

The Christ-Like Life of the Believer

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When a person accepts Jesus Christ as Lord he is born of God's Spirit and spiritually becomes a new creation in Christ. As a child in God's family and a member of the church of the body of Christ it is the joy, privilege and responsibility of this believer to live a Christ-like life of love and service towards others. In doing this, the Christian believer is able to live in intimate fellowship with God as his Father, strengthen his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and bring the good news of salvation by grace to others in the world. The Book of Ephesians explains the proper relationship of God's gift of salvation to the believer's corresponding responsibility of living a life of good works:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:8-10).

Salvation is the gift of God. No one is, or ever could be, good enough to deserve it. That is precisely why Christ came into the world - to die for the sins of people like you and me. Good works in the Christian life are the believer's response to God's gracious love - not the other way around. They are the *fruit* of salvation - not the means to attaining it. It is important that we always remember this because trying to be "good enough" for God, as most religions of the world endeavor to do, is a losing battle which is sure to tie up a believer in frustration, doubts and condemnation. Remember, we are accepted by God because of his grace, through faith in Christ, not because of any worthiness on our own part. Good works must spring from this certainty of God's forgiveness, acceptance and love for us as his children - in Christ!

The Mind of Christ

The principle key for the Christian believer in living a Christ-like life of love and service towards others is learning to live with the "mind of Christ" so as to think and live as he did (I Cor. 2:16; I John 2:6). This is a deliberate process accomplished by the free-will decision of each and every believer. It involves a moment by moment, day by day decision to think as Christ would think and live as Christ would live. As we do this, God works with us and in us by way of his Spirit, to help us to grow as his children and to help us accomplish his will in our lives (Rom. 8:28-30; Phil. 2:13; II Cor. 3:17-18). This way of life is, therefore, a process of growing and maturing as a child in God's family. Though no one will ever master this way of life perfectly before Christ's return, it is still the goal and ideal for which we strive. As we endeavor to live with this mind of Christ, the Book of Ephesians states:

... we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph. 4:14-16).

As each believer lives with the mind of Christ we all grow together as the body of Christ. By speaking and living the truth in love, we are able to care for each other, as well as to bring the knowledge of Christ to the world so that others may hear, be saved and be brought into the family of God.

The Renewed Mind

Living with the mind of Christ is accomplished by the process of renewing our minds. This means that we consciously decide to change the way we think by replacing thoughts which are contrary to Christ's character with those which are in accordance with it. This renewed mind walk of learning to think and live as Christ did is a matter of becoming in practice what spiritually we already are in Christ. Christ is in us already by way of the Spirit but we

must, by our own free-will decision, choose to put on the mind of Christ in our day to day lives - to think as he would think and live as he would live. This is the essence of being a disciple, or follower, of Christ. God's Spirit will not take control of us and force us to live this way. Instead, the choice is always ours - to live as obedient children in a manner worthy of God's love or to conform to the ways of the world (I Peter 1:13-16). Look at Romans:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom. 12:1-2).

As Christians who have been saved by God's grace we now offer ourselves in thankfulness as "living sacrifices" to God. This we do by living a life that is holy and well pleasing to God. A "holy" life is a life that has different standards from the world. As children in God's family we live by the principles, standards and goals which God has set forth within the Bible rather than by what the world says. We do not learn to love by watching television and saying, "Oh, that must be what true love is!" No, we base our understanding of love and truth on what the Scriptures teach rather than what the world would have us believe. The Bible, the holy Scriptures, must be our only standard for truth in this life - all else will lead only to confusion and error (Matt. 4:4; 22:29; II Tim. 3:16-17).

The Example of Christ

In learning to live a Christ-like life the Christian believer should focus his or her study of the scriptures on two primary sections of the Bible:

1. The life and teaching of Christ as presented in the Gospels - in the light of their Old Testament background.
2. The New Testament Letters to the Christian churches and believers - in the

light of the new covenant which Christ has established.

In studying the life of Jesus Christ in the Gospels we should always remember that it is the *principles* of love and truth by which Jesus lived that we are to imitate - not the specific tasks or ministry of Christ. In other words, we do not have to go to Jerusalem because Jesus went there, nor do we minister primarily to the Jews just because he did, nor do we need to be crucified as he was. Christ had a specific ministry to perform in the historical situation in which he lived. He was sent by God specifically as a servant to Israel within his earthly ministry and then to die as the ransom sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. It is, therefore, the principles of love and truth which he taught and exhibited that are of eternal relevance. These same principles must be applied by us today in the historical, geographical and cultural contexts of our own lives.

