not found in any development of the natural man or cultivation of latent abilities, but is disclosed in the power of God as manifested in the work of the Holy Spirit. Apart from this work of the Holy Spirit, God would continue to be unrevealed to a lost race; the death of Christ would be inapplicable to

men; and the purpose of God to save the elect would be impossible of fulfillment. The importance of this doctrine, therefore, justifies a careful study. been overemphasized by the church, these sacraments do reveal in symbol the Gospel message, and the Lord's Supper in particular is to be observed because it shows "the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor 11:26).

In relating the Word of God to the doctrine of common grace, two extremes in doctrine may be observed. Lutheran theologians have overemphasized the living character of the Word of God (Heb 4:12) to the point where it is claimed that the Bible has power in itself, and no attendant work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to make it effective. While the Lutheran church has fully supported the immanence and power of the Holy Spirit, they regard His work as being limited in some sense to the Word itself. As Charles Hodge summarizes the Lutheran position, "This divine efficacy is inherent in, and inseparable from the Word."<sup>4</sup> The chief difficulty with this view is the obvious fact that many unsaved men are completely unaffected by hearing or reading the Bible. Lutherans explain this by conditioning its power on their faith, but it is difficult to see how they can believe what they do not know and understand. If an unsaved man cannot understand before he believes, and is unable to believe what he does not understand, how can he ever be brought to saving faith? The fact remains that the Spirit of God brings conviction and understanding to many who never believe, who turn from the Gospel even after the way of salvation is made plain to them. The work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the Gospel to the unsaved is rather a sovereign operation of God, not conditioned upon the receptivity of man. The experience of many Christians bears witness to the possibility of understanding the issues of saving faith and at the same time being rebellious against God and unwilling to accept Christ for some time before the decision for Christ is finally made.

Another extreme in the doctrine of common grace is found in the viewpoint that the Word of God is unnecessary. While the Word of God is not necessarily related to the general works of God in restraining sin, in providence, and in acts of sovereignty, the revelation of the truth of the Gospel comes only through the Word of God. The extreme position which makes the Word of God unnecessary to common grace is supported by two opposite schools of theology, the rational and the mystic. Rationalism approaches the problem from many angles. The deists, of course, assume that God is not immanent in the world, and trace all spiritual experience to a normal process of human mind. To them the realm of common grace is purely a discovery of the human intelligence proceeding from natural causes. Less extreme than the deists is the Pelagian viewpoint, holding that man is inherently able to understand the truth and make his own decisions in relation to it. The rationalistic approach to the subject is diametrically opposed to the Scriptural revelation, and is not seriously considered by Reformed theologians.

The view of the mystics, of course, is quite the opposite of the rationalist. The mystic assumes that God gives direct revelation to all who will receive it, and that truth so given can be understood properly by the recipient. The view partakes of all the errors of false mysticism, going far beyond the relation of false mysticism to the Christian, and attributes even to the unsaved the power to receive special revelation and understand it. Genuine salvation is never found except among those who have heard the Word of God. Missionaries entering unevangelized fields never come upon a Christian community, or even an individual Christian. The view of the mystics is based on speculation rather than Scripture or experience, and must therefore be dismissed.

The work of the Holy Spirit in revealing the Gospel to the unsaved is peculiarly a ministry of enablement to understand the way of salvation. As the Word is preached, the Holy Spirit attends with power to make it known to those who naturally are blind to the truth and unable to comprehend it. The importance of this ministry of the Spirit must be recognized before the necessity of prayer for the lost can be realized.

comprehend very imperfectly the nature of this imputed righteousness. It is possible that many only understand vaguely that God through Christ cares for their unrighteousness without realizing all the wonders of justification. It is essential to intelligent faith, however, that the unsaved understand that through Christ it is possible for God to deal with them as those who are righteous. This revelation is inseparable from the Gospel.

A third revelation is given the unsaved by the Holy Spirit concerning the relation of the cross to judgment and Satan. Christ said the Holy Spirit would convict the world "Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged" (John 16:11). The Holy Spirit presses upon the heart of the unsaved the fact of God's judgment. Everyone will stand before God in judgment. The unsaved need to know that sin was judged in the cross, and for those who trust in Christ there is deliverance from judgment upon sin and deliverance from condemnation. The unsaved must see Christ as judged and executed for them, and their judgment for sin as already past. As a token of this, Satan, as the "prince of this world," is mentioned as already condemned. In the cross Satan met his defeat. The cross is the power of God over Satan. Satan stands already convicted, doomed, and waiting the execution of the sentence. While in the providence of God, Satan is allowed great freedom and power in this age, his end is sure, and those who reject Christ will share his destiny.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit to the unsaved follows three specific lines, then. First, the unsaved must understand that salvation depends upon faith in Christ. Second, the unsaved must understand the righteousness of God as belonging to the Person of God and as made available for the sinner through Christ. Third, the unsaved must face the fact of judgment and find in Christ One who was judged and executed as their substitute. While these elements may not be always seen clearly, they form the principles which combine to bring the unsaved into the knowledge necessary to place saving faith in Christ. Needless to say, the subjects included in the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the unsaved should constitute an important part of effective Gospel preaching.

## 2. The Limitations of Common Grace.

From preceding discussion it is evident that common grace falls far short of efficacious grace. While the unsaved may be led to understand the Gospel sufficiently to act intelligently upon it, common grace does not have any certain effect upon the will and does not issue certainly into salvation. Two unsaved men may understand the Gospel equally, and yet one never comes to the point of saving faith while the other trusts in Christ and is saved. Common grace must be sharply distinguished from any work of God which is efficacious in bringing the unsaved to salvation.

Common grace also falls far short of the Christian's experience of illumination. The indwelling Holy Spirit opens to the yielded Christian the storehouses of truth in the Word of God. Common grace is related almost entirely to revelation on the one subject of salvation with a view to providing an intelligent basis for faith. The revelation of common grace can never rise higher than the plane of the natural man even in the realm of salvation truth. It is closely parallel to the idea of moral and intellectual persuasion, constituting an influence, but in itself not resulting in decision.

Common grace provides none of the normal experiences of the Christian such as are produced by the unhindered indwelling Holy Spirit. The love, joy, peace, and other fruit of the Spirit are never found in those who have merely experienced common grace. While unsaved men may be able to imitate some of the outward manifestations of Christian conduct, there is never the reality of inward experience, though in

some cases it may be difficult to determine whether some individuals are unsaved or saved.

While common grace is greatly limited in its character and its results, it cannot be said to be without certain phenomena. Religious instinct and fear of God are no doubt related to common grace, though they may not be connected definitely with the Scriptures. This phase of common grace is never sufficient to provide understanding of the issues of the Gospel. Common grace in its broader sense may have the effect of restraining sin, and it is often regarded as including this aspect. Outward profession of faith in Christ and conformity to moral standards without being saved may be a result of common grace. Charles Hodge writes, for instance, "Unrenewed men in the Bible are said to repent, to believe, to be partakers of the Holy Ghost, and to taste the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come."<sup>5</sup> There are no doubt stages in the work of common grace from religious instinct and a fear of God which is almost universal to the experience of those who understand clearly the condition of salvation. In it all the Holy Spirit is working, striving to bring men to the knowledge of Christ. Without this preliminary ministry, the work of efficacious grace would be impossible.

The work of the Holy Spirit for the unsaved world constitutes another proof that God is a God of infinite grace and condescension, working in those who are the objects of His righteous judgment, striving to bring them to the knowledge of Christ as Savior. Without this ministry, the world would be an impossible situation for the Christian, and Gospel preaching would be fruitless. The trophies of the grace of God which some day will stand complete before God in glory will bear witness to the power of the Spirit in effectively accomplishing the task given to Him by Christ.

Dallas, Texas

(Series to be continued in the July-September Number, 1941)

1 Bibliotheca Sacra, 1940, pp. 430, 431.

2 Bibliotheca Sacra, 1935, p. 301.

3 Systematic Theology, Vol. II, p. 667.

4 Op. cit., p. 656.

5 Op. cit., p. 673.

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-f-walvoord/the-holy-spirit-in-relation-to-the-unsaved-world/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**