Jesus summed up the principles by which he lived in the two Old Testament commandments which he said were the sum and substance of all the ethical teaching of the Bible. The Gospel of Matthew records this:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:34-40).

Throughout his life and ministry Jesus taught and showed how to live this life of love. In doing this he went beyond the common understanding of the Old Testament Law of his day and showed that what God truly wanted were people who would love and worship him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21-24) - from the heart - going *beyond* the external rules and regulations which governed the affairs of men (Matt. 9:13; Mk. 12:32-34; Luke 6:1-11). No matter how much of a knowledge of the Bible we may gain in our lives it is this law of love as summarized in the simple and succinct statements of Christ to love

God and to love your neighbor as yourself that will always be the foundation for right Christian living. These are statements that anyone of sound mind can understand and then apply to the many, many situations which life may present. Learning to think and live this way is learning to think and live like Christ.

The New Testament Letters

As a result of Christ's life, death, resurrection and the giving of holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, it is now possible for God's people to love and worship God as their Father in spirit and in truth (Eph. 2:18-22; Phil. 3:3). With the giving of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost the age of the new covenant began. This new covenant is not based on external ordinances, rituals or a written code of law. Instead, it is based upon the once for all time sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world, and upon the Spirit of God which is given to every believer in Christ (Heb. 9:15; II Cor. 3:6). As a result, the Christian believer is now able to live in the freedom and confidence of a child of God and to serve others with a Christ-like love from the heart. Look at the following verse from the New Testament Letters:

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ ... but now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 7:4-6).

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire Law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:13-14).

The lifestyle of living in love, or living in the Spirit, is the very essence of the Christ-like life of the Christian believer. This principle is called within the New Testament Letters the "law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). This is the rule, or principle, by which Christians within the age of the new covenant are to live. Instead of being a legal code of rules and regulations, this law of Christ is summed up in the all encompassing concept of loving God and loving

one's fellowman. This life of love is based on the life of Christ himself and is flexible enough to be applied to any historical or cultural situation which this life can bring. The law of Christ is "Christ-centered" rather than "rule centered." It tells us to think and live like Christ rather than focus on rules or laws which govern the affairs of men. The Christ-like life goes beyond a written legal code of conduct (Gal. 5:23) so as to fulfill the intent of God's commands in the many varied situations which this life can bring. It focuses on loving and caring for people just as Christ did.

The New Testament Letters speak of this lifestyle as "living" or "walking" in: "love" (Eph. 5:1-2; Rom. 13:8-10; etc.), "the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16-25; Rom. 8:1-13; etc.) or "the light" (Eph. 5:8-9; I John 1:5-9). Each of these phrases emphasizes the same basic truth - a Christ-like life of love and truth. Let's look at some examples from the NT letters:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8-10).

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Gal. 5:16-23).

The contrast between the Christ-like life of love and truth and the worldly lifestyle based on the works of the flesh (the sinful nature) is obvious. Christians should have no part in the works of the flesh since we are not to be conformed to the world but instead to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Since, however, we live in the world, it is certain that there will always be a battle taking place between the godly lifestyle of living in the Spirit and the world's lifestyle of the works of the flesh. The "battlefield" for this ongoing spiritual battle (Eph. 6:10-12) is primarily in the believer's mind and it is here that the Christian believer must learn to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (II Cor. 10:5). When we sin, as we all do at times, we come to God as our Father and express our regret and sorrow by confessing our sins to him. Since he is our loving Father, we have his assurance that he will always forgive us so that we may continue to walk in intimate fellowship with him. Look at the Letter of I John:

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (I John 1:5-10).

The Christian life is a life of living as Christ lived. As we live this way it is our joy and privilege to walk in intimate fellowship with God as our Father and with Jesus his Son. As children in God's family we are "heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17) and we are able to share fully in all that is our rightful inheritance in Christ. Since we now have God's Spirit as the "firstfruits" of that inheritance, we are even now able to walk in fellowship with God day by day. The intimacy of that fellowship is directly proportional to our

decision to put on the mind of Christ so as to walk in the light as he is light.

Our Christian Responsibilities

When we confessed Jesus as our Lord we became subject to him as our Lord and Christ. As his servants and members of his church, believers are responsible to live for him in every aspect of their lives (Col. 3:24). This includes family responsibilities, job responsibilities or any other area of our lives. In addition, Christian believers have two special responsibilities which God has assigned specifically to the church. First, we are responsible to care for and strengthen our fellow brothers and sisters within the body of Christ in whatever way that we can. Look at the Book of Philippians:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:1-5).

Though Christians are instructed to "do good to all men," they should make a special effort to do good "to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10). These same thoughts are repeated over and over within the New Testament Letters and the basic idea is certainly not difficult to understand. As God's family and members of the church of the body of Christ, we are all uniquely bound together and therefore have a special obligation to care for each other (cp. Rom 12:1-15:7; I Cor. 12-13; Eph. 4:1-6:9; Col. 3:1-17). We are to "carry each other's burdens, and in this way ... fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:1-2).

The second responsibility which God has specifically assigned to the church is to share the good news of salvation by grace through believing in Jesus Christ with others throughout the world (Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:7-8; II Cor. 3:6-5:21). This

responsibility is called the ministry of reconciliation within the Book of II Corinthians. God has given the church a special role to play in the accomplishing of his plan of salvation. If others are to hear about God's love and grace it must come through the efforts of those who have themselves received God's wonderful gift of salvation. As the church of God and citizens of God's kingdom we are ambassadors for Christ within this world. Look at the following verses:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (II Cor. 5:14-21).

As Christians we have the joy and privilege of "shining like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life" (Phil. 2:14-16). We are ambassadors for Christ and are representing him in this world. As we share the truths of God's love and salvation with others we are able to help them believe and be reconciled to God. What an incredible truth that God has entrusted this responsibility to us, his people. Though we may not all be wonderful speakers or evangelists we can all aid in the accomplishment of this ministry of reconciliation. In our daily lives and in our personal contacts with others we are witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ by all that we do. Through our Christ-like lives, our

sharing of God's Word with others or even helping those with special ministries in this regard, we can all do our part in helping others "to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). As Jesus stated, "...if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matt. 10:42). Let us therefore be faithful to this responsibility which God has entrusted to us for there is no greater task or more noble purpose to be accomplished in this life.

The Judgment of Believers

After Christ's second coming each Christian believer will "give account of himself before God" (Rom. 14:9-12) and be judged as to his or her faithfulness in carrying out their Christian responsibilities in this life (II Cor. 5:10). Since "in Christ" we have already been judged and found "not guilty" as regards our acceptance with God and future salvation (Rom. 3:22-24; 8:1-3), this judgment will be in respect to rewards which have been earned through faithful service to our Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor. 3:8-15).

Believers will stand before Christ in their already glorified bodies and in assurance of being with him forever since this transformation takes place instantaneously at Christ's return when believers are caught up to meet him in the air (I Thess. 4:13-18; I Cor. 15:50-57). As our Lord, Jesus will himself be the judge, on God's behalf, and his judgment will be absolutely just (II Tim. 4:1,8). It will be a judgment based not only on outward acts but also on the inward motives of the heart (I Cor. 4:1-5). All who have rendered faithful service for Christ will "receive their own reward according to their own labor" (I Cor. 3:8). Those whose work will prove to be of poor quality will have their work "burned up" but they themselves "will be saved, though only as one escaping through the flames" (I Cor. 3:10-15).

Though the Bible tells us little about these future rewards, it is evident that how we live our lives in this present life will have direct bearing on the privileges, honors, and responsibilities that will be ours in the kingdom of God of the coming age. Salvation is absolutely by grace, through faith, but the believer in Christ is also assured that there will be glorious rewards for those who faithfully serve

him. The Book of Colossians puts the entire Christ-like life of the believer in proper perspective for us:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the

word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged ...

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism (Col. 3:1-25).

This is the Christ-like life of the believer. It is a life of loving service to others based on the truth of God's Word. As we live faithfully for God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord we can enjoy the fellowship of that relationship even now while looking expectantly to the "praise, glory and honor" that we will receive "when Jesus Christ is revealed" (I Pet. 1:7). Therefore,

...my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain (I Cor. 15:58).

[This article is adapted from chapter 5 of this writer's booklet *God's Plan of Salvation*.]